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MEXICO | Displaced Protestants Refused Re-Entry to Village

A group of 47 displaced Protestants from Chiapas State, Mexico, were refused re-entry to their village despite state government promises that village leaders agreed to uphold religious freedom.

The Protestants, who were forcibly expelled from Buenavista Bahuitz village in Chiapas State in 2012, were initially told they could only return to their homes if they converted to Roman Catholicism and participated in Roman Catholic religious activities. According to Luis Herrera, director of the Coordination of Christian Organizations of Chiapas, the group later received assurances from the state government they had negotiated the return of the displaced group and their religious freedom would be protected.

The government promise of action came after a month-long peaceful sit-in in front of the state government palace in Tuxtla Gutierrez by the Buenavista Bahuitz group and other communities of forcibly displaced Protestants. The sit-in ended Dec. 1 after the state government made verbal commitments to address their situation.

The group set out for Buenavista Bahuitz in the early hours of Jan. 20 by bus, accompanied by some state government officials. Upon arrival at the village, they were met by village leaders who demanded that the Protestants convert to Catholicism before they would be permitted to stay. Herrera noted the government officials present appeared to be taken by surprise by the village leaders' stance and questioned their preparations. Negotiations were held on the spot and the village leaders eventually agreed to allow the Protestants to stay if they paid a fine which Herrera described as "extremely high." The group declined and went to the capital of Chiapas, Tuxtla Gutierrez, where they sought refuge in the Jesus is the Way Church.

The events of Jan. 20 follow a series of serious religious freedom violations and forced displacements in Chiapas this month. In early January in the municipality of San Juan Chamula, tensions erupted after Protestants in the village of Las Ollas declined to participate in festivals celebrating the Roman Catholic patron saint of Mexico, the Virgin of Guadalupe. According to the Organización de Pueblos Evangélicos de los Altos de Chiapas (OPEACH), the villagers were compelled to pay financial contributions to Catholic festivals in the village over the past year but had decided they would no longer do so in December 2014. They were subsequently attacked, beaten, and had their water and electricity cut on Jan. 8. OPEACH stated the village leaders also threatened to bar the Protestant children from attending school and to block Protestant families from receiving state benefits allocated to the community.

On Jan. 14, a group of ten Protestants were forcibly displaced from the community of La

Florezilla in San Cristóbal de las Casas municipality after having their water and electricity supplies interrupted, and after being physically attacked, arbitrarily imprisoned and given a deadline by village authorities to renounce their faith or be forced to leave. Local religious leaders in San Cristóbal de las Casas, who have offered refuge to the families, informed Christian Solidarity Worldwide (CSW) the problem has been going on since 2011 and numerous complaints to the municipal and state governments have been made but no action has been taken to protect the rights of the group or to uphold the rule of law.

CSW's Chief Executive Mervyn Thomas said, "We are extremely disappointed that the government of Chiapas did not follow through on its promises to assure the safe return of the Buenavista Bahuitz community and to uphold their religious freedom. The events of Jan. 20, which have occurred amidst serious violations of religious freedom and the forced displacement of religious minorities in other parts of the state, call into question the state government's purported commitment to defending religious freedom and addressing these and the approximately 30 other cases of religious freedom violations in the state of Chiapas. We continue to call on the state government to meet its obligations under Mexican and international law and urge the federal government to intervene if the state government is unable or unwilling to fulfill its responsibilities."