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CUBA | Government Demolishes House Church

Cuban government agents, including state security and Cuban Communist Party officials, destroyed the home of Pastor Esmir Torreblanca in the eastern city of Santiago de Cuba on July 2. The building also housed the Establishing the Kingdom of God Church.

The unannounced demolition began at 6 a.m. while the pastor, who is a leader in the church, his wife and their young children, aged two and seven, were sleeping inside. They are now homeless.

Pastor Marcos A Perdomo Silva, who leads the Establishing the Kingdom of God Church, told the blog *Religión en Revolución* that "...they arrived and violently broke down the front door which was locked, the police entered with batons alongside a group of men carrying machetes. They began to destroy and occupy the properties of the pastor and the church." Photographs taken at the scene show uniformed officers directing a bulldozer to level the area where the church and home stood.

According to Pastor Perdomo, state security agents and police dressed in civilian clothes cordoned off the block, which is located in the Jose Marti District, Micro 10, using patrol cars, ambulances and trucks to block the roads. Pastor Perdomo noted the trucks were also used to carry away the contents of the home and church. When members of the church attempted to break through the barriers, their identification documents were confiscated, and they were threatened with arrest.

The Establishing the Kingdom of God church was threatened with confiscation and demolition in March this year, but local officials appeared to back down after the case received international attention. The house church is affiliated with the Apostolic Movement, a fast growing network of churches which the government has refused to register and considers illegal.

In 2010, the director of the Office of Religious Affairs of the Central Committee of the Cuban Communist Party, Caridad Diego, told a group of religious leaders her office was working to eradicate the Apostolic Movement and specifically said the government would forcibly remove people affiliated with the movement from their homes and confiscate their goods. Apostolic Movement leaders are consistently targeted by government officials for harassment, threats and in some cases imprisonment.

Mervyn Thomas, Chief Executive of CSW, said, "The Cuban government continues to claim publicly that it respects religious freedom, but cases like that of Pastor Esmir Torreblanca demonstrate that this is not the case. There is no justification for the arbitrary destruction of this church. This action by Cuban government officials left the church members without a place to worship and made this family, with two small children, homeless. We call on the international

community to hold the Cuban government to account and particularly urge the European Union to raise this case and other serious religious freedom violations as a part of its ongoing negotiations on an association agreement with Cuba.”