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MEXICO | “Ongoing and Systematic” Religious Freedom Violations Found in Chiapas

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 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 religious freedom violations are on the rise and 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 40 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 victimized 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."