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CUBA | Religious Freedom Violations Increased in 2013

CSW has renewed its call for Cuban leader Raul Castro to ensure that significant improvements are made in upholding religious freedom in 2014. Research showed a steady increase in religious freedom violations across Cuba in 2013 as the result of an ongoing government crackdown on religious organizations and individuals.

CSW documented 185 reported cases of religious freedom violations in 2013, up from a total of 120 in 2012. Many of the individual documented cases involved entire churches and denominations and large numbers of people. 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. Baptist, Pentecostal and Methodist churches in different parts of the country reported consistent harassment and pressure from state security agents. Government officials continued to refuse to register some groups, including the large Protestant network the “Apostolic Movement”, threatening affiliated churches with closure.

Church leaders in different parts of the country reported ongoing violations in the final weeks of the year. On Dec. 20, six members of an inter-denominational protestant group were beaten and imprisoned for nine hours in a windowless cell with no ventilation or light after attempting to carry out open air evangelism in the city of Bayamo. A few days later, on Dec. 22, 60 women affiliated with the Ladies in White movement were arrested in the early hours of the morning and held in prisons, police patrol cars and police stations across the country to prevent them from attending Sunday morning Mass.

Based on the documentation and information received from church leaders, the Cuban government seemed most concerned with control over religious groups, some of the only established independent civil society organizations tolerated by the regime. Various denominations told CSW that they are under heavy pressure from the Office of Religious Affairs of the Central Committee of the Cuban Communist Party to change internal governing structures, statutes and constitutions to make them less democratic and therefore easier to control. The government also announced that in 2014, bank accounts would be restricted to one per denomination or religious association; individual churches will no longer be permitted to maintain their finances independently.

The government continued to push religious groups to expel or bar Cubans associated with human rights or pro-democracy groups from their congregations. Religious groups that refused to comply with these government demands saw their bank accounts frozen, and entire denominations found their requests to receive foreign visitors on religious visas denied.

There were some improvements, notably in the elimination of the need for Cubans to receive an exit visa, or 'white card' from the Cuban government in order to travel abroad. While many church leaders were able to travel outside Cuba for the first time, some continued to see their right to travel curtailed. At least two leaders in the Apostolic Movement were informed in 2013 they would not be permitted to leave Cuba with no reason given.

CSW's Chief Executive Mervyn Thomas said, "We are deeply concerned by the continued deterioration in religious freedom over the past year in Cuba. Each Sunday the government continues to violate the most basic of rights: the right to freely participate in religious services and form part of a religious community without interference. We are particularly concerned at attempts by the government to exert control over the internal affairs of religious groups, and specifically at the new regulation that limits entire denominations and religious associations to one bank account. Given that the government runs the bank and regularly freezes the accounts of individual churches as a way to exert pressure or punish them, this is an extremely worrying development. The Cuban government's claims of reform and respect for human rights cannot be taken seriously unless these violations are addressed and real protections for religious freedom for all put in place. Once again we urge Raul Castro to make this a priority of the government in 2014."