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'Castro's death won't end repression of Cuban Church'

World Watch Monitor (01.12.2016) - <http://bit.ly/2hg77Ws> - The death of Cuba's revolutionary leader Fidel Castro will not reduce the harassment and surveillance to which the Church is already subjected, an analyst at the charity Open Doors has warned.

Following Castro's death at the age of 90 on Saturday (26 Nov.), Paul Groen told World Watch Monitor: "Fidel's regime really has been a huge source of suffering for the Church," referring to the communist rule instigated by Castro and other revolutionaries in 1959 and continued by Fidel's brother Raul since 2006. "Many leaders don't expect any immediate change. Raúl Castro will continue governing the way his brother did. This means that the restrictions on the Church that existed before Fidel's death are likely to be maintained, at least until the elections in 2018 when Raúl, who will then be 87, has said he will resign as president."

Cuban church leaders chose not to comment publically on Castro's death. The Catholic bishops' conference in Havana issued a brief and carefully worded statement expressing "our condolences to his family and the authorities of the country", entrusting the communist leader to Christ, "the Lord of Life and History", and praying "that nothing would disrupt the coexistence among Cubans".

"Christians in Cuba face harassment, surveillance, discrimination and the occasional imprisonment of leaders," said Groen. "New churches and seminaries cannot be built, and foreigners may enter the country with no more than three Bibles."

Aid work carried out by the Church is also subject to government control. Officials have demanded that some churches hand over donated goods, such as food and building materials that they were distributing to people whose homes were destroyed or damaged by Hurricane Matthew in October. Church leaders said officials believed the state should be responsible for the material needs of the people. Nonetheless, they acknowledged that there has been an improvement in the government's treatment of the Church over the last two decades, and pointed out that Christians are no longer subject to beatings, imprisonment and even murder that terrorised the Church in previous decades.

Raúl Castro's effort to have more contact with the Catholic Church has strengthened its public role, and Fidel openly expressed his admiration of Pope Francis, the first Latin American pope and an outspoken critic of economic inequality. Francis has visited the island twice since his election, once for a long-awaited meeting with the Russian Orthodox Patriarch, Kirill.

One church leader explained how the experience of the regime had affected the Church in Cuba. He said: "We learned to patiently put up with life's afflictions. We learned to forgive. We learned to love our enemies. We learned to live through our faith. We learned to live without human defence. We learned to know the power of God in supplying what we need, health for our bodies, providing this sense of fulfilment, peace in the eye of the storm. We learned the most important lesson of a believer about the earth, which is knowing that God is the only being that we need."

But Groen said local church leaders are concerned about what might eventually replace the communist regime, which for decades has been isolated by the US trade embargo. He said they are concerned that materialism and other Western values might flood the island if it opens up to more international trade.

Cuban pastor awaits outcome of appeal after being sentenced to house arrest

CSW (01.11.2016) - Reverend Juan Carlos Núñez Velázquez from Las Tunas in eastern Cuba is awaiting the outcome of his appeal against his one-year sentence of house arrest.

He was found guilty on 21 October of violating the environmental protection law following complaints from neighbours that his church's sound system was too loud. Reverend Núñez Velázquez was only given two days' notice of his court date and his lawyer did not have adequate time to prepare his defence. During the trial, Reverend Núñez Velázquez was only allowed four witnesses, while the prosecution had ten.

Reverend Núñez Velázquez was due to appear in court on 28 October to hear the exact conditions of his house arrest, however as a result of the appeal he filed on 25 October, the hearing was cancelled and while he awaits the outcome of the appeal he is currently able to leave his house.

Reverend Núñez Velázquez's church belongs to the Apostolic Movement, an unregistered network of Protestant churches. The church building, which was located on his private property, was demolished on 8 January and since then the church has been forced to meet in the courtyard of the house.

On 23 September, Reverend Núñez Velázquez was notified by the Environmental Organisation (CITMA) that his neighbours had complained that his church's sound system was too loud during Sunday services. However, the sound system used by the church adheres to environmental regulations and at no point did CITMA officially assess the sound system for its compliance to the legislation before bringing charges. In addition, from 22 to 25 September 2016, around the time the accusations were brought against Rev. Núñez Velázquez, local carnivals were held in Las Tunas, during which loud music was playing 24 hours a day.

On 26 September, Reverend Núñez Velázquez was made to sign a precautionary measure which stipulated that he had to seek official permission to leave his city. Sources inform Christian Solidarity Worldwide (CSW) that Reverend Núñez Velázquez's neighbours were encouraged by the authorities to complain about the church. This is not unusual. CSW's recent briefing on freedom of religion or belief in Cuba states that government agents sometimes try to instigate community hostility towards a local church: "In one case in Santiago, government agents employed neighbours to carry out surveillance on the church leaders by following them and taking photographs of them."

