



3.7.14

MEXICO | Reparations Called for Victims of Religious Freedom Violations

Christian Solidarity Worldwide (CSW) welcomes the report of the Oaxaca State Ombudsman's Office, dated Jan. 28 but released last week, which confirmed serious religious freedom violations in the municipality of San Juan Ozolotepec and recommended reparations be made to the victims.

The victims, members of the Independent Christian Pentecostal Church, filed a complaint with the ombudsman's office in April 2013 after municipal authorities declared the area to be a 'Protestant-free' zone and forcibly closed the Pentecostal church with 'concrete tubes, chains and padlocks'. The municipal president, Pedro Cruz Gonzalez, called for the destruction of the church building and demanded that the Protestants pay a 7000 peso (approximately \$535) for 'not being Catholic'. In November, tensions escalated when Cruz Gonzalez called for the Protestants to be lynched, imprisoned and tortured. Four men associated with the church were arbitrarily detained and tortured and only released after state and federal intervention.

In its report, which only addressed the initial complaint and not the violence later in the year, the ombudsman recommended the reparations be made for the damage to the church building and that the municipal authorities issue a building permit for the Pentecostal church. The report went on to suggest that: "As a way to compensate for the damage done to the victims... the authorities [should] permit each and every one of the activities of the members of the evangelical community according to the internal regulations of their community, with due respect for their freedom of religious belief and worship, which they profess, as well as offering them all administrative and justice services that local government is obliged to provide."

The ombudsman's report clearly states the constitutional rights, including religious freedom, of the Protestants were violated: "Noting that the violation of the right to freedom of religious belief and public worship, constitutes discrimination: excluding a segment of the population holding beliefs different to the majority of the population, contrary to the provisions of the last paragraph of Article 1 of the Constitution of the United Mexican States which prohibits all discrimination on grounds of ethnic or national origin, gender, age, disability, social status, health status, religion, opinions, sexual orientation, marital status or any other that undermines human dignity and has the effect of nullifying or impairing the rights and freedoms of individuals."

In order to prevent any repetition of the religious freedom violations, the ombudsman recommended the community organize workshops and training on human rights, with a priority on religious freedom, targeting members of the community but also municipal officials and public servants. It went on to recommend the state government organize roundtable dialogues

to bring together the different parties involved in order to reach a long term resolution to the conflict.

CSW's Chief Executive Mervyn Thomas said, "We warmly welcome the findings of the Oaxaca State Ombudsman and urge state and municipal authorities to implement its recommendations as a matter of urgency. In light of the severe escalation of the conflict late last year, and the failure of the government to hold those responsible for criminal acts accountable, we are concerned that the situation in San Juan Ozolotepec remains volatile. The state must take concrete steps to build a culture of respect for religious freedom in Oaxaca. One important step would be to follow the recommendations of the Oaxaca state ombudsman and make training in human rights and religious freedom obligatory for all public servants, especially at the local and municipal level."