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MEXICO | Families Have Water, Electricity Disconnected After Refusing to Join Religious Ceremonies

Twenty-five Protestant families had their water and electricity supplies disconnected and have effectively been put under house arrest in Mexico because of their refusal to participate in Traditionalist Catholic religious ceremonies.

On Feb. 11, village authorities turned off the Protestant families' water supply. Two days later, their electricity supply was disconnected and chains, ropes and civilian guards were placed around the families' homes in order to further isolate them. One member of the group was arbitrarily detained by village authorities and imprisoned for more than 24 hours after he attempted to reconnect his water while under the supervision of state officials and police. Village authorities in Unión Juárez, located in La Trinitaria municipality in the state of Chiapas, also detained the police officers for 10 hours.

Traditionalist Catholic village authorities are demanding the families, who belong to the local Mount Tabor Evangelical Church, contribute financially to religious festivals and have said they will not permit the families to reconnect their services or receive visitors until they pay 500 pesos (approximately \$38) each. The village authorities are justifying their actions as in line with the Law of Uses and Customs, which gives indigenous populations autonomy to exercise traditional forms of justice and to protect their culture.

The situation follows an escalation of discriminatory behavior towards the group of Protestant Christians in La Trinitaria Municipality in Chiapas state, beginning in 2010, when the local village assembly blocked their access to firewood and refused them permission to attend or participate in village assembly meetings.

According to Luis Antonio Herrera, a local activist representing the victims, the families have pointed out that under the Mexican Constitution they cannot legally be forced to be involved in festivals or ceremonies linked to religions to which they do not ascribe. The victims have filed a complaint with the National Commission for Human Rights.

Dr. Jorge Lee Galindo, Director of Impulso 18, CSW's partner organization in Mexico, said, "Unfortunately this case is not atypical in Chiapas, where village authorities regularly attempt to impose the majority religion on all inhabitants of the village. Crimes like this take place with impunity, contributing to a worsening of the situation as can be seen in this case. State authorities should intervene in the early stages to prevent increasing violations of human rights, and those responsible for criminal acts must be held accountable in a court of law."

Mervyn Thomas, Chief Executive of Christian Solidarity Worldwide, said, "We call on the government of Chiapas state, and as well as the federal government, to take urgent action to protect the fundamental rights of the people of La Union Juarez. It is unacceptable that access to electricity and water be used as a tool to enforce religious belief in a modern democracy with constitutional protections for religious freedom. We are also concerned that without swift action on the part of government officials, and based on the trajectory of similar cases, the situation could deteriorate further and lead to violence. Those who are responsible for the criminal acts committed thus far including the deprivation of basic services, water and electricity, and arbitrary detention, must be prosecuted."