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CUBA | Baptist Pastor Threatened with Criminal Charges

Cuban Baptist pastor and religious freedom activist Rev. Mario Felix Lleonart Barroso received official notice that he may face criminal charges if he does not break ties with “counter-revolutionary elements” in and outside of Cuba, and if he does not stop giving radio interviews. His wife, Yoaxis Marcheco Suarez, was summoned for an interview with security services on Oct. 15.

Rev. Mario Felix Lleonart Barroso, a prominent religious freedom activist and church leader, was officially summoned to the State Security Unit in Camajuani, Villa Clara on Oct. 8. He was threatened with arrest if he did not appear. At the unit, a Lieutenant Colonel read out an Official Warning or “Acta de Advertencia,” a document that can be used as justification for future arrests and criminal charges. Two witnesses, whom the pastor did not recognize, were present and offered testimony of his “counter-revolutionary” links. This is the third time government agents have unsuccessfully attempted to pressure Rev. Lleonart Barroso into signing an Acta de Advertencia.

According to Rev. Lleonart Barroso, who leads the Ebenezer Baptist Church in the town of Taguayabon in Villa Clara Province, and who is a member of the Western Baptist Convention, one of the largest registered religious organizations on the island, the Lieutenant Colonel told him verbally that the government was unhappy about the pastor’s recent visit to the eastern part of the country. The official added that if the pastor did not change his behavior soon, a criminal case would “probably be filed.”

The purpose of Rev. Lleonart Barroso’s visit was to meet with church leaders who had reported violations of religious freedom. He met with Pastor Yiorvis Denis, the leader of a church in Camaguey which has come under repeated threat of forced closure and confiscation of property. He also met with Pastor Esmir Torreblanca, the leader of a large church in Santiago that was razed by the government in July.

Rev. Lleonart Barroso told Christian Solidarity Worldwide (CSW), “I intend to continue on with my activities in the defense of religious freedom in Cuba.”

CSW’s Chief Executive Mervyn Thomas said, “Once again we call on the Cuban government to cease its harassment of Rev. Lleonart Barroso. We are deeply concerned that the Cuban government appears to equate the defense of freedom of religion or belief with ‘counter-revolutionary’ activity, even as it publicly maintains that these fundamental rights are respected in Cuba. CSW reminds the Cuban government of the provisions in the ICCPR and the ICESCR, which it has signed, to protect and uphold religious freedom and the civil rights of its population.

We urge members of the international community to make representations to the Cuban government in support of Rev. Leonart Barroso and to hold the Cuban government to account for its continued violations of religious freedom.”