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CUBA | Church Leaders Publish Joint Declaration on Religious Freedom

Cuban religious leaders finished a visit to Washington, DC last week by publishing a joint declaration called “Thirty Questions for the Cuban Government.” Rev. Mario Felix Lleonart Barroso, Missionary Yoaxis Marcheco Suarez and Apostle Omar Gude Perez drafted the statement and questions which they say show freedom of religion or belief is not respected in Cuba.

The members of the group, who represent both a legally recognized, historic religious organization and a newer religious movement considered by the Cuban government to be illegal, spent a week in Washington, DC in a visit facilitated by Christian Solidarity Worldwide (CSW). They met with policy makers and NGOs to brief them on continued violations of freedom of religion or belief in Cuba.

The declaration and questions outline the most pressing concerns raised by the group, including the government’s continued refusal to extend official recognition to newer religious groups, the approval or denial of legal rights to registered groups based on perceived political support and cooperation, and the sweeping authority over religious organizations and activities held by the Office of Religious Affairs (ORA) of the Central Committee of the Cuban Communist Party. The group pointed to mass arrests during the visit of Pope Benedict XVI and new restrictions, including a decree that as of January 2014, churches and religious groups will no longer be able to hold individual bank accounts and existing accounts must be consolidated into one per denomination or organization as proof that the government is not interested in true reforms that would protect freedom of religion or belief.

Missionary Marcheco, a blogger and professor at the Luis Manuel Gonzalez Peña Baptist Theological Seminary, also pointed to excessive government intrusiveness into the internal affairs of religious organizations, pointing out that the minutes and decisions of every internal meeting must be turned over for the approval of ORA. Apostle Gude Perez, a national leader of the fast growing charismatic church group the Apostolic Movement, expressed frustration at the continued harassment of churches affiliated with his group, supposedly because of their

unregistered status, at the hands of the same officials who have denied their repeated attempts to register.

While the group was composed of Protestant leaders, they were keen to point out that other groups, including Catholics and Afro-Cuban religious groups suffer the same abuses, and held up the case of the Jehovah's Witnesses as an example of a group that suffers particularly severe persecution.

CSW's Senior Advocate Matthew Jones said, "CSW was privileged to facilitate the visit of these three religious leaders to Cuba last week and continues to be impressed by their courage and persistence in speaking out to challenge the claims of Raul Castro that religious freedom is respected in Cuba. We ask the international community to listen to their request for pressure on the regime to make fundamental changes to ensure the protection of fundamental human rights, including freedom of religion or belief. A first step should be the elimination of the Office of Religious Affairs of the Central Committee of the Cuban Communist Party and the establishment of a legal framework to protect the freedom of religion or belief of all, without discrimination for any reason. We are particularly concerned at the announcement that individual church bank accounts will be eliminated by the end of the year, and religious denominations limited to only one account, as this will make it much easier for the government to exert pressure over entire religious groups."