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## **CUBA | Pastor Awaits Outcome of Appeal**

Rev. Juan Carlos Núñez Velázquez, from Las Tunas in eastern Cuba, is awaiting the outcome of his appeal against his one-year sentence of house arrest.

He was found guilty Oct.21 of violating the environmental protection law following complaints from neighbors that his church's sound system was too loud. Rev. Núñez Velázquez was only given two days of notice for his court date, and his lawyer did not have adequate time to prepare his defense. During the trial, Rev. Núñez Velázquez was only allowed four witnesses, while the prosecution had 10.

Rev. Núñez Velázquez was due to appear in court Oct.28 to hear the exact conditions of his house arrest; however, as a result of the appeal, he filed Oct.25, the hearing was cancelled. He is currently able to leave his house while he awaits the outcome of the appeal.

Rev. Núñez Velázquez's church belongs to the Apostolic Movement, an unregistered network of Protestant churches. The church building, which was located on his private property, was demolished Jan. 8. The church has been forced to meet in the courtyard of the house since the demolition.

On Sept. 23, Rev. Núñez Velázquez was notified by the Environmental Organization (CITMA) that his neighbors complained his church's sound system was too loud during Sunday services. However, the sound system used by the church adheres to environmental regulations, and at no point did CITMA officially assess the sound system for its compliance to the legislation before bringing charges. In addition, from Sept. 22-25, around the time the accusations were brought against Rev. Núñez Velázquez, local carnivals were held in Las Tunas, during which loud music was playing 24 hours a day.

On Sept. 26, Rev. Núñez Velázquez was made to sign a precautionary measure which stipulated that he had to seek official permission to leave his city. Sources inform Christian Solidarity Worldwide (CSW) that Rev. Núñez Velázquez's neighbors were encouraged by the authorities to complain about the church. This is not unusual. CSW's recent briefing on freedom of religion or belief in Cuba states that government agents sometimes try to instigate community hostility towards a local church: "In one case in Santiago, government agents employed neighbors to carry out surveillance on the church leaders by following them and taking photographs of them."

During the church service Oct. 30, the neighbors who accused Rev. Núñez Velázquez of having the church sound system too loud, lit candles which released smoke during the church service and caused church members, including children, to cough profusely. However, the church was able to finish the service.

CSW's Chief Executive Mervyn Thomas said, "CSW is deeply concerned at the unjust treatment of Rev. Núñez Velázquez and calls for his sentence to be overturned. We urge the Cuban government to halt its harassment of the Apostolic Movement denomination. We further call on the EU and the U.S. to insist that improvements in freedom of religion or belief and other human rights in Cuba are a central part of any dialogue with the Cuban government."