

Congress of the United States

Washington, DC 20515

January 15, 2016

The Honorable John Kerry
Secretary of State
U.S. Department of State
2201 C Street NW
Washington, DC 20520

Dear Secretary Kerry,

We write to you out of deep concern over the Cuban government's evident abuses of religious freedom. As the Obama Administration engages with the Cuban government, we urge you to place a greater emphasis on human rights issues and the exercise of religious freedom in particular.

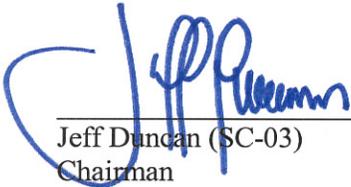
The Subcommittee on the Western Hemisphere held public hearings last year in which we examined the human rights situation in Cuba and heard witness testimony of serious abuses of freedom of expression, which unfortunately continue today without redress. While Cuba's constitution recognizes freedom of conscience and religion on paper, in practice the Cuban government severely restricts religious liberties. A most appalling action occurred last week when the Cuban government reportedly took steps to completely demolish two church worship areas and buildings: the Apostolic Movement Church in Versalles, Camaguey, and a house church in Victoria de las Tunas. Church leaders were also arbitrarily detained without any due process.

Such shameful actions by the Cuban government follow a history of repeated government harassment of churches and Christians who have been targets of threats, coercion, blackmail, and severe intimidation. In recent months, the Cuban government has reportedly declared 2,000 churches affiliated with the Assemblies of God denomination illegal, and 100 of those churches have been designated for forced closure and demolition. Thousands of other churches in Cuba reportedly face these threats as well.

Last year, the Cuban government expropriated the property of 15 Methodist churches, arrested and imprisoned two pastors, and confiscated the property of Maranatha First Baptist Church. Repeated violence by Cuban security agents against the Ladies in White group continues, regularly preventing these women from attending religious services. Today in Cuba, churches must register with the government in order to import religious materials, and Jehovah's Witnesses and Mormons cannot practice their religion.

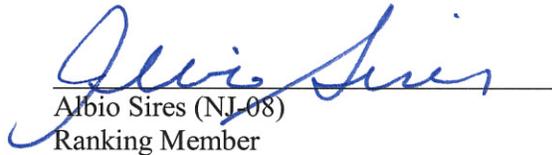
In light of these abuses of religious freedom, we urge you to specifically raise issues of religious freedom in your bilateral meetings with Cuba. We would like to know what explicit efforts the Administration is taking both in bilateral meetings and at the U.S. Embassy in Havana to address these abuses of religious freedom, including the expropriation of church property of religious groups; to prioritize religious freedom in Cuba as a core U.S. national interest; and to engage regularly with minority religious leaders in Cuba. Thank you for your attention to this critical matter. We look forward to your response.

Sincerely,



Jeff Duncan (SC-03)
Chairman

Subcommittee on the Western Hemisphere
House Committee on Foreign Affairs



Albio Sires (NJ-08)
Ranking Member

Subcommittee on the Western Hemisphere
House Committee on Foreign Affairs

CC: The Honorable David N. Saperstein, Ambassador-at-Large for International Religious Freedom