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## **Cuba: Religious freedom violations continued to increase in 2013**

Christian Solidarity Worldwide (09.01.2014) - CSW has renewed its call for Cuban leader Raul Castro to ensure that significant improvements are made in upholding religious freedom in 2014, after research showed a steady increase in religious freedom violations across Cuba in 2013 as the result of an ongoing government crackdown on religious organisations and individuals.

CSW documented 185 reported cases of religious freedom in 2013, up from a total of 120 in 2012. Many of the individual documented cases involved entire churches and denominations and large numbers of people. While Roman Catholic churches reported the highest number of violations, mostly involving the arrest and arbitrary detention of parishioners attempting to attend church activities, other denominations and religious groups were also affected. Baptist, Pentecostal and Methodist churches in different parts of the country reported consistent harassment and pressure from state security agents. Additionally, government officials continued to refuse to register some groups, including the large Protestant network the "Apostolic Movement", threatening affiliated churches with closure.

Church leaders in different parts of the country reported ongoing violations in the final weeks of the year. On 20 December, six members of an inter-denominational protestant group were beaten and imprisoned for nine hours in a windowless cell with no ventilation or light after attempting to carry out open air evangelism in the city of Bayamo. A few days later, on 22 December, 60 women affiliated with the Ladies in White movement were arrested in the early hours of the morning and held in prisons, police patrol cars and police stations across the country to prevent them from attending Sunday morning Mass.

Based on the documentation and information received from church leaders, the Cuban government seemed most concerned with control over religious groups, some of the only established independent civil society organisations tolerated by the regime. Various denominations told CSW that they are under heavy pressure from the Office of Religious Affairs of the Central Committee of the Cuban Communist Party to change internal governing structures, statutes and constitutions to make them less democratic and therefore easier to control. The government also announced that in 2014, bank accounts would be restricted to one per denomination or religious association; individual churches will no longer be permitted to maintain their finances independently.

The government continued to push religious groups to expel or bar Cubans associated with human rights or pro-democracy groups from their congregations. Religious groups that refused to comply with these government demands saw their bank accounts frozen and entire dominations found their requests to receive foreign visitors on religious visas denied.

There were some improvements, notably in the elimination of the need for Cubans to receive an exit visa, or 'white card' from the Cuban government in order to travel abroad. However, while many church leaders were able to travel outside Cuba for the first time some continued to see their right to travel curtailed. At least two leaders in the Apostolic Movement were informed in 2013 that they would not be permitted to leave Cuba with no reason given.

CSW's Chief Executive Mervyn Thomas said, "We are deeply concerned by the continued deterioration in religious freedom over the past year in Cuba. Each Sunday the government continues to violate the most basic of rights: the right to freely participate in religious services and form part of a religious community without interference. We are particularly concerned at attempts by the government to exert control over the internal affairs of religious groups, and specifically at the new regulation that limits entire denominations and religious associations to one bank account. Given that the government runs the bank and regularly freezes the accounts of individual churches as a way to exert pressure or punish them, this is an extremely worrying development. The Cuban government's claims of reform and respect for human rights cannot be taken seriously unless these violations are addressed and real protections for religious freedom for all put in place. Once again we urge Raul Castro to make this a priority of the government in 2014."

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## **Cuban schools slap down Jehovah's Witnesses**

***Refusal to conform with state ideology exposes faith group members to discrimination.***

By Yaremis Flores Marín

IWPR (26.03.2013) - A member of the Jehovah's Witnesses in Cuba filed a complaint with the state prosecutor last month alleging discrimination against her three school-age daughters.

She says the authorities have condoned acts of discrimination including physical and verbal violence, which have led the pupils to miss classes and their parents to move house.

"I demand a solution, because they are responsible for safeguarding young people on the island," said the woman, known by the pseudonym Ana to protect her family's identity. "I'm tired of the poor treatment they [my daughters] receive, and of the fact that no one is doing anything about it."

