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CUBA | Pastor Arrested, Church Demolished

Early on Friday morning, Oct. 30, Cuban authorities in the city of Santiago de Cuba moved to demolish a church that has been under threat since 2015. A prominent pastor of another church, who was recording the demolition, was detained by Cuban police and remains in custody.

Cuban State Security, accompanied by heavy machinery including bulldozers, arrived at the site at about 7:30 a.m. and began to attempt to clear the area located in the Abel Santamaria neighborhood of Santiago de Cuba. Witnesses told CSW that the authorities planned to demolish the Assemblies of God Church as well as the homes of members of the church located on the property. The Assemblies of God is one of the largest religious groups in Cuba and is legally recognized by the government.

Pastor Alain Toledano, a prominent leader of an unregistered denomination, the Apostolic Movement, and who lives in the same neighborhood, went to the site to record the government attack on the church. He broadcast it on Facebook Live via his mobile phone. As he was filming, he was approached and physically apprehended by men in plainclothes. The phone was dropped on the ground and, before the feed was cut, the sound of bulldozers can be heard as members of the church sing in the background.

Pastor Toledano was taken by Cuban police to the Motorizada Police Station and has been held incommunicado since.

Cuban authorities claim the church, which is under the leadership of Rev. Fausto Polemo, was to be demolished to make way for train tracks. CSW sources question this, noting that the church is the only building in the neighborhood that was destroyed. The church has long been a target of the government. Officials at the Cuban Physical Planning and Housing Departments first attempted to demolish the church in 2015 but backed off after members of the church and other denominations, led by Rev. Polemo, held a peaceful sit-in in the building. They also threatened to confiscate the homes of those living on the property in 2015.

Pastor Toledano has been a regular target of the government since beginning of his ministry in 2003. Over the past 15 years, his church has been demolished twice. In 2019 he was put on the list of “regulados,” Cubans who are prohibited from traveling internationally, was summoned by the police dozens of times, and was warned a criminal case had been opened against him.

CSW CEO, Scot Bower, said, “CSW is deeply concerned at the events of this morning. We strongly condemn the demolition of the Assemblies of God Church and the eviction of church members. This church has been in the crosshairs of the Cuban government since 2015 and its arbitrary destruction is a serious violation of freedom of religion or belief. Pastor Alain Toledano’s actions this morning demonstrated cross-denominational solidarity and we commend his courage in bearing witness to government attacks on Rev. Fausto Polemo and the members of his church. We call on the Cuban authorities to immediately release Pastor Toledano and to cease its targeting of him and his family.”