

Cuban Baptist leader stranded in El Salvador

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A Cuban Baptist leader who was seeking to enter Nicaragua to escape persecution remains stranded in El Salvador after he and his two sons were prevented from boarding an airplane on Feb. 27.

Carlos Sebastian Hernandez Armas, secretary general of the Baptist Convention of Western Cuba and pastor of the Ebenezer Baptist Church in Cotorro, Havana, and his sons, ages 10 and 17, were denied permission to board a flight to Nicaragua during a layover in El Salvador.

Cubans do not require visas to enter Nicaragua, but immigration officials reportedly informed the airline that they would not permit the pastor and his sons to disembark the plane. Immigration officials and police reportedly told the pastor that he will not be permitted to stay in El Salvador, according to [Christian Solidarity Worldwide](#).

Hernandez Armas, who also is the director of ministry studies and a history professor at the Baptist Theological Seminary of Havana, posted a live video on [Facebook](#) and [YouTube](#) saying he probably would be jailed if he and his family were returned to Cuba.

“We managed to flee, but if I return, I am convinced that the Cuban government will never let me leave the country again, but not only that, it is likely they could put me in jail,” he said.

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 or belief.

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.

Officials with CSW voiced their belief Hernandez Armas has a well-founded fear of persecution if he were forced to return to Cuba and that his freedom would be in jeopardy. His sons also are considered likely to experience discrimination in terms of their access to higher education.

“CSW calls on the government of El Salvador to allow Rev. Hernandez Armas and his sons to stay in the country while his case is being investigated by the UN Refugee Agency (UNHCR), and to afford him all rights applicable to those seeking refuge from well-founded fears of persecution, including threats to freedom and life, under international law,” said Anna Lee Stangl, the organization’s director of advocacy.

“CSW has monitored the pastor’s case for over a decade, as he has courageously resisted efforts by the Cuban government to silence him and intimidate his denomination. We ask the international community to closely monitor his case to ensure that he is not returned to Cuba.”