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MEXICO | Displaced Protestants Seek Government Help

A group of forcibly displaced Protestant Christians continue to call on Mexican government officials to address their case one year after their attempt to return home was met with extreme violence. The group of 35 people, including small children, has been living in limbo since they were forcibly expelled from the village of Los Llanos in January 2010.

In May 2014 in a visit facilitated by a representative of local activist group, the Coordination for Christian Organizations (COOC), Christian Solidarity Worldwide (CSW) met with the community, which is currently housed in a small communal living space in very basic conditions on the grounds of a local church. Members of the displaced group told CSW of their disappointment at the failure of the government to take action to defend their rights. Since then, according to the COOC, government officials have communicated to the displaced group it may take at least another eight months to address their request for relocation.

The Protestants were forcibly displaced in early 2010 after village authorities destroyed their church and issued an ultimatum to the Protestants to convert to Catholicism. In June 2013, after 3 ½ years living as internally displaced persons with no apparent government action on the case, the group members attempted to return to their homes on their own. As the group approached Los Llanos, located in the municipality of San Cristóbal de las Casas, it was met with roadblocks and a violent mob who took them captive. They were held against their will, beaten, doused with petrol and threatened with being burnt alive.

State officials eventually intervened and negotiated the release of the group. However, no criminal charges were filed against those who had committed acts of violence, and as part of the negotiated agreement the victims were prohibited from pursuing legal action against those responsible for the violence.

The National Commission for Human Rights (CNDH) investigated the original case and published its conclusions and recommendations in November 2011. The CNDH found that the rights, including the right to religious freedom, of the victims had been violated and recommended that they be allowed to return to their home. The Chiapas State Government never took any action to implement these recommendations. The group told CSW that after the events of June 2013 it does not believe it will be possible to return and have requested the government relocate the group members in order to resolve the situation.

CSW's Chief Executive Mervyn Thomas said, "We continue to urge the Mexican government and in particular the Chiapas State government to take effective measures to address this case and others like it as a matter of urgency. It is unacceptable, not only that the government failed at every step to defend the religious freedom of the Los Llanos displaced community, but has

allowed four and a half years to go by without seeking any resolution to the case. In the meantime, this group of 35 men, women and children live in precarious conditions without recourse to justice. We call on Governor Velasquez Coello to instruct members of his administration to prioritize this and other long term cases of forced displacement based on religious belief.”