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CUBA | Number of Violations Remains High

The wife of a Cuban political prisoner ended her 19-day hunger strike Jan. 23 after Cuban authorities made verbal promises to respect the rights of her husband. Ariana López Roque was protesting the treatment of her husband, Misael Díaz Paseiro, who is serving a three and a half year prison sentence for “pre-criminal social dangerousness.” He has been denied visits from a priest and access to a Bible since his imprisonment Nov. 22, 2017.

On two occasions during her hunger strike, Cuban officials prevented López Roque from receiving pastoral visits to her home. Local pastor, Bárbaro Guevara, attempted to visit her twice but was physically prevented from doing so by political police.

Human rights activist Jorge Luis García Pérez, also known as Antúnez, reported that state security agents raided the home of Díaz Paseiro on Oct. 22, 2017 and confiscated two Bibles, a number of crucifixes and five rosaries. On Nov. 4, 2017, Díaz Paseiro was beaten by political police, who tore his rosaries from around his neck and said to him, “Misael, in addition to being a counter-revolutionary, you are also a Christian. You should look at us, we are revolutionaries and we don’t believe in your god. Our god is Fidel Castro.”

The case comes as CSW releases a new report on violations of freedom of religion or belief (FoRB) in Cuba in 2017. Over the course of the year, CSW recorded a total of 325 FoRB violations. The number is not exhaustive but serves as an indicator of the government’s approach to FoRB. While the figure for 2017 is significantly lower than in 2015 and 2016, when 2,000 churches from one denomination were threatened with confiscation or demolition, the number remains in line with the general trend of a steady increase in FoRB violations since 2011. Threats against the 2,000 churches were rescinded in 2017.

Church leaders from all denominations reported consistent harassment and surveillance from state security as well as from Communist Party officials responsible for religious affairs. The government continued to severely restrict public religious events, including interrupting and stopping an inter-denominational worship event in eastern Cuba which had received advance permission from the local authorities.

Many incidents involved entire churches or, in the case of arrests, dozens of victims. Each week, dozens of women linked to the Ladies in White, and large numbers of human rights and pro-democracy activists, were temporarily detained to prevent them from attending Sunday morning Mass and other mid-week events.

Human rights and pro-democracy activists were a particular target of the government, which has long attempted to socially isolate them and separate them from communities of faith. Díaz Paseiro was imprisoned after he criticized elections held in 2017 and his religious beliefs were a specific target of the government in the weeks preceding his arrest.

CSW's Chief Executive Mervyn Thomas said, "We are deeply concerned for the wellbeing of both Ariana López Roque and her husband Misael Díaz Paseiro, and condemn the government's restrictions on their rights to religious visits and materials. Unfortunately, our documentation shows that there has been no move by the government to make any serious attempts to improve protections for freedom of religion or belief. We call on the government to allow all Cubans to worship without hindrance and for religious groups to be able to exist and carry out their activities without interference or harassment from the government. We continue to commend the courage of religious groups and secular human rights activists 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."