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CUBA | CSW Commends Courage of Ladies in White on International Women's Day

On International Women's Day, Christian Solidarity Worldwide commends the courage of the Ladies in White, the Cuban women's non-violent protest movement.

The Damas de Blanco, or Ladies in White, is an opposition movement in Cuba comprising the wives and other female relatives of jailed dissidents. Every Sunday, the women attend Mass dressed in white, to symbolize peace, and then walk silently through the streets of their town or city. They are often harassed or arrested on their way to Mass, and members of their group have been threatened.

The Ladies in White movement was formed in 2003, just two weeks after the Black Spring, the Cuban government's mass crackdown on dissidents and journalists, which resulted in 75 being detained. Since 2010, all of the Black Spring prisoners have been released, mostly into exile in Spain, following dialogue between the government and hierarchy of the Roman Catholic Church. There are still political prisoners in Cuba, and the Ladies in White are still active and growing in number.

In 2005, the Ladies in White were jointly awarded the Sakharov Prize for Freedom of Thought by the European Parliament, along with Reporters without Borders and Nigerian human rights lawyer Huawa Ibrahim. The Cuban government barred the group's leaders from travelling to France to accept the award.

In 2012, one of their members, Caridad Caballero, a journalist and activist, sought refuge in the United States following months of harassment by the Cuban authorities. She was also arrested on a number of occasions. The authorities particularly targeted her religious faith, blocking her from participating in any religious activities at Jesus Christ the Redeemer Catholic Church in the Pueblo Nuevo neighborhood of Holguin.

Caballero and other members of the Ladies in White were among hundreds of Catholic dissidents who were imprisoned for the duration of the visit of Pope Benedict XVI to Cuba in March 2012. CSW documented a dramatic increase in violations of freedom of religion or belief in Cuba in 2012. While Roman Catholic churches reported the highest number of violations, mostly involving the arrest and arbitrary detention of parishioners attempting to attend church activities, other denominations and religious groups were also affected.

CSW's Advocacy Director Andrew Johnston said, "On International Women's Day, we commend the courage of the Ladies in White in standing up for justice and human rights, keeping the spotlight on the prisoners of conscience in Cuba. CSW urges the international community to continue raising human rights concerns with the Cuban government, including the harassment and imprisonment of human rights activists."