

Cuban Baptist leader allowed to remain in El Salvador

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El Salvador will accept the asylum request of a Cuban Baptist leader who was denied entry into Nicaragua.

Carlos Sebastian Hernandez Armas, secretary general of the Baptist Convention of Western Cuba and pastor of the Ebenezer Baptist Church in Cotorro, Havana, fled Cuba to escape increased government repression.

Hernandez Armas and his two sons, ages 10 and 17, were denied permission to board a flight to Nicaragua during a layover in El Salvador on Feb. 27. Initially, immigration officials told them they would not be allowed to stay in El Salvador, leaving them [stranded in the airport](#) and facing the possibility of deportation.

On March 2, immigration authorities re-interviewed Hernandez Armas, accompanied by a representative of First Lady Gabriela Rodriguez's office and members of the press, [Christian Solidarity Worldwide reported](#).

That evening, Hernandez Armas and his sons were allowed to leave the international airport and spent the night in accommodations provided by the government.

In a video on [social media](#), Hernandez Armas said: "We give thanks to God for all the people who helped, all the people for their prayers ... here in El Salvador a great many pastors trying to help us, to bless us. This is a very important step We have been treated very well here.

"Naturally there were tense moments, for example when the immigration authorities told me I would have to fly to Panama, but I understood

perfectly that they were just trying to do their job ... but I was never offended, I give thanks to God, they treated us very well, the police as well and the people here in the airport. We've made friends during our stay here in this place. [One] lent me his phone so I could make the call to the UNHCR; they all were looking for ways to see what they could do for me."

Increased government pressure

CSW reported government pressure on Hernandez Armas has grown severe in recent years as he has made repeated public calls for the government to respect freedom of religion.

In Cuba, he reportedly received numerous threats, both from anonymous callers and government officials, if he continued to speak out.

The leadership of the Baptist Convention of Western Cuba has resisted pressure from the Office of Religious Affairs of the Central Committee of the Cuban Communist Party, which oversees all religious activity on the island, to remove him from his position.

Anna Lee Stangl, director of advocacy for CSW, expressed her organization's appreciation to the El Salvador government for agreeing to review the Cuban Baptist leader's asylum request and for allowing him to enter the country.

"We were encouraged to hear of the good treatment the pastor and his family experienced from the immigration officials and police," Stangl said.

"We continue to call on the government of Cuba to cease its harassment of religious leaders, to release imprisoned leaders such as Reverend Lorenzo Rosales Fajardo, and to make reforms to guarantee freedom of religion or belief for and other fundamental human rights for all."