

Persecuted Pastor and Family Arrive in US as Cuban Refugees

Pastor Omar Gude Pérez, his wife, Kenia Denis, and their two children arrived in the United States as refugees Friday. They were finally granted permission by Cuban emigration authorities to leave the island following an 18-month wait for the appropriate paperwork.

Former prisoner-of-conscience Gude Pérez and his family were granted asylum by the United States in July 2011 after he was barred from working as a pastor, and following a campaign of official harassment lasting a number of years. Despite multiple verbal promises on the part of government officials, the family was blocked from leaving the country for 18 months.

Gude Pérez, a national leader of the Apostolic Movement, a fast-growing network of independent churches, was first imprisoned on trumped up charges in May 2008. A year later, he was sentenced to more than six years in prison.

Pérez was released on conditional liberty following an international campaign in early 2011; however he was prohibited from working as a pastor or from traveling outside the city of Camaguey without official permission.

State security officials contacted Pérez on Nov. 14 following his wife's high-profile visit to Washington, D.C., facilitated by Christian Solidarity Worldwide (CSW), during which she highlighted their case. He received a citation to present himself at a police station the following day in Havana in order to sign a series of documents, which officials assured him would allow him to leave the country. There were no further developments until mid-January when state security officials contacted the family to inform them that an exit

permit had been issued.

The couple expressed relief that they have finally been able to leave the country, articulating particular concern for their teenage children, who were barred from attending school after the offer of asylum was extended. In a statement to CSW, Gude Pérez said, “My son, Omar Daniel, who is 17 years old, has in just six months, lost 50 pounds of his bodily weight. My daughter, Keila Rosa, who will soon celebrate her 15th birthday—the dream of every little girl—has lost three-quarters of her hair since the Americans first told us we would be able to travel.”

CSW’s Advocacy Director Andrew Johnston said, “CSW has made this case a priority since we first learned of Pastor Gude’s arrest in 2008. We are overjoyed that the Gude Pérez family has finally been allowed to take up the offer of asylum in the United States, where they will be able to practice their faith in freedom.

“The decision to leave Cuba has been a difficult and painful one for the family but the constant harassment on the part of the government and the official prohibition on their participation in religious ministry gave them no other option. We know they will continue to fight for **religious freedom** in Cuba from their new home in the United States and will be an effective voice for their network of churches, which continues to suffer targeted persecution. CSW will support them in this important work, drawing attention to the Cuban government’s ongoing violations of **religious liberty**.”