

Table of Contents

- ***Increase in attacks on Roman Catholic priests***
 - ***Protestants in Palenque under threat***
 - ***Mexico: CSW finds "ongoing and systematic" religious freedom violations in Chiapas***
 - ***Exile***
-

Increase in attacks on Roman Catholic priests

CSW (16.10.2014) Attacks on Roman Catholic priests in Mexico have increased by 80% over the past two years, according to a new report released by the Mexican Catholic Multimedia Centre (CCM).

CCM reports that six priests have been killed and three others have been the victims of forced disappearances since President Enrique Peña Nieto came into power two years ago. The CCM Investigative Unit called on the Mexican government "to provide security in areas with a significant presence of organized crime."

The report was released shortly after the kidnap and murder of Father José Ascensión Acuña in the State of Guerrero in late September. Parishioners in Acelias, in the state of Guerrero, expressed concern when Father Ascensión Acuña disappeared on 21 September and failed to reappear to hold Mass. His body was found in the Balsas River near Santa Cruz de Las Tinajas, in the municipality of San Miguel Totolapan, following an anonymous tip.

According to the Vatican, Mexico is now the country with the most attacks on Roman Catholic religious leaders in the world. Christian Solidarity Worldwide's (CSW's) investigations revealed that the situation is similar for Protestant church leaders.

Reasons for the attacks on religious leaders by criminal groups vary. In some cases the criminal groups view religious leaders as opposing their objectives, either through word or action. Some religious leaders have been attacked because of their public denunciations of corruption and criminal activities, while others are targets because of work that impacts the interests of the criminal groups, for example with alcohol and drug addicts, victims of human trafficking or former members of criminal groups seeking to reintegrate into society.

Criminal organizations also often view churches as attractive targets for extortion or money laundering and religious leaders who refuse to cooperate frequently come under threat. In addition, some criminal groups have developed a religious aspect to their identity and seek to impose this in areas under their control. Sources told CSW that they believe at least one Catholic priest murdered in December 2013 was killed after he refused demands by a criminal group to hold a mass dedicated to Santa Muerte (Saint Death) in the Catholic church.

CSW's Chief Executive Mervyn Thomas said, "The continued increase in the number of attacks on religious leaders in Mexico, making it one of the most dangerous places in the world for church leaders, is shocking and deeply concerning. We urge the Mexican government to implement effective strategies to provide security to civilian populations in areas with a strong influence of criminal groups, and to develop strategies to support civil society actors like churches and religious leaders as they come under threat. CSW also

calls for a full investigation into the forced disappearance and subsequent murder of Father Ascensión Acuña and the prosecution of those responsible. We urge the international community to engage with the Mexican government on these matters and to recognise the role that many religious leaders play, not only as leaders of their churches, but also as voices for peace, justice and integrity as human rights defenders.”

Protestants in Palenque under threat

CSW (01.08.2014) - A group of Protestant Christians in Chiapas, who have been the target of threats and physical attacks, is calling on state and federal government officials to protect their religious freedom.

Leaders of the village of Cuahutémoc Cárdenas, Palenque Municipality have cut off water and electricity and restricted the access of a group of 42 Protestants to their farmland. Luis Herrera of the Coordinator of Christian Organisations (COOC) in Chiapas informed CSW that former village commissioner, Leonarda Damas Cruz, justified this action by referring to an old legal agreement which stipulates that inhabitants of Cuahutémoc Cárdenas must be members of the Institutional Revolutionary Party (PRI) and be Roman Catholics. According to Herrera, Damas Cruz is behind a campaign of threats against the Protestants, as “she wants to force them out of ‘her’ community”.

