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CUBA | Pastor Under House Arrest Following Detention

Rev. Mario Felix Leonart Barroso, a Baptist pastor, was arrested and detained by political police and state security agents in central Cuba on Jan. 25. He was returned to his home later that night and put under house arrest.

Political police surrounded the home of Barroso, pastor of the Ebenezer Baptist Church in Taguayabon, in the early hours of Jan. 25. His wife, Yoaxis Marcheco Suarez, was forcibly stopped by security services when she attempted to leave the house with their two young daughters to warn Barroso, who was not home at the time. He was arrested in front of his family in the street as he returned home.

Barroso was held incommunicado for most of the day. He was returned home late in the evening and put under house arrest. During his detention, prints were taken of his fingers and toes, a scent sample was taken and the pastor was forced to give DNA samples from his nails and teeth. State security agents also attempted to intimidate him into signing an Official Warning or 'Advertencia Oficial', which is frequently used in the Cuban court system as evidence in future arrests. Barroso refused to do so.

Since his return home, two armed political police officers are standing guard outside the family house which is adjacent to the church. According to the pastor's sister, Mirka Pena, Barroso's arrest is part of a larger crackdown on political dissidents across the country, including well known activists such as Dr. Oscar Elias Biscet and Sakharov prize winner Guillermo Fariñas, in anticipation of the Community of Latin American and Caribbean States (CELAC) summit, due to take place this week in Cuba.

Barroso and his wife received a visit from the political police a few days before his arrest, who warned them to 'be calm' during the CELAC summit, which will bring together heads of state from across Latin America and the Caribbean. Government officials informed Barroso if he leaves his house he will be put in prison.

Barroso's arrest follows the temporary detention of another pastor, Yordani Santí, who was summoned to the police station on Jan. 16 and interrogated for several hours. State security agents threatened and warned Santí to stop associating with Barroso or face serious consequences.

CSW's Chief Executive Mervyn Thomas said, "We condemn the detention and arrest of Rev. Leonart Barroso and are particularly concerned at the intrusion of Cuban state security in taking DNA, biometric and scent samples from a peaceful church leader. We call on the Cuban government to release the pastor from house arrest with immediate effect, and to remove state

security agents stationed around his home and church. The arrest and harassment of Cubans across the island that the government considers to be political dissidents, even as Latin American leaders prepare to gather in Havana, is an affront to democratic principles and respect for human rights all over the world. We urge the Latin American leaders who will be present in Cuba in the coming days to raise the situation of human rights there and to meet with some of those who have suffered this harassment.”