

Crackdown on church leaders and Christian activists in Cuba

Country/Region: Cuba

Pastors have been arrested, beaten, fined and threatened, and Christian human rights' activists physically blocked from attending church, in a crackdown by the Cuban authorities.

One church leader, Reutilio Columbie (41), from Moa, suffered brain damage in a brutal assault. It is thought that he was targeted because he challenged the confiscation by the authorities of a vehicle the church had bought five years ago to transport its members.

His family started receiving threatening phone calls after Reutilio initiated a complaints procedure. Then, when he left his home on 6 February with the intention of filing the papers, he was attacked; Reutilio was found unconscious on the street a few hours later; the documents were missing. He cannot remember anything about the incident and is still struggling with speech and memory.

In another incident, on 25 February, four church leaders were detained in Bayamo, Granma Province, while they were sharing the Gospel with people at the local bus station. State security agents beat one of them, Juan Moreno, so severely that he required hospital treatment. The other three were released after being held for a few hours.

Elsewhere, in Alamar, Havana, a pastor has been repeatedly fined huge sums since December because his church building is not registered. He and his family are now in great financial difficulty and facing the prospect of the church being forcibly closed.

Another church leader in Havana, Francisco Rodriguez, has faced harassment and threats of physical violence from the authorities in recent weeks. It is thought that the church's outreach to people on the margins of society, including the homeless and juvenile delinquents, has brought him to the attention of the authorities.

Activists targeted

The authorities have also been clamping down on Christian human rights' activists. On 4 March, Caridad Caballero Batista and her husband Esteban Sade Suarez were detained by police while on their way to church. They were mistreated and held in a poorly ventilated mosquito-infested cell for three hours.

The couple, along with their 19-year-old son, have been blocked from attending Christian activities since the beginning of the year. Every Sunday, their home has been surrounded by police and state security agents to stop them from going to church. At other times, they have been followed to Christian meetings and prevented physically, sometimes violently, from attending.

Other Christian human rights' activists have also been arrested or blocked from attending church services.

Cuba's Marxist authorities try to limit the churches' growth and activities as much as possible.

In a film released on the internet last year, the top Cuban official in charge of religious affairs, Caridad Diego Bello said, regarding the government's crackdown on one Christian group:

We are taking measures and will continue to take measures, the hands of our authorities will not waver.

Despite the authorities' best efforts, the church in Cuba is growing. Some new Christian groups are meeting in overcrowded houses because they are barred from building new churches.

The authorities subject churches to intimidation and restrictions, while church leaders have been imprisoned in dreadful conditions, sometimes enduring periods of solitary confinement.

Source: *Christian Solidarity Worldwide*



The Church in Cuba is growing despite harassment from the authorities
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