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CUBA | CSW Marks Ongoing Struggle of Ladies in White

Christian Solidarity Worldwide (CSW) is marking the ongoing struggle and enduring courage of Cuba's Ladies in White ahead of International Women's Day which is March 8.

The Ladies in White (known as Damas de Blanco in Spanish), many of whom are the wives and other female relatives of former and current political prisoners, attend Mass on Sundays dressed in white to symbolize peace, before walking silently through the streets of their town or city.

The movement, which won the European Parliament's Sakharov Prize for Freedom of Thought in 2005 and was nominated for the Nobel Peace Prize, was formed in 2003 after a mass crackdown on dissidents and journalists known as the Black Spring. Since 2010, all of the Black Spring prisoners have been released, mostly into exile in Spain, following dialogue between the government and hierarchy of the Roman Catholic Church. However, there are still political prisoners in Cuba, and the Ladies in White are still active and growing in number.

They are often harassed, arrested or beaten on their way to Mass. CSW's latest report on freedom of religion or belief in Cuba noted that scores of Cubans were forcibly prevented from exercising their right to worship every Sunday in 2015, the majority of whom were Roman Catholics and women affiliated with the Ladies in White. This treatment has continued in 2016.

The report states that "harassment and arbitrary detention was frequently accompanied by threats and severe violence. Many of the members of the Ladies in White reported being beaten during their arrest. On Feb. 1, 2015, Mayelin Peña Bullain was detained, beaten and kicked in the chest by a state security agent named Ramon in Melena del Sur, Mayabeque province, before being imprisoned for the duration of Mass. While most women were detained in prison cells or at police stations during Mass, others were handcuffed and kept in hot cars in the sun for up to six hours at a time. In many cases, after their detention, state security agents dropped off the women in remote locations forcing them to find their own way home."

It continues: "While government officials appear to be primarily focused on Sunday morning activities, some victims reported that they were also stopped from attending other weekday events including midweek services, Bible studies and prayer groups. This would suggest that the government policy is aimed not only at impeding the victims from being present at Sunday Mass, but is also an attempt to isolate them from their faith community." Members of the Ladies in White, as well as other human rights activists, were prevented from attending the activities around Pope Francis' visit in September 2015. The group's leader, Berta Soler, was arrested and reported that state security agents "dragged her by the hair and neck" to a police car and later intentionally hurt her hands as punishment for having attempted to attend Mass with the Pope.

CSW's Chief Executive Mervyn Thomas said, "Every Sunday, the Ladies in White go to Mass knowing that they will likely be harassed, arrested and beaten, putting their bodies on the line in defense of freedom. International Women's Day is an opportunity to highlight their weekly act of courage and commend their resilience. CSW stands with these brave women and urges the Cuban government to stop targeting them and others like the Ladies in White who are peacefully exercising their rights as Cuban citizens. We call on President Obama to keep Cuba's human rights record, including violations of the right to freedom of religion or belief in Cuba on the agenda when he visits this month."