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CUBA | US Government Urged to Discuss Religious Freedom

Christian Solidarity Worldwide (CSW) is calling for violations of freedom of religion or belief to be raised in a human rights dialogue between the United States and Cuba on March 31.

CSW's research revealed that the situation in Cuba continued to deteriorate in 2014, with 230 violations of freedom of religion or belief documented that year, up from 185 in 2013. While all religious groups were affected, the majority of the violations targeted Roman Catholic human rights defenders and pro-democracy activists who were prevented, sometimes violently, from participating in religious activity by state security agents and the police. Unregistered religious groups, which the government has vowed to eradicate from the island, also reported a very high number of religious freedom violations including fines, harassment, threats of confiscation of property and in one case, the destruction of a church in July 2014.

CSW recommends the US government raise two specific issues with the Cuban government: allowing unregistered groups to attain legal status and respect for the right of all Cubans to participate in religious activities, regardless of their political beliefs.

CSW is also calling for the United States to press for the release of imprisoned pastor Rev. Jesús Noel Carballeda, who has been held without charge in a Cuban prison since early February. He was imprisoned five years ago for four months after militant communist neighbors filed legal complaints about the church services he held in his home in Marianao, Havana. Following his imprisonment, he was put on probation and made to check in with the authorities on a regular basis. He and his wife were barred from holding church services in their home, but Rev. Carballeda continued to lead his church, holding services in parks, rented halls and other private homes. His wife believes this is the reason behind his re-arrest.

In addition, CSW urges the Cuban government to respect the property rights of religious groups and of individuals associated with religious groups, highlighting the case of Rev. Yiorvis Bravo, whose property in Camaguey, which acts as his home and a place of worship for the unregistered Apostolic Movement religious network, has been repeatedly threatened with confiscation by Communist Party Officials and the regional government since 2010. Although Rev. Bravo has paperwork, signed by a government notary, proving his legal ownership of the property, a Cuban court moved to nullify his ownership arbitrarily in September 2013. Government officials later offered to allow him to stay in the property if he agreed to submit all church activities to the authorities in advance for approval and to acknowledge the government as the rightful owner of the property. Rev. Bravo refused these conditions.

CSW's Chief Executive Mervyn Thomas said, "We welcome tomorrow's human rights dialogue between the United States and Cuba, and appreciate that both sides have expressed a

willingness to discuss these issues. We urge the United States to include respect for freedom of religion or belief for all as a key part of these dialogues and to press the Cuban government for a commitment to improving its record in this area. While a few religious groups in Cuba have received special privileges in the past few years, including permission to build a handful of new churches, these rights have not been extended to all religious groups and thus cannot be considered an improvement in respect for freedom of religion or belief. The Cuban government must be held to account for its continued violations of this right and should be urged to legalize all religious groups, release Rev. Carballeda, allow all Cuban citizens to participate in religious activities without regard for their political beliefs, and to cease its threats to confiscate or destroy properties associated with registered and unregistered religious groups."