



2.5.17

## **CUBA | Report Reveals Ongoing Religious Restrictions**

Christian Solidarity Worldwide's (CSW's) new report on violations of the right to Freedom of Religion or Belief (FoRB) in Cuba reveals that, despite developments in Cuba's relationships with the United States and European Union (EU), "talk of progress has not yet translated into tangible improvements for religion or belief communities."

The report notes that the Cuban government has continued to actively restrict FoRB for a number of religious communities across the island. This is particularly acute for those who have been refused registration by the Office of Religious Affairs (ORA), the branch of the Cuban Communist Party which regulates religious affairs and which is identified in CSW's report as "the key perpetrator of FoRB violations across the island."

In 2016, four large churches linked to the Apostolic Movement, a Protestant church network that has been denied registration by the ORA, were destroyed by the government in central and eastern Cuba. Government officials later threatened to confiscate land from two landowners if they continued to allow the congregations of two of the demolished churches to hold Sunday services on their properties.

According to the report, "In 2016, CSW recorded 2,380 separate violations of freedom of religion or belief (FoRB) in Cuba. At least 2,009 of these violations involved entire church congregations, and around 260 involved groups of women or activists arrested to prevent them from attending Mass. This is a slight increase on the 2,300 cases documented in 2015, a record high at the time. The spike can be attributed to the fact that 2,000 Assemblies of God (AOG) churches were declared illegal in 2015, a ruling which still stands. By comparison, CSW reported 220 FoRB violations in Cuba in 2014; 180 in 2013, 120 in 2012 and 40 in 2011." These figures are not exhaustive, but serve as an indicator of the rate of FoRB violations in the country.

“The brutal and public strategies used by the Cuban government to target religious groups, identified in CSW’s 2015 report, continued throughout 2016. These include public and arbitrary arrests, beatings, and interrogations in contexts such as going through airport security. CSW also received reports of more subtle tactics used by the Cuban government, including the spreading of disinformation about religious leaders.” In addition, the report details FoRB violations committed during the national period of mourning for Fidel Castro.

Many religious leaders and members of church congregations were also closely observed by, and received visits from, state security agents and political police officers. Every Sunday in 2016, government agents systematically and often violently detained dozens of women affiliated with the Ladies in White movement, a non-violent human rights movement, preventing them from attending Mass.

On Feb. 1, 2017, Rev. Juan Carlos Núñez Velázquez from Las Tunas, whose case is detailed in the report, was barred from leading his church for a year and threatened with imprisonment if he does not comply with this order. On Jan. 8, 2016, his church, which is affiliated to the Apostolic Movement and was located on his private property, was demolished. Since then, the congregation has met in the courtyard of his house. Rev. Núñez Velázquez was found guilty of “disobedience” in October 2016 following complaints that he had broken environmental regulations. His appeal against a sentence of house arrest was denied in December 2016. The February 2017 ruling clarified the conditions of his house arrest.

As CSW reported in August 2016, Cuban activists are becoming increasingly bold in their efforts to defend FoRB. Churches have continued to find ways of meeting together, even after land and church belongings have been confiscated. They have also continued to publicly denounce violations, despite the dangers this can involve.

CSW’s Chief Executive Mervyn Thomas said, “CSW is very concerned that despite developments in Cuba’s relationships with the US and the EU, the promised freedoms have not materialized for Cuba’s religious communities. We commend the courage of religious groups who have spoken out publicly to denounce ongoing FoRB violations, often at great personal risk. We continue to call on the EU and the UK and US governments to ensure that human rights, and particularly FoRB, remain a priority in any dialogues with the Cuban government.”