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Cuban pastor, family arrive in U.S. after suffering under Regime

Authorities imprisoned, fined church planter who fought for religious freedom

By David Miller

Compass Direct News (08.07.2011) / HRWF (12.07.2011) - <http://www.hrwf.net> – 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 Thursday evening (July 7) 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 of 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 (US\$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 – 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.”

Protestant pastors detained and interrogated

Christian Solidarity Worldwide (04.05.2011) / HRWF (05.05.2011) - <http://www.hrwf.net>
– Three protestant pastors were detained and questioned by Cuban security agents in Camaguey over the past weekend. The pastors are all affiliated with the Apostolic Movement, a network of churches that has come under heavy pressure from the Cuban government over the past few years.

On Saturday 30 April, Pastors Benito Rodríguez y Bárbara Guzmán were picked up by a group of high ranking state security agents and communist party officials. The two were taken to the Palma Street Police Station in Camaguey where they were held for two hours. During their detention the two reported being interrogated and put under heavy pressure to cease holding church services in their home.

On Sunday 1 May, a church service officiated by the two pastors was interrupted by Ms Etael, the head of the Office of Religious Affairs in the Provincial Ministry of Justice. Etael, who was also present at the time of their detention, issued a summons to Pastors Rodríguez and Guzmán to present themselves and proof of their home ownership at the Ministry of Justice on May 6. Pastor Rodríguez, aged 45, has lived in the house for his entire life.

Following Etael’s visit, Pastor Bernardo de Quesada Salomón was detained after leaving his house at around 12:45pm. He was taken to a provincial detention centre where he reported being subjected to heavy pressure and threats in an effort to push him to leave his pastoral work.

Pastor Omar Gude Perez, a leader in the Apostolic Movement who is currently serving a six-and-a-half year prison sentence under conditional liberty, told CSW that pressure on the network of churches has intensified. “This is just one of the many occasions on which they have been detained, fined, or threatened by the Castro regime which has not altered in the least its policy of denial of religious liberty to and aggression towards the Apostolic Movement,” he said.

Pastor Gude Perez also noted that a number of pastors, including his wife Kenia Denis and Mario Alvarez, a church leader based in San Jose de las Lajas, had recently been

denied permission to leave the country to attend religious conferences abroad. They believe that this is due to the fact that they continue to share information about religious liberty violations with international human rights groups and media.

Andrew Johnston, Advocacy Director at CSW, said, "We are deeply concerned at the arbitrary detention and intimidation of Pastors Rodríguez, Guzmán and de Quesada and the more generalized hostility toward churches affiliated with the Apostolic Movement on the part of the government. We call on the Cuban government to cease its harassment of these men and women and to allow these churches to register and operate freely."
