

Crackdown on Religious Freedom in Cuba Intensifying

Events in the first quarter of 2013 point to an ongoing trend of a broader political crackdown on religious freedom in Cuba, while reported violations tripled in 2012, according to Christian Solidarity Worldwide's (CSW's) latest report on **religious freedom** in Cuba.

Religious freedom violations reported to CSW in 2012, many involving dozens of people at a time, rose to 120 compared to 40 in 2011. These numbers do not include the hundreds of devout Catholics who were arrested, sometimes with force, and arbitrarily imprisoned during the week of the pope's visit, in order to prevent them from attending any of the scheduled masses or other events.

After a period in which it appeared that the government was moving toward more subtle and refined pressure on church leaders, 2012 saw a return of the use of more brutal and public tactics. For the first time in years, CSW received multiple reports of violent beatings of protestant pastors in different parts of the country.

In one particularly egregious case, Pastor Reutilio Columbie of the Shalom Christian Centre, a Pentecostal church in Moa, Holguín Province, was left with permanent brain damage following a violent attack as he travelled from his home to the provincial capital to file a legal complaint against local Communist Party officials who had illegally confiscated a vehicle owned by and licensed to the church.

The government has in general moved away from issuing lengthy prison sentences to political dissidents, and now employs a strategy of frequent, temporary arbitrary detention without charge—a tactic increasingly used against religious leaders

and Christians who are explicitly prevented from attending Sunday morning services.

There were also increased reports of threats of forced closure and demolition of church buildings, as well as confiscation of property, often ordered by the Office of Religious Affairs (ORA), an arm of the Central Committee of the Cuban Communist Party (CCP) and which has authority over all religious groups and associations.

Discrimination against Christians continues to be a problem; children are particularly vulnerable. Earlier this month a primary school-aged girl who attends a Baptist church in Ciego de Avila province was barred from school and threatened with expulsion for refusing to proclaim that "Comandante Hugo Chávez was more important than Jesus Christ" during compulsory memorial activities organised in the wake of President Chávez' death. CSW has also received reports that children of church leaders, particularly outside Havana, are frequently singled out for harassment and ridicule because of their faith by teachers and school administrators.

CSW's Advocacy Director Andrew Johnston said, "Recent developments led many to hope for a more positive era for religious freedom in Cuba. However, the reality on the ground for church leaders representing the full spectrum of denominations suggests that the reforms and privileges accorded to a few religious groups have been mostly cosmetic.

"The government's stance towards religious groups, epitomized by the actions of the ORA, suggests that religious organisations, and in particular their leaders, are still considered potentially dangerous and there are concerted efforts to exert as much control as possible over their activities. We urge the Cuban government, as a signatory to the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR), to guarantee the right to **freedom of religion** or belief for all of its citizens."