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CUBA | Religious Leaders Arrive in Washington, DC

Cuban pastor and blogger, Rev. Mario Felix Leonart Barroso, arrived in Washington, DC Sept. 16 to begin a week of advocacy meetings with policy makers. Rev. Leonart is accompanied by his wife, Yoaxis Marcheco Suarez, who is also a prominent blogger, and former prisoner of conscience, Rev. Omar Gude Perez.

The visit of the three religious leaders is organized by Christian Solidarity Worldwide (CSW), a religious freedom organization. The group plans to raise concerns about Cuba's deteriorating religious freedom situation. This is linked to an overall increase in violations of human rights and government attacks on independent civil society leaders. A CSW report published earlier this year showed a dramatic spike in documented religious freedom violations over the previous 15-month period. According to the delegation, this trend has continued during 2013.

Rev. Leonart, who is affiliated with the Cuban Western Baptist Convention, leads a Baptist church in the village of Taguayabon in Villa Clara Province. He also teaches at the seminary linked to the La Trinidad Baptist Church, in the provincial capital of Santa Clara. He created the blog *Cubano Confesante* in 2010 and has written extensively about violations of religious freedom in Cuba. His wife is also a frequent contributor. Rev. Leonart's role in offering pastoral support to high profile dissidents, including Sakharov Prize winner, Guillermo Fariñas, has made him a regular target of government harassment, including arbitrary detention. The Western Baptist Convention has endorsed the visit of Rev. Leonart to Washington, DC.

The third member of the delegation, Rev. Omar Gude Perez, received asylum in the United States along with his family in early 2013. Rev. Gude is a national leader of the Apostolic Movement, a fast growing religious group which has been the target of an intense government crackdown. The government has denied the group's attempts to register, and its members have been subjected to harassment including arbitrary detention, loss of employment and fines. Rev. Gude was imprisoned on trumped up charges in 2008 and handed a 6 ½ year sentence. He was granted conditional release in 2011 but prevented from leaving the country to accept an offer of asylum in the US until January 2013. He continues to advocate on behalf of the Apostolic Movement in Cuba from his home in Texas, and to raise ongoing violations of religious freedom.

Matthew Jones, Senior Advocate at CSW, welcomed the visit, saying, “CSW is privileged to be able to play a role in the visit to Washington, DC of these important voices for religious freedom in Cuba. They each have valuable testimonies of persecution they have personally suffered, but are also travelling to speak on behalf of the thousands of Cubans whose freedom of thought conscience, religion or belief are violated on a daily basis. We hope that their visit helps to expose the truth about the Cuban government’s attacks on religious freedom and gives policy makers a clearer picture of the reality on the ground. CSW continues to call on the Cuban government to make systematic changes that will protect freedom of religion and belief for all groups, not just a privileged few.”