As in other cases, the government has preferred to facilitate the negotiation of extra-legal agreements to resolve religious freedom issues, rather than prosecute those responsible for criminal acts or enforce the law. These efforts led to an agreement, signed by local officials and the villagers in January 2014, which declared that religious freedom would be respected in Cuahutémoc Cárdenas, but restricted this right to the inhabitants of the village. Visitors would not be permitted to participate in any non-Roman Catholic religious activities. However, the January agreement appears to have had no impact on the actions of local authority. On the contrary, threats and acts of aggression against the Protestant community have increased in number and severity, and municipal and state officials have taken no action to enforce the agreement.

In addition to having their water and electricity cut off and their access to their farmland restricted, members of the community have been subjected to sustained harassment and attacks. The most serious of these resulted in the hospitalization of Juan Alvaro, a Protestant who was attacked and badly beaten by Felipe de Jesús Cruz Damas, Damas Cruz’s son, on 30 March 2014. Although a complaint was filed and Cruz Damas admitted guilt, the government declined to prosecute, and Alvaro received no compensation for his injuries and hospital bills.

Similarly, the municipal council has failed to respond to citations issued by religious affairs officials to restore the Protestants’ electricity and water.

According to Herrera, so far the village leaders have been unsuccessful in forcibly displacing the Protestants; however, the villagers are concerned that if the government does not step in to resolve the situation, they may be expelled from the village. Most recently, Cruz Damas, acting under the authority of the current village commissioner, cut off access to the home of an elderly Protestant, forcing him to move in to the home of his son’s family.

Mervyn Thomas, Chief Executive of Christian Solidarity Worldwide (CSW) said, “We call on the state and federal governments to urgently intervene in this case to uphold religious freedom in Palenque, Chiapas and to bring an end to the threats and acts of aggression against the Protestants of Cuahutémoc Cárdenas. The failure of the government to intervene decisively to restore water and electricity to these victims and

to prosecute Felipe de Jesús Cruz Damas for the horrific attack on Juan Alvaro is indefensible. It is imperative that Mexico upholds the rights guaranteed in its own constitution and brings an end to the culture of impunity surrounding criminal acts committed in the name of religion which is at the root of this case and the approximately 50 others like it in Chiapas alone.”

Mexico: CSW finds "ongoing and systematic" religious freedom violations in Chiapas

CSW (19.05.2014) - Christian Solidarity Worldwide (CSW) has obtained firsthand evidence of ongoing and systematic large-scale violations of religious freedom in the state of Chiapas, Mexico, following a fact-finding assignment to the area.

In the assignment report, CSW calls on the Mexican government to take action to address more than 50 cases of serious religious violations in the state.

During the visit, CSW met with communities which had been forcibly displaced from their homes because of their refusal to recant their faith. Two of the communities, from the villages of Los Llanos and Chilil, have been waiting for four and five years respectively for government action on their cases. CSW also met with elected and appointed government officials, academics, Protestant and Catholic Church leaders, and local activists, who all agreed that religious freedom violations are on the rise and that government inaction on this issue is largely to blame.

Serious violations of religious freedom targeting religious minorities have occurred on a widespread scale in Chiapas since the 1970s. According to CSW's findings, typically in these cases the local authorities proclaim their village or municipality to be exclusive to one particular religion, prohibit the entry of members of other faiths, make participation in activities related to the 'official' religion compulsory and attempt to force inhabitants who practice other faiths to convert to the declared 'official' religion.

According to the report, "in the absence of any state response to defend and uphold religious freedom, the end result in all of these cases is the same: members of minority religious groups are systematically targeted by the authorities for the deprivation of services including water and electricity, arbitrary detention, acts of violence and finally forced displacement." Those responsible for these violations rarely, if ever, face criminal charges.

"Serious violations of religious freedom targeting religious minorities have occurred in a widespread scale in Chiapas since the 1970s. Almost forty years on, it is impossible to justify the government's failure to address the issue in any comprehensive way. Instead, expulsions continue, religious tensions continue to be exploited for political and economic interests, and social instability continues to grow. Endemic corruption in the government and the growing presence of criminal groups involved in trafficking of humans, drugs, and protected biological resources can only add to this problem."

