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CUBA | Unprecedented Crackdown Drives Spike in Violations

An unprecedented crackdown on churches across the denominational spectrum in Cuba in 2015 fueled a spike in reported violations of freedom of religion or belief (FoRB), according to a new report by Christian Solidarity Worldwide (CSW).

Figures compiled by CSW, which are not exhaustive but which serve as an indicator of the level of FoRB violations, reveal a tenfold increase, with 2,300 separate violations recorded in 2015 compared to 220 in 2014. Many incidents involved entire churches or, in the case of arrests, dozens of victims. A digital illustration by CSW highlights the crackdown on churches in Cuba.

The spike in cases was largely due to the government declaring 2,000 Assemblies of God (AoG) churches illegal, ordering the closure or demolition of 100 AoG churches in three provinces, and expropriating the properties of a number of other denominations, including the Methodist and Baptist Conventions. Legally registered and unregistered religious groups across the denominational spectrum reported varying degrees of hostility from the government.

According to the report, “the consistently antagonistic relationship” between Caridad del Rosario Diego Bello, director of the Office of Religious Affairs (ORA), an arm of the Central Committee of the Cuban Communist Party which oversees religious affairs on the island, and the leadership of many religious groups, “is evidence that the office exists solely to monitor, hinder and restrict the activities of religious groups.”

In 2015, the ORA continued to deny authorization for a number of religious activities and in cooperation with other government agencies, issued fines and threats of confiscation to dozens of churches and religious organizations. The ORA also sanctioned the arbitrary expropriation of historic, registered church properties and the actions against the AoG churches.

CSW’s report also highlights “more brutal and public tactics” being employed by government agents than were witnessed in the first decade of the millennium.

“Week after week, state security agents physically and violently dragged scores of women away from Sunday morning services. Most were arbitrarily detained until after the conclusion of religious services. The government continued to employ a strategy of frequent, temporary arbitrary detention to target those it views as political dissidents. This tactic is also applied to religious leaders who are viewed as problematic, for whatever reason, by the authorities...for the first time in four years a church leader was sentenced to and served six months in prison for holding unauthorized religious services,” the report states.

In the face of intense pressure, many Christians are engaging in peaceful protest as seen in the case of the attempted demolition of an AoG church in Santiago de Cuba in November 2015 which was thwarted after local Christians held a peaceful sit-in at the church building. On Jan. 8, a large-scale government operation led to the mass arrests of several church leaders and the blocking of their communications devices while two churches were demolished, possibly to preempt a similar protest. Both churches belonged to the Apostolic Movement, an unregistered network of Protestant churches.

CSW’s analysis suggests that the Cuban government is trying to eliminate the potential for social upheaval by cracking down on any and all groups that are calling, or could call, for social and political reforms alongside the limited economic reforms the government has enacted.

CSW’s Chief Executive Mervyn Thomas said, “CSW doesn’t use the word ‘unprecedented’ lightly to refer to violations of freedom of religion or belief in Cuba in 2015. Following an upward trend in violations in recent years, 2015 witnessed a spike as the authorities deployed ever more public and brutal tactics to target churches across the denominational spectrum, regardless of their legal status. It is clear that despite promises of reform, the government is determined to maintain a tight grip on civil society, including churches. We commend the courage of religious groups who have spoken out publicly to denounce these violations and to call for the right to freedom of religion or belief to be upheld. We urge the international community to stand with them and to hold Cuba to account for these human rights violations.”