

Cuban Pastor Granted U.S. Asylum After Imprisonment

An evangelical pastor, once jailed by the regime of Fidel Castro, arrived in the United States from Cuba yesterday with his family under a special resettlement program for political refugees.

The Rev. Carlos Lamelas, 50, his wife, Uramis, and two daughters, Estephanie, 18, and Daniela, 10, landed at Miami International Airport on Thursday on a direct flight from Havana.

Lamelas, who once served as national president of his denomination in Cuba, was granted asylum in the United States due to persecution he has endured for more than five years at the hands of Cuban authorities. On Feb. 20, 2006, security officials conducted an early morning raid of his home and arrested Lamelas.

They accused the successful evangelist and church planter of "human trafficking," a charge related to aiding Cubans who wish to escape Cuba without government permission. Those close to Lamelas, however, said police targeted him because he had challenged the Castro regime on religious liberty issues.

During his imprisonment, hundreds of letters poured in from fellow Christians around the world, confirming their prayers for him and offering encouragement. Jailers admitted to Uramis Lamelas that the correspondence created difficulties for them, and that they "had decided on a change in procedure."

Four months after his arrest, Lamelas was unexpectedly released. Authorities tried him in court in December 2006. The state prosecuting attorney recommended acquittal on the human trafficking charge, which carries a sentence of up to nine years in prison.

Later that month, however, the court convicted Lamelas on a previously unannounced charge of “falsifying documents” and fined him 1,000 Cuban pesos (\$45). The move was seen as an effort to save face and send Lamelas a message that he was still under surveillance.

Denied means of employment following his imprisonment (leaders of his denomination had earlier expelled Lamelas from the church at the behest of government authorities), he supported his family as a freelance photographer.

Fearing another unexpected arrest and possible long-term imprisonment, Lamelas applied for political asylum in 2010 but was denied. He described the ordeal to friends as “our spiritual waters of Mara. As when Moses was leading the God’s people through the wilderness and, hungry and thirsty, they found the bitter waters of Mara.”

A U.S. official in Havana familiar with the Lamelas case encouraged him to reapply for asylum. Following interviews with the family on March 22, the Department of Internal Security determined they qualified as political refugees.

The family will be resettled in Texas under the auspices of the Division of Refugee Affairs of the U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services.

Lamelas admitted that the news that they had qualified as political refugees came as a shock, albeit a welcome one. Tense months of waiting and uncertainty had aggravated nagging health problems; he has suffered from chronic stomach ailments since his imprisonment. But once he learned of the asylum decision, he began to recover.

“For our part, we have been open to the will of God, and we know He will take us where we can best serve Him,” he wrote. “Our moral commitment with the Lord’s work is permanent and without borders ... We know that many brothers and sisters have collaborated for our benefit, [and] we’re sorry not to know

specifically who they are. Nevertheless, we want them to know that our love and gratitude is sealed in our hearts for the rest of our lives."