CSW's report concludes that the state government appears to be unable or unwilling to address the ongoing and severe violations of religious freedom in Chiapas. Many victims have now waited years for justice only to see their cases ignored or even archived by the government officials responsible for helping them. Given the serious nature of the violations, the severe physical and economic insecurity in which the victims are living, and the length of time that has passed in many of these open cases, CSW's report calls on the federal government to engage, as a matter of urgency, with the Chiapas state government to find an effective resolution to outstanding and current cases of religious freedom violations and to begin to build a culture of tolerance and respect for

fundamental human rights including religious freedom at every level, from the local villages to the governor's office.

Andy Dipper, Chief Operating Officer, at CSW said, "Those affected by the religious freedom violations are victimised twice over. Firstly, they are attacked by and suffer violence at hands of the leaders of their communities; secondly, their plight is ignored by the government officials tasked with upholding religious freedom and the rule of law. It is unacceptable that the displaced men, women and children of Los Llanos, Chilil and many other communities have been forced to wait in limbo for almost half a decade, while those responsible for committing the crimes against them remain in their homes and in leadership positions in their communities with complete impunity. It is past time for the Mexican government to address the religious freedom violations taking place in Chiapas and we call on them to do so, in collaboration with the government of Chiapas, as a matter of urgency."

Exile

For indigenous Mexicans, becoming Protestant can mean expulsion from home, land and village.

One banished family is fighting back.

By Jeff Thomas

World Watch Monitor - Much of the story of Fidencio Jiménez and Petrona Díaz and their exile from Santa Rosalía is a familiar one, shared by large numbers of Christians in southern Mexico who have been pushed to the fringe of community life, or worse, because of their faith. The couple's legal fight to obtain a written order permitting their return is a modern twist on an old, complicated — and ongoing — tale of anti-Christian pressure in one of Mexico's most ungovernable regions.

The road to Santa Rosalía is one of the better stretches of highway in Chiapas, Mexico's southernmost state, and one of its poorest. From the town of Comitán, the last major outpost before the Guatemalan border, it's 30 kilometres north on Highway 190, one of Mexico's contributions to the Pan American Highway, which stretches from Alaska to Argentina.

From the highway, a one-lane road quickly dissolves into dirt and enters a broad, shallow valley flanked by pines. Free-roaming ponies graze near the road that rises gradually toward 7,200 feet (2,200 metres) elevation, lurching amid rocks and scrub oak for a few kilometres before revealing a settlement of widely scattered, modest houses sprinkled over the hillsides. Many of them back up to plots of corn, surrounded by well-tended fences.

When he arrived in Santa Rosalía many years ago, Jiménez' grandfather discovered, after picking the volcanic rock and tree stumps from the shallow, red soil, that a successful crop isn't guaranteed. But the land produced enough to help support the family, and the grandfather handed the property down to a son, who eventually handed it down to Fidencio. He worked his land, and did electrical and carpentry work.

In the spring of 2011, Jiménez planted his corn, repeating an annual ritual reaching back through centuries of his Tzeltal ancestry. Then he went northeast to Cancún to find work and earn some money. He found little of either. Hungry and nearly broke, Jiménez picked up on a bit of folklore: Drinking Coca-Cola, Mexico's unofficial national beverage, would tamp down his hunger.

Instead, he said, swilling Cokes gave him ulcers, which progressed into more significant health problems, including a form of hepatitis. Jiménez began selling his animals and borrowing money to pay the doctors. Thin and unable to eat, he ended up in the emergency room, where he was told nothing more could be done. Jiménez began living out what he thought would be his final days, bedridden at a friend's house. Three weeks went by without eating. "Every single day, I said goodbye to my family," he said.

That's when some visitors arrived. They began to pray with Jiménez, for healing. These men were not from his church. They told Jiménez something new to him: You don't need to go to your church to pray for healing. You can pray right here, now.