During the church service on 30 October, the neighbours who accused Reverend Núñez Velázquez of having the church sound system too loud, lit candles which released lots of smoke during the church service and caused church members, including children, to cough profusely. However, the church was able to finish the service.

CSW's Chief Executive Mervyn Thomas said, "CSW is deeply concerned at the unjust treatment of Reverend Núñez Velázquez and calls for his sentence to be overturned. We urge the Cuban government to halt its harassment of the Apostolic Movement denomination. We further call on the EU and the US to insist that improvements in freedom of religion or belief and other human rights in Cuba are a central part of any dialogue with the Cuban government."

Church demolitions gather pace

CSW (16.08.2016) - <http://bit.ly/2bdTFhg> - The first half of 2016 has seen church demolitions in Cuba gather pace as the government crackdown on freedom of religion or belief (FoRB) on the island continues. The authorities have also begun to confiscate 1,400 Assemblies of God (AOG) churches that were earmarked for seizure in 2015.

The latest report on FoRB in Cuba by Christian Solidarity Worldwide (CSW) details 1606 separate violations between January and July 2016. Cases include the demolition and confiscation of church buildings, the destruction of church property, arbitrary detention and other forms of harassment, in particular seizure of religious leaders' personal belongings.

The government has continued to follow through with the confiscation of 1,400 AOG churches; 100 of those churches are under threat of demolition. AOG leaders and leaders from other denominations expressed concern to CSW that the government's repression of religious groups has worsened significantly over the past year.

There has been an unprecedented spate of church demolitions. Four large churches linked to the unregistered Apostolic Movement were destroyed by the government in central and eastern Cuba. In each of these cases, the pastors and their families were dragged out of their homes in the very early hours of the morning. They were also detained and held in separate police stations for the duration of the demolition. In some of these cases, large numbers of members of the churches were detained, apparently to stop them from protesting.

The report also details the arbitrary detention and harassment of many church leaders. CSW has reported nine cases in 2016, including those detained whilst their churches were being demolished. A particularly serious case involved the arrest of Rev. Mario Felix Lleonart Barroso on 20 March 2016, hours before the US President Barack Obama arrived in Cuba on an official visit. The government has also continued to detain dozens of women affiliated with the Ladies in White movement across Cuba every Sunday on their way to Mass. They are often violently dragged away by security agents as they leave their homes or upon arriving at church services.

Despite these challenges, CSW has received a growing number of accounts of religious groups standing up to government pressure. Church leaders have continued to worship on the sites of their demolished churches and Ladies in White have persisted in their efforts to attend Mass on Sunday mornings, despite government repression and violence.

CSW's Chief Executive Mervyn Thomas said, "CSW is alarmed by the escalation of FoRB violations throughout Cuba, but humbled and inspired by the courage and perseverance of the many religious communities who continue to peacefully resist government

pressure. We remain disappointed by the broken promises for reform on the part of the Cuban government and urge it to change course. We call on the international community and in particular the United Kingdom, European Union and the United States government to stand in solidarity with Cuban citizens by pressing the Cuban government to halt these repressive actions and ensuring that human rights, and in particular FoRB, remains a core component of any upcoming dialogues with the Cuban government.”

Church demolished and hundreds arrested

CSW (09.02.2016) - Emanuel Church, a large church in eastern Cuba affiliated to the Apostolic Movement, an unregistered Protestant denomination, was demolished by the authorities on 5 February while hundreds of church members were detained.

The property of Reverend Alain Toledano in Santiago de Cuba was surrounded by officials including members of the police, state security and the military at approximately 5am on 5 February. They detained his wife, Marilín Alayo Correa, before demolishing both Emanuel Church and the pastoral home.

The destruction of the church follows similar demolitions of two Apostolic Movement churches in Camaguey and Las Tunas provinces on 8 January.

Over the course of 5 February approximately 200 leaders and members of Emanuel Church were also detained. A group of around 40 were held in a local school while others were taken to police stations across the region to stop them from protesting the demolition. Church leaders reported that many were beaten while they were being detained. The government has repeatedly refused to register the Apostolic Movement denomination.

Reverend Toledano was in the United States attending a religious event at the time of the government action against the church. He told Christian Solidarity Worldwide (CSW) that he believes the Cuban government intentionally carried out the eviction and demolition when he was out of the country. He expressed concern at the impact on his daughters, ages 11 and 12, who he said were screaming as they witnessed their mother being detained, adding that this is the second time they have experienced the destruction of their home and church. In 2007, the Cuban government carried out a significant operation to destroy the church, also located in the Abel Santamaria neighborhood of Santiago, which at the time had around 700 members.

Church leaders told CSW that the church and family home were totally destroyed. In addition, the government confiscated goods belonging to the church including pews, chairs, audio equipment a piano and other musical instruments. Over 1,000 blocks of cement were also confiscated, despite the fact that the Toledano family has documents showing that they were legally purchased.

