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CUBA Baptist Pastors released after spurious charges are dropped

Pastor Gude Perez on right is still detained. Please ask for permission to copy photo.

Two Baptist leaders imprisoned in eastern Cuba for two weeks have been released after spurious charges of “illicit financial activity” were suddenly dropped, according to Cuban church leaders.

Pastors Ruben Ortiz Columbie, 68, and Francisco Garcia Ruiz, 46, were detained on 3 October while distributing humanitarian aid in Guantanamo Province.

The two men were held in a Santiago prison and prevented from meeting church leaders during their imprisonment. Immediate family members were only allowed one twenty minute visit.

This case comes as part of a wider deterioration in religious liberty on the island, with some religious leaders becoming regular targets of government repression. In July Pastor Omar Gude Perez, a national leader of the Apostolic Ministry Movement, was sentenced to six years in prison for ‘falsification of documents and illicit economic activities’, while Reverend Roberto Rodriguez, the former national director of the Interdenominational Fellowship of Evangelical Pastors and Ministers, has been threatened with imprisonment, and subjected to a series of legal proceedings over the past twelve months, along with members of his family.

More than thirty other pastors across the country have also reported being arrested and temporarily detained during 2009.

CSW's National Director, Stuart Windsor said: “We are overjoyed to learn that these two pastors have been freed and are now back with their families. We encourage the Cuban Government to also release Pastor Gude Perez and to cease the harassment of Reverend Rodriguez, ensuring that religious freedom is respected for people of all faiths in every part of the country”.

Notes to Editors:

- The two pastors are leaders in the Eastern Baptist Convention, one of the largest denominations on the island. Pastor Ortiz Columbie, is a Professor of Economics at the Santiago Baptist Seminary and heads up the denomination's “Special Projects” department. Sources within the denomination believe this work may be behind the two men's arrest. Pastor Garcia Ruiz is director of the denomination's youth ministries.