So they prayed, together. Two days later, Jiménez said, he was able to eat.

When he regained his strength, he returned to Santa Rosalía.

And the trouble began.

Filled with gratitude for his renewed health, Jiménez began attending Sunday services at an evangelical congregation in Natitón, a good distance away from the village. He stopped drinking. The people of Santa Rosalía, many of whom had worshipped for years with Jiménez and his family at the Catholic church, noticed.

"People started asking, 'Where is Fidencio? He's not coming to church,' " he said. Neighbours asked him pointed questions. The priest paid a visit. For two years, as Jiménez travelled to the evangelical church to worship, he heard the whispers in the village. One man asked, point blank: "Is it true you are in another religion?"

Jiménez said he had an equally pointed response: "'Why didn't you come to me two years ago when I was smelling like death?' "

"It was tense," he said, recalling that time. "I told them, and prayed in front of them, 'Open their eyes, open their hearts.' I was preparing for that moment for the last two years. They did not like that, when I prayed for them."

They told Jiménez they would take the matter to the authorities of Santa Rosalía.

Technically, no government official anywhere has any business saying anything about the church Jiménez attends. The very first article of Mexico's constitution forbids religious discrimination.

The second article, however, carves out a giant exception. It grants "a general framework of autonomy" to Mexico's indigenous communities, giving them latitude to "decide over their social, economic, political and cultural organization."

That legal grey area is broadest in Mexico's southern states, where the indigenous population is concentrated. In Chiapas, about a third of the people identify as Maya Tzotzil, Tzeltal or Chol. Their ancestors, fiercely independent, entered the Catholic Churches built by the Spanish invaders partly to avoid persecution by their new, heavily armed, overlords. For their part, the Spaniards permitted the Maya to bring some of their religious customs into the church as a way to help keep the peace.

During the centuries since, the tension between indigenous and national identity in southern Mexico has evolved into a complex civic, social and religious stew that seems to attract as many anthropologists as tourists to the lush forest region. Even as official Mexico places barriers between religion and government, in the legal space granted to indigenous Mexico, church leaders and town officials often are the same people.

Nowhere is the indigenous break from national culture on more dramatic display than in a town called San Juan Chamula.

Tucked in the high hills in the heart of Chiapas, Chamula sits 10 kilometres and a world apart from the city of San Cristóbal de las Casas, seat of the Catholic diocese of the same name. Chamula's Tzotzil inhabitants enjoy indigenous autonomy, enforcing their own laws. At the heart of their town is San Juan Bautista church, and though it looks like any other Roman Catholic church of the Spanish colonial era, what goes on inside has no connection to Rome.

The first clue is the group of men outside the church with 2-way radios, who murmur the arrival of visitors into their microphone, and the boy who collects 20 pesos from each visitor. Inside, there are no pews and no altar, only fresh green ponderosa pine needles blanketing the stone floor. Here and there, worshippers kneel on the floor, sweep away the needles and set out rows of candles before them. Their melted wax glues them to the bare stone, and their sparkling light pokes through the sanctuary's dim fluorescent gloom.

Along the walls are tables laden with large glass cases displaying costumed figures of saints, haphazard piles of flowers and other offerings at the feet of some, offered in gratitude for a healing or some other miracle. Two women and several children kneel before their candles, offering soft incantations. A bottle of Coca-Cola sits among the candles. A young girl dangles a softly clucking brown chicken by its feet. In the apse of the church, occupying the most prominent spot on the wall, is a glass case containing the figure of John the Baptist. To the left, and lower, is a case displaying the figure of Jesus.

In the plaza outside the church, clusters of men in long black or white wool jackets mill about. They are the cacique, town elders who run Chamula's civic affairs. Many worked their way up to their positions of influence by performing years of chores for the church, such as observing devotions to a saint, organizing public festivals, or attending to the local custom of daily volleys of fireworks. Now, in the legal space cleared out for them by Mexican law, they straddle the line between church and state, enforcing both religious orthodoxy and the law.

