



8.1.14

MEXICO | Protestants in Palenque Threatened

Protestant Christians in Chiapas, who have been targeted by threats and physical attacks, are calling on state and federal government officials to protect their religious freedom.

Leaders of the village of Cuahutémoc Cárdenas, Palenque Municipality have cut off water and electricity and restricted the access of a group of 42 Protestants to their farmland. Luis Herrera of the Coordinator of Christian Organisations (COOC) in Chiapas informed CSW that former village commissioner, Leonarda Damas Cruz, justified this action by referring to an old legal agreement which stipulates that inhabitants of Cuahutémoc Cárdenas must be members of the Institutional Revolutionary Party (PRI) and be Roman Catholics. According to Herrera, Damas Cruz is behind a campaign of threats against the Protestants, as “she wants to force them out of ‘her’ community.”

As in other cases, the government has preferred to facilitate the negotiation of extra-legal agreements to resolve religious freedom issues, rather than prosecute those responsible for criminal acts or enforce the law. These efforts led to an agreement, signed by local officials and the villagers in January 2014, which declared religious freedom would be respected in Cuahutémoc Cárdenas, but restricted this right to the inhabitants of the village. Visitors would not be permitted to participate in any non-Roman Catholic religious activities. The January agreement appears to have had no impact on the actions of local authority. On the contrary, threats and acts of aggression against the Protestant community have increased in number and severity, and municipal and state officials have taken no action to enforce the agreement.

In addition to having their water and electricity cut off and their access to their farmland restricted, members of the community are subjected to sustained harassment and attacks. The most serious of these resulted in the hospitalization of Juan Alvaro, a Protestant who was attacked and badly beaten by Felipe de Jesús Cruz Damas, Damas Cruz’s son, on March 30. Although a complaint was filed and Cruz Damas admitted guilt, the government declined to prosecute. Alvaro received no compensation for his injuries and hospital bills.

Similarly, the municipal council has failed to respond to citations issued by religious affairs officials to restore the Protestants’ electricity and water.

According to Herrera, the village leaders have been unsuccessful in forcibly displacing the Protestants. The villagers are concerned that if the government does not step in to resolve the situation, they may be expelled from the village. Most recently, Cruz Damas, acting under the authority of the current village commissioner, cut off access to the home of an elderly Protestant, forcing him to move in to the home of his son’s family.

Mervyn Thomas, Chief Executive of CSW said, "We call on the state and federal governments to urgently intervene in this case to uphold religious freedom in Palenque, Chiapas and to bring an end to the threats and acts of aggression against the Protestants of Cuahutémoc Cárdenas. The failure of the government to intervene decisively to restore water and electricity to these victims and to prosecute Felipe de Jesús Cruz Damas for the horrific attack on Juan Alvaro is indefensible. It is imperative that Mexico upholds the rights guaranteed in its own constitution and brings an end to the culture of impunity surrounding criminal acts committed in the name of religion which is at the root of this case and the approximately 50 others like it in Chiapas alone."