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CUBA | Church Leaders Denounce Government Threats to Destroy Church Property in Camaguey

Leaders of the Apostolic Movement, a fast-growing unregistered network of protestant churches, have condemned threats by government officials to destroy church property in the central Cuban city of Camaguey. They are also calling on the government to cease its harassment of relatives of church members.

Pastor Bernardo de Quesada, a national leader of the church group, has publicly denounced an order from the Provincial Ministry of Housing that he and his wife demolish an outdoor covered patio, used by the church for meetings. Pastor de Quesada pointed out that this demand, made by housing official Leonel del Risco Franco, directly contradicts written permission for construction of the patio issued by another government agency, which added that “permission for this type of construction is not necessary.”

Church leaders also complained that the Cuban government is targeting the family members of its leaders, some of whom are not otherwise associated with the religious group. In one particularly egregious case, the government has cut off the electricity to the Camaguey home of decorated retired military officer Lieutenant Colonel Orlando Porfirio and his 69-year-old wife Nuvia Ortiz Acosta, in what they believe is an attempt to put pressure on their adult son, a worship leader in a church affiliated with the Apostolic Movement. Lieutenant Colonel Orlando Porfirio Perez, who does not attend the church, and his wife, Nuvia Ortiz Acosta, who suffers from thyroid tumors, have not had electricity to their home since Oct. 9, 2012 and have received no response to repeated written complaints to government officials.

The Apostolic Movement has come under particular attack by government officials in recent years. Churches affiliated with the group have been subjected to repeated fines and had property confiscated or destroyed. A number of its leaders, including Pastor Omar Gude Perez, have been imprisoned for various lengths of time. Officials at the Central Committee for the Cuban Communist Party’s Office for Religious Affairs (ORA) have refused attempts to register the religious group. In 2010, CSW published a video of the head of ORA, Caridad Diego, speaking openly about the government’s attempts to eradicate the group.

Andrew Johnston, Advocacy Director at Christian Solidarity Worldwide said, “Once again we call on the Cuban government to uphold the religious freedom of all its citizens and to instruct government officials at the national, provincial and municipal levels to cease their harassment of the Apostolic Movement and other religious groups. The government must also halt its policy of targeting those who have committed no crime except to be related to someone affiliated with the church. We specifically call on the Housing Authority to rescind the order to demolish the church patio in Camaguey and to restore electricity to the home of Lieutenant Colonel Porfirio Perez and his wife immediately.”