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# *amnesty international*

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## £CUBA

### @Imprisonment of Pentecostal minister: Reverend Orson Vila Santoyo

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Reverend Orson VILA SANTOYO, a Pentecostal minister belonging to the Assembly of God Evangelical Pentecostal Church in Camagüey, Cuba, was arrested in his home on 25 May 1995. He was reportedly sentenced after a summary trial the same day to 23 months' imprisonment on charges of "disobedience", "**desobediencia**" (article 147 of the Penal Code), and "illegal meeting", "**reunión ilícita**" (article 209). The sentence was reduced on appeal, on 31 May 1995, to 18 months' imprisonment. He is currently being held in Cerámica Roja Prison in Camagüey.

According to reports, in the same week state security agents visited dozens of evangelical meeting places, and shut them down. During such a visit Reverend Orson Vila Santoyo refused to shut down his home, which is used as an evangelical centre, and was quoted as saying: "*The doors of my house are open. If you want them shut, do it yourselves.*" Equipment used by the church, such as megaphones and microphones, was confiscated and he was subsequently arrested. Two other members of the same church, clergyman Balbino Basulto, of the central district, **Distrito central**, of the Assembly of God, and Benjamin de Quesada, the pastor of Alleluya temple, **Templo Aleluya**, in central Camagüey, were also arrested. They were later released the same day without charge. At the summary trial of Rev. Orson Vila Santoyo, more than a thousand people reportedly stood outside the Camagüey court, shouting "Long live Christ", "*Cristo Vive*", while he was being sentenced.

After graduating as a doctor, Rev. Orson Vila Santoyo rejected a career in medicine and turned to religion some thirty years ago. He is now the Supervisor of the Central District of the Assembly of God, **Superintendente del Distrito Central de la Asamblea de Dios**, in Cuba. In May 1988 he was arrested and sentenced to five months imprisonment on charges of holding "illicit meetings", "**reunión ilícita**", and "other behaviour which is likely to be dangerous to public health", "**otras conductas que implican peligro para la salud pública**". On appeal his sentence was commuted to a fine.

The Assembly of God first began work in Cuba in 1951, and, according to News Network International<sup>1</sup>, in 1994 boasted 420 established congregations and nearly 500 house churches, known as **casas culto** in Cuba. Ministers from the USA travel frequently to Cuba to bring spiritual and economic support to religious leaders there. In 1990 the Office of Religious Affairs of the Cuban Communist Party, **Oficina de los asuntos religiosos del Partido Comunista**, reportedly granted permission orally to the Assembly of God to set up house churches in the country. Since then, according to official church records, the membership of the Assembly of God has risen from 3,000 to 12,000<sup>2</sup>.

Rev. Orson Vila Santoyo first opened a house church in 1991 but in January 1995 the Cuban authorities reportedly ordered him to close it down. He asked them to put the order in writing and in March he received a communication to the church stating that only 16 house churches were to be allowed in Camagüey. According to reports, since 24 May 1995 the Cuban government has ordered the closure of 85 of the existing 101 evangelical centres in Camagüey province alone. Those permitted to continue are reportedly the most poor, with the least membership, and the least accessible either because of distance or location.

Amnesty International believes Rev. Orson Vila Santoyo to be a prisoner of conscience, imprisoned solely because of his attempts to peacefully exercise his rights to freedom of religion, expression and association, and is urging his immediate and unconditional release.

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<sup>1</sup> News Network International - Special Report: A closer look at religious liberty worldwide. 12 April 1994, page 7.

<sup>2</sup> *ibid.*, page 7.

## **Background to changes in the Cuban constitution concerning religious freedom and association:**

While guaranteeing freedom of conscience and the right to profess any religious belief and practice it, the 1976 Constitution stated that it was illegal and punishable by law "to oppose one's faith or religious belief to the Revolution". However, it was amended in 1992 and religious believers are now permitted to join the Cuban Communist Party, the only legal political party.

Article 8 of the revised Constitution states:

The state recognises, respects and guarantees freedom of religion. In the Republic of Cuba, the religious institutions are separate from the state. The various religions and religious beliefs enjoy the same consideration.

**El Estado reconoce, respeta y garantiza la libertad religiosa. En la República de Cuba, las instituciones están separadas del Estado. Las distintas creencias y religiones gozan de igual consideración.**

Article 55 states:

The state, which recognises, respects and guarantees freedom of conscience and religion, also recognises, respects and guarantees the freedom of every citizen to change religious beliefs or not to have any, and, subject to respect for the law, to profess the religion of his preference. The law regulates relations between the State and religious institutions.

