



10.16.14

## **MEXICO | Increase in Attacks on Roman Catholic Priests**

Attacks on Roman Catholic priests in Mexico have increased by 80% over the past two years, according to a new report released by the Mexican Catholic Multimedia Centre (CCM).

CCM reports that six priests were killed and three others victims of forced disappearances since President Enrique Peña Nieto came into power two years ago. The CCM Investigative Unit called on the Mexican government “to provide security in areas with a significant presence of organized crime.”

The report was released shortly after the kidnap and murder of Father José Ascensión Acuña in the state of Guerrero in late September. Parishioners in Acelias, in the state of Guerrero, expressed concern when Father Ascensión Acuña disappeared Sept. 21 and failed to reappear to hold Mass. His body was found in the Balsas River near Santa Cruz de Las Tinajas, in the municipality of San Miguel Totolapan, following an anonymous tip.

According to the Vatican, Mexico is now the country with the most attacks on Roman Catholic religious leaders in the world. Christian Solidarity Worldwide’s (CSW’s) investigations revealed that the situation is similar for Protestant church leaders.

Reasons for the attacks on religious leaders by criminal groups vary. In some cases the criminal groups view religious leaders as opposing their objectives, either through word or action. Some religious leaders have been attacked because of their public denunciations of corruption and criminal activities, while others are targets because of work that impacts the interests of the criminal groups, for example with alcohol and drug addicts, victims of human trafficking or former members of criminal groups seeking to reintegrate into society.

Criminal organizations also often view churches as attractive targets for extortion or money laundering, and religious leaders who refuse to cooperate frequently come under threat. In addition, some criminal groups have developed a religious aspect to their identity and seek to impose this in areas under their control. Sources told CSW they believe at least one Catholic priest murdered in December 2013 was killed after he refused demands by a criminal group to hold a mass dedicated to Santa Muerte (Saint Death) in the Catholic church.

CSW’s Chief Executive Mervyn Thomas said, “The continued increase in the number of attacks on religious leaders in Mexico, making it one of the most dangerous places in the world for church leaders, is shocking and deeply concerning. We urge the Mexican government to implement effective strategies to provide security to civilian populations in areas with a strong influence of criminal groups, and to develop strategies to support civil society actors like

churches and religious leaders as they come under threat. CSW also calls for a full investigation into the forced disappearance and subsequent murder of Father Ascensión Acuña and the prosecution of those responsible. We urge the international community to engage with the Mexican government on these matters and to recognize the role that many religious leaders play, not only as leaders of their churches, but also as voices for peace, justice and integrity as human rights defenders.”