Her appeal to the prosecutor general follows unsuccessful applications to other state institutions. Cuba has no judicial mechanism for dealing with complaints about breaches of religious freedom.

Ana explained that because of the values held by Jehovah's Witnesses, "The girls do not wear school uniforms as the religion prohibits this. They don't sing the national anthem or pay tribute to national symbols, either."

The trouble began in Bayamo, a town in the eastern Granma province, where the children got into trouble for not taking part in the political activities that are a feature of school life in Cuba. This was noted in one of the girls' reports as the reason why she had failed fifth grade.

"The individual in charge of religious affairs for the province warned me that if the children didn't attend political activities, they would fail the year," Ana said.

For the school year starting 2011, the family moved back to the capital Havana. The girl who had failed fifth grade was allowed to attend classes again, but according to Ana, "the problems continued".

Another of her daughters told her that the teacher had slapped her on the head. The parents reported this to the police, but the case was shelved.

Ana says the school itself took no action, and the girls continue to be mistreated by teachers and bullied by their peers.

All three girls are upset and invent illnesses to avoid having to go to school. Ana says they have not been to school for nearly two months.

The Cuban government does not recognise the Jehovah's Witnesses as a legitimate faith group. since 1974. In their latest yearbook, the Jehovah's Witnesses say there are 1,400 congregations in Cuba, and over 95,00 "publishers", the term used for active members.

The state education system is heavily politicised, and the current school regulations require all pupils to be "willing to defend the socialist homeland". That is something Jehovah's Witnesses cannot do, as they are conscientious objectors.

Yaremis Flores Marin is an independent lawyer and citizen journalist in Cuba.

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## **Church leaders denounce government threats to destroy church property in Camaguey**

CSW (11.01.2013) - Leaders of the Apostolic Movement, a fast-growing unregistered network of protestant churches, have condemned threats by government officials to destroy church property in the central Cuban city of Camaguey. They are also calling on the government to cease its harassment of relatives of church members.

Pastor Bernardo de Quesada, a national leader of the church group, has publicly denounced an order from the Provincial Ministry of Housing that he and his wife demolish an outdoor covered patio, used by the church for meetings. Pastor de Quesada pointed out that this demand, made by housing official Leonel del Risco Franco, directly contradicts written permission for construction of the patio issued by another government agency, which added that "permission for this type of construction is not necessary."

Church leaders also complained that the Cuban government is targeting the family members of its leaders, some of whom are not otherwise associated with the religious group. In one particularly egregious case, the government has cut off the electricity to the Camaguey home of decorated retired military officer Lieutenant Colonel Orlando Porfirio and his 69 year old wife Nuvia Ortiz Acosta, in what they believe is an attempt to put pressure on their adult son, a worship leader in a church affiliated with the Apostolic Movement. Lieutenant Colonel Orlando Porfirio Perez, who does not attend the church, and his wife Nuvia Ortiz Acosta, who suffers from thyroid tumours, have not had electricity to their home since 9 October and have received no response to repeated written complaints to government officials.

The Apostolic Movement has come under particular attack by government officials in recent years. Churches affiliated with the group have been subjected to repeated fines

and had property confiscated or destroyed. A number of its leaders, including Pastor Omar Gude Perez, have been imprisoned for various lengths of time. Officials at the Central Committee for the Cuban Communist Party's Office for Religious Affairs (ORA) have refused attempts to register the religious group. In 2010, CSW [published a video](#) of the head of ORA, Caridad Diego, speaking openly about the government's attempts to eradicate the group.

Andrew Johnston, Advocacy Director at Christian Solidarity Worldwide (CSW) said, "Once again we call on the Cuban government to uphold the religious freedom of all its citizens and to instruct government officials at the national, provincial and municipal levels to cease their harassment of the Apostolic Movement and other religious groups. The government must also halt its policy of targeting those who have committed no crime except to be related to someone affiliated with the church. We specifically call on the Housing Authority to rescind the order to demolish the church patio in Camaguey and to restore electricity to the home of Lieutenant Colonel Porfirio Perez and his wife immediately."

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