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## MEXICO | Victims to Give First-Hand Testimony of Religious Freedom Violations

Victims of religious freedom violations will give testimony at a national conference on religious freedom in Mexico City on Nov. 6. The group will be joined by representatives from national aid organizations, academics and religious freedom experts at the conference, which was organized by Christian Solidarity Worldwide and its Mexican partner organization, Impulso 18.

Activists and victims are traveling from across the country, including from states like Chiapas, Michoacán and Oaxaca, which have some of the highest numbers of religious freedom violations in the country, to give first-hand testimony of the violations they have witnessed. Witnesses include representatives from the Yashtinin community in Chiapas, who were violently displaced from their homes in 2012 after local authorities arbitrarily imprisoned all the Protestant men and boys, and attempted to force them to renounce their faith. The group of 40 people, including small children and the elderly, has been housed in an overcrowded former homeless shelter and has yet to see any movement to resolve their situation.

While often overlooked, Mexico continues to have one of the highest rates of religious freedom violations in the Western Hemisphere. In areas with high indigenous populations, where traditional forms of justice are exercised, members of minority religious groups are regularly subjected to attempts at forcible conversion and participation in majority religious festivals, exclusion from state run schools, barred from access to electricity, water and farmland, the destruction of religious buildings, violence, and in the worst cases, forced expulsion. While these are all clear violations of Mexican law, the government rarely intervenes to prosecute those responsible for criminal acts, including violent crime. A **report** by the Mexican Commission for the Promotion of Human Rights published in September found that religious intolerance is one of the principal reasons for forced displacement in the country.

In one example of the pervasive impunity which facilitates widespread violations of religious freedom, CSW continues to call for justice for the **four Protestant victims** of illegal detention and torture in Oaxaca. One year on from the events of San Juan Ozolotepec, despite declarations from the **National Commission for Human Rights** and the **Oaxaca State Ombudsman**, no criminal charges have been brought against Mayor Pedro Cruz González, who was responsible for orchestrating and carrying out the attacks. In contrast, Cruz González and other members of the local government were arrested and detained by state officials when they blocked the highway a few weeks later in a separate incident. The victims and their families fled the area after the four men were released and are now living in precarious conditions as displaced persons in the municipality of Miahuatlán.

CSW's Chief Operating Officer Andy Dipper said, "We are delighted to be involved in this conference, which we hope will put a national spotlight on the systematic, widespread and severe religious freedom violations which have been brushed under the carpet in Mexico for far too long. It is our hope that this conference will give a voice to victims who have been marginalized and silenced by the very government that should protect and uphold their rights. It is unacceptable that in a modern democracy like Mexico, men, women and children continue to suffer violence and forced displacement solely because of their religious beliefs. We call on the Mexican government, at both the federal and state level, to focus its attention on this problem and take effective measures to ensure that freedom of religion or belief is robustly upheld for all Mexico's citizens."