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MEXICO | Government Urged To Intervene In Religious Conflicts

Christian Solidarity Worldwide (CSW) is calling on the Mexican government to intervene in the religious conflicts that result in the forcible displacement of communities in the state of Chiapas and to ensure their safety.

Two communities from the Tzotzil indigenous group have recently demanded the government address their situations as a matter of urgency.

This month, 17 families, two of whom are Baptists but the majority of whom are Roman Catholics, returned to the village of Puebla in the municipality of San Pedro de Chenalhó after being forcibly expelled on Aug. 23, 2013 by the majority Presbyterians. The group of approximately 100 people, who returned despite the risk to their safety and the failure of the government to provide any guarantees of security, were displaced following a physical attack on the Roman Catholic priest, the destruction of the Roman Catholic church and the confiscation of the property on which it stood. The majority of them are coffee farmers who chose to return to look after their crops because of an 'alimentary crisis' in the Internally Displaced Persons (IDP) camp where they had sought refuge in the municipality of Acteal.

This week a community of 31 Protestant evangelicals who have been displaced from the village of Los Llanos in San Cristobal de las Casas Municipality for four years, made a public call to the government to provide them with land on which to relocate following an attempt to return to their homes in June 2013 which ended in violence and a second expulsion. They were originally expelled by the Roman Catholic majority following a mob attack on their pastor during a prayer service and the destruction of the church.

The Los Llanos group filed a complaint with the National Commission for Human Rights, which found in 2011, the fundamental rights of the Protestants had been violated by the local and state authorities in Chiapas and recommended they be allowed to return to their homes, afforded protection by the government, and that their right to religious freedom be upheld. Unfortunately, the government did not act to implement these recommendations and when the group attempted to return on their own last year, accompanied by journalists and supporters, they found the road blocked by a mob that began to stone them. Two supporters of the displaced, both protestant pastors, were taken hostage and separated from the larger group. They were tied up, stripped of their clothing, beaten, had gasoline poured on them and then were forced to walk, with their hands and feet shackled, one kilometer to the village center of Los Llanos where the Roman Catholics threatened to burn them alive.

The entire group was held in the center until state officials arrived and freed the group after negotiating an agreement in which Roman Catholics agreed not to beat or mistreat the prisoners or to force them to pay a fee for their liberation, and the Protestants agreed not to press charges.

Dr. Jorge Lee Galindo, founder of Impulso 18, a non-governmental organization promoting religious freedom and equality in Mexico, said, "Serious violations of religious freedom, like those experienced by the forcibly displaced from Puebla and Los Llanos, have been taking place in Chiapas for more than forty years with no effective response from the authorities. It is past time for the government, both at the state and federal levels, to intervene to ensure that the fundamental rights of all Mexicans are upheld and the right to freely choose and practice one's own religion is protected. To deprive a citizen not only of his place of worship, but also of his home, possessions and land simply because of his faith is unacceptable in 2014."

CSW's Chief Executive Mervyn Thomas said, "It is imperative that the government of Chiapas take swift steps to ensure the long term safety of these two communities as they attempt to rebuild their lives. If the government of Chiapas is unwilling or unable to do so, the federal government must intervene to ensure that religious freedom, as guaranteed by the Mexican Constitution, is upheld for all citizens both Catholic and Protestant. Anyone responsible for criminal acts, including violent attacks on members of a particular religious group or destruction of property, must be held to account and prosecuted in a court of law. A culture of impunity will only feed into the cycle of violence and intolerance. The government must make it clear that there is no place for criminal acts in the name of religion in modern Mexico."