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MEXICO Religious communities agree to promote religious freedom in San Rafael Tlanalapan

Christian Solidarity Worldwide (CSW) welcomes the recent agreement signed by Catholic and Protestant leaders and the government to resolve a religious conflict in the village of San Rafael Tlanalapan, Mexico. In the agreement, both religious communities agree to promote religious freedom and tolerance in their community.

The situation in San Rafael Tlanalapan, located in Puebla State in central Mexico, received international press coverage when in early September, hard-line traditionalists threatened to “lynch and crucify” approximately seventy Protestant members of the community. Many of the Protestants fled or took refuge in the church.

According to local press reports the Catholic Church took quick steps to remove the local priest accused of instigating the conflict. Puebla State officials also intervened and over the course of the month helped to negotiate an agreement between both religious communities.

In the written agreement, signed by government officials and representatives on both sides, Catholics and Protestants, agreed to promote religious freedom, encourage respect for one another and other religious groups, and to instruct their religious leaders to promote the rule of law. In addition, the Protestants promised to move their place of worship within the town in order to help avoid future tensions and the government officials agreed to offer support in the process of relocation.

CSW continues to be concerned about an unresolved situation in San Jose de Axuxco, also in Puebla State where traditionalist hardliners continue to prevent Protestants' access to water. Tensions there first surfaced in May after the Protestants, all members of a local Baptist church, refused to contribute financially to a Catholic religious festival.

Andrew Johnston, Advocacy Director at CSW, said “We commend the Puebla State government’s commitment to religious freedom demonstrated by their actions to mediate a swift and just resolution to the conflict in San Rafael de Tlanalapan and ask that they take a similar initiative in San Jose de Axuxco as a matter of urgency. CSW also greatly appreciates the effort made by both Catholics and Protestants in San Rafael Tlanalapan to seek reconciliation and believe their actions can serve as an example to other communities in Mexico experiencing the same kind of tensions.”

A copy of the agreement is available on request.

Notes to Editors:

1. Conflict between traditionalists and non-Catholics is common in the states of Chiapas, Oaxaca, Guerrero, Hidalgo and Puebla where there are large indigenous populations. According to Mexican legal experts, ambiguity as to the relationship between the rights laid out in the Mexican Constitution and the Law of Uses and Customs, which gives indigenous communities a degree of autonomy to exercise traditional law, have allowed

local authorities to violate the rights of members of the local communities with impunity. In addition, the Mexican government's aversion to involving itself in religious issues has allowed such situations to escalate.

2. According to Mexican law, resolution to religious conflicts should be sought through dialogue. A positive example of this can be seen in the San Rafael Tlanalapan case. However, lawyers for the San Jose de Axuxco Baptists are concerned that in this case dialogue has not been actively pursued or facilitated by state religious affairs officials, and the situation has deteriorated to the point that the health of their clients is at risk.