San Juan Bautista's exotic mash-up of Mayan and Catholic theology, and Chamula's blend of religious and civic authority, is not for everyone. Not everyone in Chamula has appreciated the caciques' regular collections to pay for the fireworks and other church observances. For some, it all gets too much, and they leave, voluntarily or otherwise. Those who drop out of their hometown "traditionalist" church and take up with a new Christian congregation may be driven out as apostates. By one anthropologist's account, Chiapas is home to Mexico's largest population of Protestants.

The same dramas are played out across Chiapas and beyond, in indigenous villages too small and remote to attract tourist buses.

Villages like Santa Rosalía.

"Everything started to get hot and tough there" in the spring of 2013, said Fidencio Jiménez. There were insults, and even a threat to burn his house, though cooler heads prevailed.

"They said, 'We'll give you some time. You do what you think you should do.'" "The message was clear: Return to the Santa Rosalía church. Resume payments for the festivals. Drop the prayer meetings in Notitán. Or get out.

Fidencio Jiménez in Comitán, where is earning money to repay medical bills. World Watch Monitor His son, attending high school down the highway in Comitán, started getting

hassled. Another son was accused of throwing rocks through a neighbour's window. A third son, attending the school in Santa Rosalía, was expelled. Electricity to the Jiménez home was cut.

Then they came for the tools. Dozens of men jumped the stone fence, and one of Jiménez' sons ran to his father.

"Dad, they're coming to take my equipment," the boy said, according to Jiménez. The men advanced, then stopped. Jiménez stood, silently looking over the intruders, then fetched his tools and handed them over. After a silence, the men walked away.

By summer, the family had enough. "For two years, it was very hard to live like that," Jiménez said. In late July he, his wife and their youngest children left Santa Rosalía.

They resettled down the highway, in Comitán, in a house belonging to a friend of Petrona. Like thousands of indigenous Mexicans before them, already generally disconnected from the broader national culture and opportunities, they found themselves in one of the shanty towns flanking cities such as Comitán, San Cristóbal and Tuxtla.

The house is tiny, a squat block of grey cinder brick, about 60 square meters. The cement floor is immaculate. The outhouse stands just inside the gate to the dirt yard. To the side of the yard, an ancient table saw and a few other woodworking tools sit under a lean-to. Small chairs circle a pile of smouldering embers. Petrona brings out a tray of sweet drinks. Fidencio nurses a concoction meant to soothe his scarred stomach. He murmurs a brief prayer, then sips.

He does construction work and makes bricks in Comitán, earning about 700 pesos a week. He said he sends the money to a friend and a bank, who together had loaned him about 12,500 pesos to cover his medical expenses. The family lives mostly off the carpentry and construction wages earned by a 17-year old son.

A younger boy emerges from the house, carrying a shoe-shine kit. He collects a kiss from his father, then walks through the gate into the dirt streets leading down the hills to the city.

The family also gets a regular government cheque, part of Mexico's negotiated relationship with indigenous citizens. Petrona Díaz returns to Santa Rosalía each month to pick it up and look in on family – parents, kids and grandchildren – who remain in the village.

"My neighbours don't talk to me. They're really mad at me," she said. "I don't really talk to people. I talk to my family members." She checks on her empty house and the fields. So far, both are okay. On a visit in the summer of 2013, the Santa Rosalía authorities made her an offer: she and her children could return to the village, without Fidencio.

She declined. The family continued to live and work in Comitán, chipping away at the debt.

If it was the couple's faith in God that kept them devoted to each other and to their family, it was Luis Antonio Herrera who showed them how to go home.

An accountant by training, the unassuming Herrera is a former adviser to the San Cristóbal mayor on matters ranging from social services to recycling. He also has a knack for navigating the Mexican legal system, and volunteers his expertise to the benefit of indigenous Christians who find themselves at odds with their local town councils and church leaders.

