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CUBA | Government Refuses to Release Church Funds

Church leaders in the Cuban city of Santa Clara have condemned the Cuban government's refusal to allow Trinidad First Baptist Church access to its bank account. The accounts for the historic local church, with funds amounting to approximately \$27,000, were frozen by government officials in 2010.

In an open letter published in October 2010, the longstanding pastor of the church, Rev. Homero Carbonell, expressed hope that his retirement would convince the government to restore the church's access to its accounts, which were opened with the International Finance Bank in 1988. He and other church leaders believe the church was targeted in part because of his refusal to acquiesce to demands from state security that he bar members of the Cuban dissident movement, including Sakharov Prize winner Guillermo Fariñas, from attending the church.

According to another local Baptist pastor, Rev. Mario Felix Leonart Barroso, who authors the blog, *Cubano Confesante*, and is also a professor at the Luis Manuel González Peña Seminary, housed on the Trinidad Church's property, the retirement of Rev. Carbonell did not have the hoped-for effect. The funds, the majority of which were donated by churches abroad for essential repairs to the 105 year-old church, remain inaccessible more than two years later.

Rev. Leonart Barroso told Christian Solidarity Worldwide (CSW) that the current pastor of the Trinidad Baptist Church, Rev. Juan Carlos Mentado, "in the short time in which he has been there, has been an obliging leader, complying with every legal requirement, yet the government continues to punish the church."

The situation is made even more difficult by the fact that official decisions pertaining to religious organizations, such as the decision to freeze a church's bank accounts, are made by the Office of Religious Affairs (ORA) of the Central Committee of the Cuban Communist Party, with no recourse for appeal. Rev. Barroso added that repeated applications to Caridad Diego, the head of ORA, for legal recognition of the church seminary have also gone unanswered.

CSW's Advocacy Director Andrew Johnston said, "A government that claims to respect religious freedom should not arbitrarily block a religious organization from accessing its own funds. We call on the Cuban government to release these funds immediately and to cease its harassment of the Trinidad First Baptist Church, and others who seek only to exercise their religious freedom as guaranteed in the Cuban Constitution. Although this is a matter of principle, it is especially reprehensible that Communist Party officials would block such a large amount of

money, donated in good faith by churches abroad and vital for the repair of an important historic building.”