The property is privately owned by Reverend Toledano and the government had approved the construction of and renovation work on the buildings. However, Reverend Toledano notified CSW of numerous threats of church eviction and closure that he received throughout 2015. These included threats by three men claiming to be government officials on 13 October 2015. In response to the threats, the church organised a 'sleep in' on 13 November 2015 with members staying on the property 24 hours a day. However, these efforts were met with an eviction order issued by government Planning and Housing officials two weeks later.

CSW's Chief Executive Mervyn Thomas said, "We are extremely disturbed to learn of this latest church demolition by the Cuban authorities, in a similar manner to the destruction

of the two Apostolic Movement churches on 8 January. We are also extremely concerned for the family of Reverend Toledano and his wife Marilín, who saw their home razed as part of this destruction. This series of demolitions since the New Year indicates a worrying escalation in terms of violations of freedom of religion or belief in Cuba. Again, we urge the international community to raise the demolition of these three churches, the mass detentions of pastors and church members, as well as the threats against others with the Cuban government as a matter of urgency. We continue to call on the EU and the US to make freedom of religion or belief a central component of its dialogues with Cuba and to insist on improvement in this area.”

Unprecedented crackdown on religious freedom in 2015 drives spike in violations

CSW (18.01.2016) - An unprecedented crackdown on churches across the denominational spectrum in Cuba in 2015 has fuelled a spike in reported violations of freedom of religion or belief (FoRB), according to a [new report](#) by Christian Solidarity Worldwide (CSW).

Figures compiled by CSW, which are not exhaustive but which serve as an indicator of the level of FoRB violations, reveal a [tenfold increase](#) - with 2,300 separate violations recorded in 2015 compared to 220 in 2014. Many incidents involve entire churches or, in the case of arrests, dozens of victims. A [digital illustration](#) by CSW highlights the crackdown on churches in Cuba.

The spike in cases was largely due to the government declaring 2,000 Assemblies of God (AoG) churches illegal, ordering the closure or demolition of 100 AoG churches in three provinces, and expropriating the properties of a number of other denominations, including the Methodist and Baptist Conventions. Legally registered and unregistered religious groups across the denominational spectrum reported varying degrees of hostility from the government.

According to the [report](#), “the consistently antagonistic relationship” between [Caridad del Rosario Diego Bello](#), director of the Office of Religious Affairs (ORA), an arm of the Central Committee of the Cuban Communist Party which oversees religious affairs on the island, and the leadership of many religious groups, “is evidence that the office exists solely to monitor, hinder and restrict the activities of religious groups.”

In 2015, the ORA continued to deny authorisation for a number of religious activities and in cooperation with other government agencies, issued fines and threats of confiscation to dozens of churches and religious organizations. The ORA also sanctioned the arbitrary expropriation of historic, registered church properties and the actions against the AoG churches.

CSW’s [report](#) also highlights “more brutal and public tactics” being employed by government agents than were witnessed in the first decade of the millennium:

“Week after week, state security agents physically and violently dragged scores of women away from Sunday morning services. Most were arbitrarily detained until after the conclusion of religious services. The government continued to employ a strategy of frequent, temporary arbitrary detention to target those it views as political dissidents. This tactic is also applied to religious leaders who are viewed as problematic, for whatever reason, by the authorities...for the first time in four years a church leader was sentenced to and served six months in prison for holding unauthorised religious services.”

In the face of intense pressure, many Christians are engaging in peaceful protest, as seen in the case of the [attempted demolition](#) of an AoG church in Santiago de Cuba in November 2015 which was thwarted after local Christians held a peaceful sit-in at the church building. On 8 January 2016, a [large-scale government operation](#) led to the mass arrests of several church leaders and the blocking of their communications devices while two churches were demolished, possibly to pre-empt a similar protest. Both churches belonged to the Apostolic Movement, an unregistered network of Protestant churches.

CSW's analysis suggests that the Cuban government is trying to eliminate the potential for social upheaval by cracking down on any and all groups that are calling, or could call, for social and political reforms alongside the limited economic reforms the government has enacted.

CSW's Chief Executive Mervyn Thomas said, "CSW doesn't use the word 'unprecedented' lightly to refer to violations of freedom of religion or belief in Cuba in 2015. Following an upward trend in violations in recent years, 2015 witnessed a spike as the authorities deployed ever more public and brutal tactics to target churches across the denominational spectrum, regardless of their legal status. It is clear that despite promises of reform, the government is determined to maintain a tight grip on civil society, including churches. We commend the courage of religious groups who have spoken out publicly to denounce these violations and to call for the right to freedom of religion or belief to be upheld. We urge the international community to stand with them and to hold Cuba to account for these human rights violations."