**El Estado, que reconoce, respeta y garantiza la libertad de conciencia y de religion, reconoce, respeta y garantiza a la vez la libertad de cada ciudadano de cambiar de creencias religiosas o no tener ninguna, y a profesar, dentro del respeto a la ley, el culto religioso de su preferencia. La ley regula las relaciones del Estado con las instituciones religiosas.**

With regard to freedoms of expression, article 53 states:

It is recognised that Cuban citizens have freedom of speech and the press, in conformity with the aims of socialist society (..).

**Se reconoce a los ciudadanos libertad de palabra y prensa conforme a los fines de la sociedad socialista(..).**

With regard to the freedoms of assembly and association, article 54 states:

The right to assembly, demonstration and association are exercised by workers, both manual and skilled, peasants, women, students and the rest of the working population, and for such ends they have the necessary means at their disposal. Mass and social organisations make use of all facilities for the development of the aforementioned activities in which its members enjoy the greatest freedom of speech and opinion, based upon the unconditional right to initiative and criticism.

**Los derechos de reunión, manifestación y asociación son ejercidos por los trabajadores, manuales e intelectuales, los campesinos, las mujeres, los estudiantes y demás sectores del pueblo trabajador, para lo cual disponen de los medios necesarios a tales fines. Las organizaciones de masas y de sociales disponen de todas las facilidades para el desenvolvimiento de dichas actividades en las que sus miembros gozan de la más amplia libertad de palabra y opinión, basadas en el derecho irrestricto a la iniciativa y a la crítica.**

While many religions have been able to operate in Cuba in recent years, their activities are still in practice severely restricted by law. For example, they are not permitted to proselytize or hold "open air" meetings. All religious assemblies must be held in the confines of registered church property or in private homes. All religious denominations have to be registered with the authorities in order to carry out their work.

## WHAT YOU CAN DO TO HELP REVEREND ORSON VILA SANTOYO

1. Send politely-worded appeals, preferably in Spanish, to the Cuban authorities:
  - requesting the unconditional release of Reverend Orson Vila Santoyo on the grounds that he is a prisoner of conscience, imprisoned solely for attempting to peacefully exercise his rights to freedom of religion, expression and association.
2. Encourage others in your country, especially members of parliament and members of religious bodies, to send appeals to the Cuban authorities and encourage them to take further action on behalf of Reverend Orson Vila Santoyo.
3. Send a copy of your letter of appeal to the Embassy of Cuba in your own country.

### SEND YOUR LETTERS TO:

#### 1) Head of State and Government

Dr. Fidel Castro Ruz  
Presidente de los Consejos  
de Estados y de Ministros  
La Habana, Cuba  
**Faxes: +537333085/+537335261**  
(via Ministry of Foreign Affairs)  
**Salutation: Su Excelencia/Your Excellency**

#### 2) Minister of Justice

Dr. Carlos Amat Forés  
Ministro de la Justicia  
Ministerio de la Justicia  
Calle O # 216, 8º piso  
e/23 y Humboldt, Vedado  
La Habana, Cuba  
**Telexes: 511331**  
(Sr Ministro/Dear Minister)

#### 3) Attorney General

Dr Juan Escalona Reguera  
Fiscal General de la República  
Fiscalía General de la República  
San Rafael 3, La Habana, Cuba  
**Telexes: 511 456 FISGE**  
(Sr Fiscal General/Dear Attorney General)

### COPIES OF YOUR APPEALS TO:

#### National Union of Jurists

Dra. Zenaida Osorio Vizcaina  
  
Presidente  
Unión Nacional de Juristas de Cuba  
Comunista  
Calle 21, No. 552, esq. D  
Apartado 4161  
La Habana 4, Cuba

#### Office for religious Affairs of the Cuban Communist Party

Señor Director  
Jefe de la Oficina de Asuntos  
  
Religiosos  
Comité Central del Partido  
  
de Cuba  
La Habana, Cuba

**KEYWORDS:PRISONERS**  
**CONSCIENCE/BANNING/CENSORSHIP/RELIGIOUS**  
**PROTESTANT/RELIGIOUS INTOLERANCE**

**OFFICIALS**

**OF**  
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