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CUBA | Government Demolishes Apostolic Movement Church

Cuban government officials demolished the Strong Winds Ministry Church in Las Tunas, eastern Cuba on April 9 and threatened Rev. Mario Jorge Travieso with seven years imprisonment if he spoke publicly about the destruction of his church.

The church, which is affiliated with the Apostolic Movement, an unregistered Protestant denomination, is the fourth in Cuba and the second in Las Tunas to be demolished by the government since the beginning of the year.

Rev. Travieso told Christian Solidarity Worldwide (CSW) that in a large-scale operation at 4 a.m. on April 9, hundreds of government officials surrounded the property on the outskirts of the city, situated on Calle Guerra and the southern ring road and which is privately owned by a church member called Caridad Reyna. Rev. Travieso was arrested and detained while they carried out the demolition.

Rev. Travieso said, “The farm was raided by hundreds of troops from different government entities and they used modern heavy machinery to destroy the foundation which we had built and a brick platform covered with earth. They broke up the floor with an old digger and they confiscated all the pews where more than 70 church members sit, all of the lights and cables and electrical equipment, as well as the tools to carry out work, iron pipes and a private cement mixer. The value of the items they stole amounts to more than 50,000 Cuban pesos (approximately \$1,980) and that is without including the 14 zinc sheets and the pipes donated by members of the congregation which are worth about 20,000 (approximately \$792) in our national currency.”

Rev. Travieso was detained for hours although the officials presented no warrant for his arrest. He said he was treated badly by the head of the State Security Provincial unit, “like a common delinquent.” State security agents presented him with a pre-arrest warrant (acta de advertencia) which includes a seven-year prison sentence if anyone in the congregation makes public

complaints about the destruction of their church.

Despite these threats, Rev. Travieso said “All of these violations continue in my country, without any attention, so we share the news of this great injustice with the international community.” He also expressed concern and called for international support with regards to his own safety, “... (I) could fall into unfair hands at any moment.”

CSW’s Chief Executive Mervyn Thomas said, “We are extremely disturbed to learn of this latest church demolition by the Cuban authorities, just weeks after President Obama’s historic visit to the island. The actions of the Cuban government this past weekend indicate that they have no plans to ease up on their crackdown on the Apostolic Movement churches. The threats of a lengthy prison sentence, should members of the Strong Winds Ministry Church speak out about these serious human rights violations, are beyond the pale. Once again, we urge the international community to raise the demolition of these three churches, the mass detentions of pastors and church members, and threats of imprisonment with the Cuban government as a matter of urgency. We continue to 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.”