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CUBA | Catholic Public Celebrations Cancelled

The Cuban government has withdrawn permission for the Catholic Church to hold planned public celebrations and activities for National Youth Day Aug. 4.

In a video posted on Facebook earlier this week, Father Jorge Luis Pérez of the Havana Catholic Youth Ministry explained that the Office of Religious Affairs of the Central Committee of the Cuban Communist Party (ORA), had informed Catholic leaders that all public activities associated with National Youth Day would not be allowed, with one exception in the city of Santiago.

The announcement comes after some Cuban Catholics and journalists were prevented from attending the funeral of Cardinal Jaime Ortega in Havana on July 28. Top Communist Party officials were in attendance; however, a heavy police presence outside the cathedral limited entry to others, including some priests who attempted to enter.

Civil society activists, including Dagoberto Valdés Hernández, who is also a Catholic lay leader, and members of the independent media were warned in advance that they would not be permitted to attend and were threatened with arrest should they attempt to do so. Additionally, Luis Manuel Otero Alcántara, an artist, reported that police were also stationed outside his house to stop him from going outside during the funeral services.

Valdés Hernández, whose relationship with Cardinal Ortega went back to their student days, published a statement on Facebook in which he said, “All I wanted to do was to go tomorrow to the Requiem Mass and the burial, to fulfil the obligation of a Christian and a Cuban; to pray for the eternal rest of Cardinal Jaime Ortega, as behoves a son of the Church. The authorities have stopped me...”

Despite the arbitrary cancellation of all public National Youth Day activities by the ORA, Father Pérez of the Havana Catholic Youth Ministry said that celebrations would go ahead, though they would have to be adjusted to take place inside Catholic Church properties.

CSW's Head of Advocacy Anna-Lee Stangl said, "We are disappointed, if not surprised, that the Cuban government continues to interfere and repress religious expression. There is no justification for blocking Cuban Catholics, including those who knew Cardinal Ortega personally, from participating in the funeral services and burial. Likewise, there is no good reason to arbitrarily cancel permits for almost all public activities associated with National Youth Day approximately a week before young Catholics were preparing to celebrate their faith. We continue to call for the abolition or reform of the Office of Religious Affairs, which remains the institution responsible for the most violations of freedom of religion or belief across Cuba."