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CUBA | Baptist Pastor Arrested, Wife Under House Arrest

Baptist pastor and prominent religious freedom activist, Rev. Mario Felix Leonart Barroso, was arrested March 20 by Cuban state security agents, just hours before U.S. President Barack Obama arrived in Cuba for his official visit.

Before his arrest, Rev. Leonart Barroso told CSW his home and church in the village of Taguayabon, Villa Clara Province, were surrounded by police and state security agents beginning early Sunday morning.

Following his arrest, Rev. Leonart Barroso's wife, Yoaxis Marcheco Suarez, was placed under house arrest. State security continues to surround their home, where she and their two young daughters are locked inside, and the authorities have cut her phone connection.

The arrest of Rev. Leonart Barroso, who is a member of the Baptist Convention of Western Cuba, came only a few hours after the violent detention of scores of human rights activists linked to the Ladies in White while they were on their way to attend morning Mass on March 20.

Before the phone lines were cut, Marcheco Suarez told CSW she was informed that Rev. Leonart Barroso was taken to the city of Santa Clara, where the authorities refused to allow any food or liquids to be brought to him. She expressed concern for his health, stating that he was feeling very unwell over the weekend. His skin and the whites of his eyes turned yellow and his stomach was distended, after a stranger pricked him with a pin while the pastor was riding public transport last week. No one from his family or church has been able to communicate directly with the pastor since his arrest.

"Last night we began Holy Week, and my husband could not give the church the sermon he had prepared... we continue to do all that we can for him and for all the activists who woke up behind bars," Marcheco Suarez told CSW. "President Obama has an extraordinary challenge. He will go into history as the first U.S. leader to either give a great boost to the old Cuban dictatorship, or he will be remembered as the one who found the antidote to eliminate it. For the

moment, we will see if he, at the very least, vehemently condemns the human rights violations that this regime commits every day. For now, all I can say is that there was a huge contrast between Obama's big smile when he arrived in Havana and saluted the lackeys of the system, and the repressive environment which the real Cuba breaths, something which I'm sure he won't be able to truly appreciate in the short hours of his visit to the island."

CSW's Chief Executive Mervyn Thomas, said "The Cuban government's decision to detain Rev. Leonart Barroso, to put his wife and children under house arrest and cut off their communication, and the violent mass arrests of members of the Ladies in White and other human rights activist on the very day of President Obama's historic arrival to the island is a slap in the face to the United States, as well as to the European Union and other countries which have been encouraging improvement in respect for human rights in Cuba. We are deeply disappointed at this turn of events, and call on President Obama to demand the release of these prisoners as matter of urgency. If the events of the weekend are allowed to pass in silence, it bodes ill for the likelihood of any improvement in human rights in the future. Our prayers are with Rev. Leonart Barroso and Yoaxis Marcheco Suarez, and with all human rights defenders and pro-democracy activists who find themselves behind bars today, on what was supposed to herald a new era for Cuba."