

CUBA

Between January 1 and September 10, 2012 CSW documented over 100 separate violations of religious freedom in Cuba. Many of the documented cases involved multiple victims (in one case hundreds) who were simultaneously targeted by Cuban security agencies in different parts of the country. While the number is restricted only to cases verified and documented by CSW and as such is probably far lower than the number of actual religious freedom violations, it does indicate a sharp deterioration in religious freedom on the island when compared with the total number of documented cases, 30, for all of 2011 (which was up from 2010). The numbers confirm information received from CSW sources inside Cuba who say that levels of intimidation and repression are at their highest levels since 1980.

There appear to be multiple factors behind the crackdown this year, the most obvious of which can be linked to the visit of Pope Benedict XIV in March and later in the year, the celebrations around Our Lady of Charity of El Cobre in September. Ironically, the government was keen to portray the Pope's visit to the international community as evidence that religious freedom is respected and upheld in Cuba. Because of this the event was carefully orchestrated in order to eliminate the possibility of any disruption that might damage the positive image the government wished to project. Human rights defenders and pro-democracy activists, many of whom are practicing Catholics, were targeted to prevent their attendance or participation in any of the activities surrounding the Papal visit. During the week of the Pope's visit hundreds of men and women were rounded up and put under house arrest or imprisoned, effectively stopping them from participating in any of the religious activities organized during that period.

After the Pope's departure, many expected the government to relax its restrictions on religious practice. Unfortunately, this did not occur. Men and women who had been prevented from attending church services since the beginning of the year, continue to be stopped each Sunday from participating in religious activities either through security agents surrounding their home or through temporary detention through the hours of the religious service. Some incidents have involved violence. Those targeted by the government have not only been prevented from attending Sunday morning services, but in some cases have been told they are forbidden from any involvement in religious activities.

In one particularly egregious case, Caridad Caballero, a member of the Ladies in White movement, her husband and her son were physically stopped from reaching their local church to join in any religious activities, including Sunday morning mass, confirmation classes, and weeknight prayer meetings and Bible study, since Christmas. Despite the support of their local priest, the family was blocked from receiving their First Communion and being confirmed into the Catholic Church on Easter Sunday. The family was handled violently by security agents on multiple occasions and has been subjected to verbal and physical abuse. They spent consecutive Sundays in solitary confinement in harsh conditions. In June, they were offered asylum in the United States and left Cuba. Other members of the Ladies in White in Holguin, including Marta Diaz Rondon, have continued to suffer similar treatment.

The government's concern regarding possible juxtaposition between human rights and pro-democracy activists and communities of faith is nothing new. The government has always viewed religious institutions, one of the only manifestations of organized independent civil society tolerated on the island, as a potential threat. Since 1959 the authorities have put heavy pressure on religious bodies to expel and shun individuals designated as undesirable by the government. In recent years, however, more and more church leaders from all denominations have openly resisted this pressure and refuse to allow the

government to dictate who may and may not be involved in a particular community of faith. This shift has not gone unperceived by the government and is likely responsible in large part for the renewed crackdown.

Individual pastors and entire denominations have come under intense pressure from the authorities to bring their members back into line. In the case of one group, the Western Baptist Convention, this pressure has been applied at all levels. The government has targeted congregations and denominational leadership, respectively encouraging them to lodge complaints against or expel specific pastors who refuse to comply with government demands. When this failed to achieve the desired results in one case, the denomination was pushed to make fundamental structural changes to its leadership and decision making process. After the denominational assembly unanimously rejected this proposal in a democratic vote in early April, the government was quick to apply retaliatory measures. A number of churches associated with the denomination were threatened with closure, a church vehicle and other property were confiscated and demolition and construction began on the property of a historic (pre-Revolution) church in Yaguajay. The government claimed the property had been nationalized in 1980 but it is clear to denominational leaders, who note the timing of this wave of abuses, that this is punishment for refusing to submit to the demands of the authorities.

