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GLOBAL | Conference Addresses Impact of Violence on Human Rights

Latin American legal experts will discuss the impact of violence on human rights in the region, including religious freedom, at a landmark conference starting Sept. 3 in San Salvador. The event has been organized by the Inter-American Federation of Christian Jurists and Christian Solidarity Worldwide (CSW).

The three-day conference will comprise various panels exploring the impact of different forms of violence on religious freedom; restorative justice; and will compare experiences of national truth and reconciliation processes, and share best practice norms for civil society organizations working in a violent context. Experts from Colombia, Peru, Chile, Mexico and Honduras will be taking part. An additional workshop on international religious freedom protections will be given by Dr. Jorge Lee Galindo from the Mexican religious freedom organization Impulso 18.

For decades, countries in the region have suffered the effects of violence ranging from that associated with dictatorships, internal conflicts and civil wars to the more recent phenomenon of organized criminal violence on a massive scale. The host country, El Salvador, has been particularly affected by the wave of criminal violence. In August, the government designated street gangs as terrorist groups.

All of the types of violence to be addressed in the conference have a direct impact on civil society, including religious groups. The number of religious leaders murdered by criminal groups in Mexico rose sharply in the past two years and is mirrored by similar attacks in Colombia and Central America. Internal conflicts, like that in Colombia, also affect religious freedom as leftist guerrilla groups limit or prohibit religious activities in areas under their control and the military regularly violates the right to conscientious objection.

Other forms of violence, including local social conflicts left unaddressed in Mexico have led to the widespread forced displacement of religious minorities, mostly from indigenous communities. Similar problems affect the indigenous population on a smaller scale in Colombia and other Latin American countries.

Experts from El Salvador, Chile and Peru will present their countries' post-conflict experience, including lessons learned from their truth and reconciliation processes.

Anna-Lee Stangl, CSW's Senior Advocacy Officer for the Americas, said, "We are delighted to co-sponsor this ground breaking conference together with our partners in FIAJC. We hope that the knowledge and experience shared by the panelists, many of whom are linked to CSW partner organizations in Latin America, will help to equip those in attendance from across the

region to address the challenges created by high levels of violence in their own countries and that it will encourage them to know that they are not alone. We believe that through sharing their experiences, both positive and negative, the civil society activists at the conference, including those who defend religious freedom and other human rights, will be less isolated and better equipped to carry out their work. We also hope that it will inspire other legal professionals present at the conference who may not know what they can do to address rising violence in their countries to take action.”