It was late June when Herrera got a call from a local pastor connected to a number of his cases. Jiménez had been asking around his new Christian circles, looking for guidance.

"We need your help," Herrera said the pastor told him. About a week later, Jiménez received threats that his house would be burned. A couple days after that, he was in Comitán, telling Herrera his story.

The two decided to play it quietly. Jiménez filed a denuncia, a request for the local government to watch closely over his house and protect it from arson. Making a full-blown complaint would have alerted Santa Rosalía that Jiménez was on the legal offensive.

Arson threats were made again July 14, and tensions ran high in the village. Village authorities cut water and power to the house, and issued their ultimatum. On July 20, the family decided to leave.

Toward the end of July, Herrera called everyone to the table for mediation. It did not go well. The prevailing message from village elders, he said, was "We don't want evangelicals in the town."

With no solution in sight, Jiménez and Herrera decided to elevate the denuncia to a demanda, akin to a lawsuit. They filed the case in Tuxtla Gutiérrez, the Chiapas state capital and a state office known to be more aggressive than the more timid government outposts outside the capital. Jiménez and Díaz demanded compensation for their damaged crops. They also sought punishment, on religious-discrimination grounds, of Santa Rosalía elders for running their children out of their schools and the family out of town.

"We asked the higher authorities to be more focused on the legal issues than on negotiations," Herrera said. "If we just negotiate, it could take years." The prospect of legal sanctions, however, added urgency.

The fiscal, the state attorney assigned to the case, called everyone to the table Sept. 10. Five representatives of Santa Rosalía were present. They insisted Jiménez and Díaz should remain expelled because they had abandoned the traditionalist Catholic church for a Protestant denomination.

The fiscal, Jaime Méndez, responded that their argument exposed the town to a charge of religious discrimination. Then he said something unexpected for a government official.

"God is the same God of the Catholics and Protestants," Méndez said. "Fidencio has shown you respect and tolerance on the way you follow God, or am I wrong?"

No one said he was wrong.

A document began to take shape. It began with the acknowledgement that in Mexico, including Santa Rosalía, "there is freedom of religion, as one of the fundamental rights of every inhabitant." Then it spelled out the terms of the family's return to the village: The town would restore water and electricity, let Jiménez work his land, collect wood and receive visitors, and permit his children return to school. For their part, Jiménez and Díaz agreed not to hold public worship services or build a church. They would not take their message door-to-door, but neither would they be held responsible for anyone else who left the village traditionalist church.

And they agreed to contribute 200 pesos a year to the church to help pay for the celebrations.

"He understands it is a small price to pay for freedom," Herrera said.

The document was signed by Jiménez and Díaz, as well as by Herrera and the pastor who had alerted Herrera to the case, the state officials on hand, and by the five Santa Rosalía delegates, one of whom affixed his thumbprint.

Sitting in a sunny hotel courtyard in October, their signed agreement only a few weeks old, Jiménez and Díaz spoke wistfully about their return to Santa Rosalía, now promised but still months away.

"It's hard for us," Jiménez said. "I'm not used to working in the city. I miss my house, my kids, my grandkids".

Not that they expected it will be easy in their home village, either.

"I think it's going to be a mess," he said. "That's why I'm working right now. I'm getting prepared. When we go back and they try to kick me, I'm not going to move a finger."

In the weeks that followed, Jiménez said he heard from another family that had been discovered associating with a Christian community outside the village. They remain in Santa Rosalía, however, mindful of the agreement the church authorities had signed.

Jiménez said the legal victory he and his wife won will benefit others in the village who break away from the traditionalist church. He vows to speak openly about his faith in his home town, and to return to the work he left when he was chased out. He missed out on working the 2013 corn crop, but now it is April, time to prepare the new crop for the new year. The paper is signed; the money is repaid. It's time to go home.

"I know they are not going to receive me happily", he said, "but I know I must go back."
