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CUBA | Church Demolished, Hundreds Arrested

Emanuel Church, a large church in eastern Cuba affiliated to the Apostolic Movement, an unregistered Protestant denomination, was demolished by the authorities Feb. 5 while hundreds of church members were detained.

The property of Rev. Alain Toledano in Santiago de Cuba was surrounded by officials including members of the police, state security and the military at approximately 5 a.m. on Feb. 5. They detained his wife, Marilín Alayo Correa, before demolishing both Emanuel Church and the pastoral home.

The destruction of the church follows similar demolitions of two Apostolic Movement churches in Camaguey and Las Tunas provinces on Jan. 8.

Over the course of Feb. 5, approximately 200 leaders and members of Emanuel Church were detained. A group of around 40 were held in a local school while others were taken to police stations across the region to stop them from protesting the demolition. Church leaders reported that many were beaten while they were detained. The government has repeatedly refused to register the Apostolic Movement denomination.

Rev. Toledano was in the United States attending a religious event at the time of the government action against the church. He told Christian Solidarity Worldwide (CSW) that he believes the Cuban government intentionally carried out the eviction and demolition when he was out of the country. He expressed concern at the impact on his daughters, ages 11 and 12, who he said were screaming as they witnessed their mother being detained, adding that this is the second time they have experienced the destruction of their home and church. In 2007, the Cuban government carried out a significant operation to destroy the church, also located in the Abel Santamaria neighborhood of Santiago, which at the time had around 700 members.

Church leaders told CSW that the church and family home were totally destroyed. In addition, the government confiscated goods belonging to the church including pews, chairs, audio

equipment a piano and other musical instruments. Over 1,000 blocks of cement were also confiscated, despite the fact that the Toledano family has documents showing they were legally purchased.

The property is privately owned by Rev. Toledano and the government approved the construction of and renovation work on the buildings. However, Rev. Toledano notified CSW of numerous threats of church eviction and closure he received throughout 2015. These included threats by three men claiming to be government officials on Oct. 13. In response to the threats, the church organized a “sleep in” on Nov. 13 with members staying on the property 24 hours a day. However, these efforts were met with an eviction order issued by government Planning and Housing officials two weeks later.

CSW’s Chief Executive Mervyn Thomas said, “We are extremely disturbed to learn of this latest church demolition by the Cuban authorities, in a similar manner to the destruction of the two Apostolic Movement churches on 8 January. We are also extremely concerned for the family of Rev. Toledano and his wife, Marilín, who saw their home razed as part of this destruction. This series of demolitions since the New Year indicates a worrying escalation in terms of violations of freedom of religion or belief in Cuba. Again, we urge the international community to raise the demolition of these three churches, the mass detentions of pastors and church members, as well as the threats against others with the Cuban government as a matter of urgency. We continue to call on the EU and the US to make freedom of religion or belief a central component of its dialogues with Cuba and to insist on improvement in this area.”