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MEXICO | New Evidence Presented for Imprisoned, Forcibly Displaced Protestants

Two court hearings in Mexico on April 22, held by the State Commission for Human Rights and the Public Ministry, heard new evidence supporting the case of two men imprisoned and forcibly expelled from their village in Hidalgo State in March 2015 because of their religious beliefs.

Casto Hernández Hernández, 30, and his cousin Juan Placido Hernández Hernández, 25, both members of the United Pentecostal Church of Mexico, were imprisoned by village officials in Chichiltepec village, Tlanchinol Municipality, on March 12. They were put under pressure to renounce their Protestant faith while imprisoned. When they refused to do so after 30 hours, they were released and told they had 18 hours to leave the community. Since then, Juan Placido has been allowed to return to the village. Casto has not and is living in the city of Huejutla los Reyes. The two men are both single and have no children.

The first hearing with the State Commission for Human Rights focused on the religious intolerance instigated by the village delegate, Jesús Domínguez Hernández. New evidence was presented including a photograph showing the two men in detention and a 40-minute video of the assembly at which Casto Hernández Hernández was pressured to renounce his faith. A local representative from the State Human Rights Commission also gave testimony to support Casto and Juan Placido's case.

Casto Hernández Hernández said, "Because of the delegate's intolerance, he would not allow us to preach the word of God. He imprisoned me after he tried to force me to renounce my faith in writing but I would not do it." In his response to the complaint, village delegate Jesús Domínguez Hernández admitted to some of the actions he was accused of but claimed that he acted in ignorance of the law.

The new evidence was presented at the hearing with the Public Ministry. Two new witnesses came forward to give oral testimony on behalf of Casto Hernández Hernández. Despite initial concerns about impartiality and due process by church leaders, lawyers representing the men were positive about both court hearings. Since the hearings, both Casto and Juan Placido have received death threats and are facing intense pressure to withdraw their case and pursue an informal, non-legally binding resolution.

Dr. Jorge Lee Galindo, director of Mexican religious freedom organization Impulso 18, which organized legal support for the men, said, "The hearing went well and we hope that this will be the beginning of new era in Mexico, in which the law is applied correctly and religious freedom for all, as protected in our constitution and in the various international treaties to which we are

party, is upheld.”

CSW’s Chief Executive Mervyn Thomas said, “We are encouraged by positive reports of the hearings on 22 April and call on the Hidalgo State and Mexican federal government to continue to ensure a transparent and fair court process. Given that Casto and Juan Placido’s arbitrary imprisonment and forced expulsion are part of a much larger and entrenched pattern of religious freedom violations in the region, we hope that their case will prove to be a watershed moment, galvanizing the authorities to uphold freedom of religion or belief for religious minorities in Mexico.”