The government's interest in promoting an image of respect for religious freedom in Cuba internationally has also resulted in the targeting of specific individuals who have the potential to damage their campaign. Pastor Omar Gude Perez who was imprisoned on trumped up charges in 2008 and sentenced to 6 ½ years in prison has been blocked from leaving the country despite being offered asylum by the United States last July. Gude Perez was released on conditional liberty in early 2011 but is barred from working in the ministry and severely restricted in terms of travel. Emigration officials at first insisted that no one in the family would be allowed to leave (Gude Perez's wife and two teenage children also received asylum) but granted exit permits to his wife and daughter in the autumn and to his son at the end of the year following sustained international pressure to do so. The family, citing concerns regarding an indefinite separation from Gude Perez, has not yet left the country. The government seems most concerned that Gude Perez and his wife will work to highlight the persecution of the Apostolic Movement, a fast growing network of churches which they lead and which is disproportionately targeted by the authorities.

Of particular concern to CSW is news of a number of physical attacks on pastors this year. While CSW has received such reports in the past, they have been sporadic and not indicative of a wider wave of violence targeting church leaders. The fact that multiple such attacks have taken place in such a short period of time along with the level of brutality involved is extremely worrying. No one has been held to account in any of the beatings, and local authorities have dismissed requests for an investigation. There are a few common factors in each of the attacks. Victims have all been church leaders in smaller denominations or independent churches, meaning they do not have an organized network to call on for support. In addition they all work in relatively isolated parts of the country away from tourist traffic and where access to e-mail is extremely limited. Local security agents are believed to be responsible for carrying out or organizing the beatings, however, the fact that no investigations have been forthcoming seems to imply the tacit endorsement of the central government.

The exact reasons behind the beatings are varied; however, in each case the victim had challenged local authorities prior to the attack. In the most severe of the cases, Pastor Reutilio Columbie, leader of a Pentecostal church in Moa in the eastern part of the country, was beaten and left for dead after

protesting the illegal confiscation of the church vehicle by local Communist Party officials.¹ The only item taken was the documentation proving the church's legal ownership of the vehicle. Columbie was found by passers-by and received emergency medical treatment. He suffered inflammation of the brain which led to some long term damage. He continues to have problems with perpetual dizziness and nausea as well as with speech and memory. Local officials have declined to carry out an investigation.

Although some observers have pointed to the Pope's visit and government promises to relax some restrictions on the Catholic Church as signs of increasing religious freedom in Cuba, this is belied by the number and severity of religious freedom violations affecting different religious groups across the country in the first four months of 2012. Claims by Raul Castro that Cuba "favors complete religious freedom" like those he made in his welcoming address to the Pope must be accompanied by real reform on the ground. If there is to be true religious freedom in Cuba any positive changes must be applied uniformly to all religious organizations, not a select few. The government must respect the independence of religious organizations in terms of their activities and who they allow to participate and end its practice of punishing individual church leaders, churches and denominations which resist government interference. Members of the security forces and government officials responsible for abuses, such as the beating of Pastor Columbie, must be held to account. Finally, authority over religious activities and organizations must be removed from the Communist Party; legal questions pertaining to registration, construction, travel, ownership of property including vehicles, and the import or publication of religious materials should be dealt with through regular legal channels with proper recourse for appeal.

Recommendations:

- Ensure that religious freedom is included as a key indicator in any assessment of measurable progress in terms of human rights on the island and critically assess apparent progress in religious freedom ensuring that any reforms or concessions are applied uniformly to all religious groups;
- Actively press for the granting of an exit visa to Omar Gude Perez; and strongly encourage a thorough investigation into the attack on Reutilio Columbie and other acts of violence committed against church leaders;
- Push the Cuban government to respect the independence of religious institutions as well as the right of all Cubans to join or participate in a community of faith without inference;
- Strongly encourage the Cuban government to adopt legislation to establish legal parameters for religious activity and registration with recourse for appeal and to remove authority over religious activities and organizations from the Cuban Communist Party;
- Encourage the Cuban government to ratify the ICCPR and ICESCR which Cuba signed in 2008 and to ensure the full implementation of the protections included in the two conventions into Cuban law.

¹ Abuses such as that suffered by Pastor Columbie and the Shalom Christian Center are facilitated by the lack of any legislation defining the legal parameters for religious activity and the rights of religious organisations. This is compounded by the fact that all religious institutions come under the purview of the Office of Religious Affairs of the Cuban Communist Party not a government institution. This leaves religious organisations at the mercy of Communist Party officials, who are often hostile to religion, in all matters involving legal registration, construction or renovation of church buildings, ownership of a vehicle, permits to travel abroad, permission to receive foreign visitors and the import of religious materials.