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## CUBA | Government Issues Church Demolitions Orders

Christian Solidarity Worldwide (CSW) received reports that Cuban government officials issued an order to demolish all churches in the Abel Santa Maria neighborhood in the city of Santiago de Cuba.

According to Rev. Alain Toledano, who leads one of the targeted churches, the authorities have also instructed the pastors and families who live on the affected church properties be evicted.

The order, issued Nov. 27 by government Planning and Housing Officials, came two weeks after members of the Emanuel Church, affiliated with the Apostolic Movement and led by Rev. Toledano, started a “sleep in” in an effort to block government efforts to confiscate the property and destroy the church. Rev. Toledano told CSW that two churches affiliated with the Baptist and Assemblies of God denominations in Santiago, as well as two Assemblies of God churches in the Las Tunas Province, are also under threat of government confiscation and demolition.

“There is a witch hunt against churches in Cuba at this time, mainly against the churches of apostolic and prophetic ministry. The communists have intensified in their hatred and persecution of the church following the Pope's visit to Cuba and the re-establishment of relations with the United States. I request constant intercession on behalf of the churches in Cuba. In our case, this would be the second time that the racist communists have attempted to evict us from our house, throw us out on the street and demolish our temple, only now their diabolical hatred and fury is directed at other congregations too,” said Rev. Toledano.

Although the Cuban government has refused to register the Apostolic Movement, the Emanuel Church property is privately owned by Rev. Toledano and his wife, Marilyn, and they have paperwork demonstrating that they had the approval of government officials to carry out all the construction and renovation work which has taken place. Rev. Toledano told CSW that one of the Assemblies of God churches under threat in Las Tunas is also facing demolition, despite the fact that the denomination is legally registered and the government issued permits for construction.

The threats against the churches appear to be part of a general crackdown and expropriations of church properties, linked to the implementation of new legislation in January.

Legal Decree 322 gives sweeping powers to the authorities to confiscate property at their discretion, and CSW received reports from numerous registered and unregistered denominations that the law has been used to target scores of churches, including historic properties, across the island. Some religious groups were given the option to remain in the

properties as tenants as long as they pay artificially high rent to the government and submit all their activities in advance to the Communist Party for approval, but most have rejected this.

CSW's Chief Executive Mervyn Thomas said, "We continue to call on the Cuban government to cease its harassment and persecution of religious groups across Cuba. The land grabs and attempts to manipulate religious organizations, linked to efforts to confiscate church properties, must end. It is clear that freedom of religion or belief has seriously deteriorated in Cuba over the course of the year since Legal Decree 322 came into force in January. We urge the European Union, the United States and other members of the international community to raise concerns about this law and its impact on freedom of religion or belief with the Cuban government as a matter of urgency, as well as the cases of these churches, which are currently under threat."