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CUBA | Religious Freedom Violations Continue to Increase

Violations of religious freedom in Cuba continued to rise in 2014, according to a new report by Christian Solidarity Worldwide (CSW) detailing 220 separate violations over the course of the year. Religious leaders and groups from all denominations on the island reported problems ranging from harassment and fines to confiscation and destruction of church property.

Throughout 2014, CSW received regular reports of severe harassment and sporadic reports of violent beatings of Protestant pastors and lay leaders in different parts of the country. Week after week, scores of women affiliated with the Ladies in White dissident group, most of whom are Roman Catholic, were violently dragged away by state security agents to stop them from attending Sunday morning mass. Many were beaten in the process and most were arbitrarily detained until after the conclusion of religious services.

Church leaders were also subject to arbitrary detention. Rev. Mario Felix Leonart Barroso of the Western Baptist Convention and his wife, Yoaxis Marcheco Suarez, were both arrested and pressured to sign a pre-arrest warrant, or *Acta de Advertencia*, on separate occasions in 2014. In November, Rev. Edi Yanela Área, a leader of an Apostolic Movement-affiliated church in Santiago de Cuba, was arrested and imprisoned for three days.

The government gave contradictory signals in regard to property rights. Positive moves included official permission to construct two new Catholic churches in Santiago de Cuba and in Pinar del Rio. However, other denominations reported continued threats of confiscation or destruction of their property. These include the Cuban Methodist Church, which was permitted to build a new church in Ciego de Avila in 2013, but reported government threats in mid-2014 to confiscate a church building in Matanzas. Religious groups that the government has refused to register, effectively making them illegal, like churches affiliated with the Apostolic Movement, reported serious problems. One Apostolic Movement church in Santiago de Cuba was destroyed by state security forces in July. Apostolic Movement leaders Pastor Alain Toledano in Santiago de Cuba and Pastor Yiorvis Bravo in Camaguey both reported continued threats from the government to confiscate their churches and homes despite the fact they hold the deeds and paperwork demonstrating legal ownership.

Religious groups also continued to complain of the government ignoring or refusing outright permits to make essential repairs on historic church buildings, many of which are in a state of decay. Most churches and religious buildings in Cuba were built prior to the Revolution in 1959. In September, leaders of the Bethel Baptist Church in the town of Vueltas made a public appeal for attention to their case. Since 2006, the church has filed numerous requests for permits to make repairs on the building, but these have been denied or ignored. To date, they have received no response. Their church building continues to deteriorate and is in an unsafe state.

Roman Catholics also reported problems. CSW was told that in 2014 the historic Franciscan monastery in Guanabacoa shut its doors after waiting years for government permission to carry out necessary repairs. Most of the monks, whose order has been present in Cuba for centuries, will be leaving Cuba as a result, with only four remaining in the country.

CSW's Chief Executive Mervyn Thomas said, "We were disappointed but not surprised to see another significant increase in religious freedom violations in Cuba, as it continues the trend of the past five years. Government promises of reform have not been reflected in the reality on the ground in Cuba. Raul Castro's government continues to maintain a tight grip on civil society and religious groups are not exempt. However, it is important to commend the courage of many religious leaders in Cuba, more and more of whom are speaking out publicly to denounce such violations and to call for religious freedom. We call on the international community and in particular the United Kingdom, European Union and the United States Government, to stand with these brave leaders and to hold Cuba to account on religious freedom. Respect for fundamental human rights must be a part of any political dialogue and the cornerstone of any economic or political agreement."