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CUBA | Churches Demolished, Pastors Arrested

Two Protestant churches were demolished and at least three church leaders held incommunicado in Cuba on Jan. 8.

State security agents and police also blocked off roads and surrounded the home of Mario Felix Leonart Barroso, a prominent pastor and religious freedom activist, in an unsuccessful attempt to arrest him but did manage to detain scores of other Cubans linked to the churches to prevent them from going to the site of the demolitions.

Both churches belonged to the Apostolic Movement, an unregistered network of Protestant churches. Government officials initiated the destruction of Rev. Bernardo de Quesada Salomon's church, an open-air structure in Versailles, Camaguey, and that of Rev. Juan Carlos Núñez Velázquez, in Victoria de las Tunas, without prior warning in the early hours of Jan. 8.

Just after 4 a.m., police and state security agents broke down the door and handcuffed Rev. Bernardo de Quesada Salomon and his wife, Damaris, taking them to two separate prisons while the demolition took place. Damaris was released at around 1 p.m. while Rev. de Quesada Salomon was dropped off by state security after 3 p.m. after the church had been destroyed. Their son was handcuffed and held in the house during the demolition of the open-air structure.

Numerous Apostolic Movement church leaders in Camaguey and Las Tunas, as well as other parts of the country, were also arbitrarily detained or confined to their homes by state security agents, presumably to stop them from going to support the churches being demolished. Many reported that their mobile phones were cut off, and police blocked off the roads surrounding the churches, as well as some of the main roads in the city of Camaguey.

The home of Baptist pastor, Mario Felix Leonart Barroso, who was not in at the time, was surrounded by state security and police. The government agents also blocked the road and told Rev. Leonart Barroso's wife and two small daughters that they intended to arrest Rev. Leonart Barroso, also in an attempt to stop him from going to Camaguey to the site of the demolitions.

The scale of the government operation, together with the mass arrests and blocking of communication, may be a reaction to the aborted effort to demolish an Assemblies of God church in Santiago in November after local Christians held a peaceful sit-in at the church building.

The churches, which are both located on the private properties of the respective pastors, had received permits for construction or changes to the buildings from the government. Rev. Núñez Velázquez received a permit to build his church on July 5, but one month later was informed by the Ministry of Housing that the permit had been revoked and the church designated for demolition. The authorities told Rev. Núñez Velázquez the demolition would be carried out by “The Group to Confront Illegalities within the Provincial Institute of Physical Planning.” The pastor called on his congregation to pray and to physically occupy the church in peaceful protest. Initially, local officials backed down on the five-day ultimatum and agreed to “discuss” the fate of the church with the church's lawyer. However, the nullification was not revoked. Ongoing threats were reported in October and November and finally carried out Jan. 8.

Church leaders inside Cuba note that the demolition of the two churches takes place within a worrying context. Last year, 2,000 churches linked to the legally recognized Assemblies of God denomination were declared by the government to be illegal. Meanwhile, 100 of those in just three provinces, Santiago, Guantanamo, and Contramaestre, were designated for demolition and forced closure by the Group to Confront Illegalities. Many religious leaders are concerned that the demolitions could be the first of many if the government follows through on its threats.

Mervyn Thomas, Chief Executive of Christian Solidarity Worldwide said, “We urge the international community to raise the demolition of these two churches, the detention of the pastors and the threats against others with the Cuban government as a matter of urgency. We are deeply concerned for the well-being of Reverends de Quesada Salomon and Núñez Velázquez and their families. Their treatment at the hands of the government is unacceptable and all restrictions on their freedom and communication must be lifted without delay. Contrary to the hopes of many that political dialogue with United States and the European Union would lead to more freedom in Cuba, over the past year we have seen a severe regression in terms of freedom of religion or belief and shrinking space for religious groups to operate. We call on the EU and the U.S. to make freedom of religion or belief a central component of its dialogues with Cuba and to insist on improvement in this area.”