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CUBA | Church Demolitions Gather Pace

The first half of 2016 has seen church demolitions in Cuba gather pace as the government crackdown on freedom of religion or belief (FoRB) on the island continues. The authorities have also begun to confiscate 1,400 Assemblies of God (AOG) churches that were earmarked for seizure in 2015.

The latest report on FoRB in Cuba by Christian Solidarity Worldwide (CSW) details 1,606 separate violations between January and July 2016. Cases include the demolition and confiscation of church buildings, the destruction of church property, arbitrary detention and other forms of harassment, in particular seizure of religious leaders' personal belongings.

The government has continued to follow through with the confiscation of 1,400 AOG churches; 100 of those churches are under threat of demolition. AOG leaders and leaders from other denominations expressed concern to CSW that the government's repression of religious groups has worsened significantly over the past year.

There has been an unprecedented spate of church demolitions. Four large churches linked to the unregistered Apostolic Movement were destroyed by the government in central and eastern Cuba. In each of these cases, the pastors and their families were dragged out of their homes in the very early hours of the morning. They were also detained and held in separate police stations for the duration of the demolition. In some of these cases, large numbers of members of the churches were detained, apparently to stop them from protesting.

The report also details the arbitrary detention and harassment of many church leaders. CSW reported nine cases in 2016, including those detained while their churches were being demolished. A particularly serious case involved the arrest of Rev. Mario Felix Leonart Barroso on March 20, hours before U.S. President Barack Obama arrived in Cuba on an official visit. The government has also continued to detain dozens of women affiliated with the Ladies in White movement across Cuba every Sunday on their way to Mass. They are often violently dragged away by security agents as they leave their homes or upon arriving at church services.

Despite these challenges, CSW received a growing number of accounts of religious groups standing up to government pressure. Church leaders have continued to worship on the sites of their demolished churches and Ladies in White have persisted in their efforts to attend Mass on Sunday mornings, despite government repression and violence.

CSW's Chief Executive Mervyn Thomas said, "CSW is alarmed by the escalation of FoRB violations throughout Cuba, but humbled and inspired by the courage and perseverance of the many religious communities who continue to peacefully resist government pressure. We remain disappointed by the broken promises for reform on the part of the Cuban government and urge it to change course. We call on the international community and in particular the United Kingdom, European Union and the United States government to stand in solidarity with Cuban citizens by pressing the Cuban government to halt these repressive actions and ensuring that human rights, and in particular FoRB, remains a core component of any upcoming dialogues with the Cuban government."