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MEXICO | Water, Electricity Restored After Two Years

Twenty-seven families in the state of Chiapas will have access to water and electricity restored two years after local authorities agreed to respect religious freedom in the village of Unión Juárez, Trinitaria Municipality. The families, all Protestants, have been living without access to clean water or electricity since February 2014 because of their refusal to contribute to or participate in Roman Catholic festivals.

According to Luis Herrera of the Coordination of Christian Organisations (COOC), an agreement “which includes respect for beliefs, as well as the obligations of villagers, as long as these do not include participation in or contributions to religious festivals” was signed by local authorities Feb. 19 in a process overseen by two lawyers who were supporting the victims.

COOC repeatedly called for state government intervention, especially after many of the victims began to manifest serious health problems because of their lack of access to clean water. In September 2015, village leaders blocked three of the Protestant villagers from entering the village, citing a curfew and other restrictions placed on the movement of Protestants in the village. The men also reported their mobile phone and cash were stolen, and one of the men was arbitrarily detained for 24 hours.

Despite these positive developments in Union Juarez, a number of other cases in Chiapas State, many of which involve forced displacement, remain unaddressed. Last week, village leaders in Yashtinín, San Cristóbal de las Casas Municipality, refused to allow the burial of an elderly Protestant man who was killed after being hit by a motorcycle.

José Moshan Ara was part of a group of 12 families comprising 40 individuals, including very young children, who were violently expelled from the village because of their religious beliefs in 2012. The group has been living in a homeless shelter in the city of San Cristóbal de las Casas for the past four years. In January 2015, the state government signed an agreement to relocate the families within three months but did not follow through on the implementation. Moshan Ara was buried Feb. 20 in the municipal cemetery in San Cristóbal de las Casas.

COOC is continuing to support the Yashtinín villagers, including the elderly widow of Moshan Ara, and a number of other displaced Protestant communities that are waiting for the government to fulfill promises to resolve their cases.

Mervyn Thomas, Chief Executive of Christian Solidarity Worldwide, said, “We were happy to hear that all members of the Union Juarez village will have access to basic services, including water and electricity, regardless of their religious beliefs. However, we do not believe that it should have taken the Chiapas state government two years to take action to uphold the rights of these 27 families. At the same time, we believe that the tragic death of José Moshan Ara likely could have been avoided if the state government had followed through on its promises to relocate him and the rest of the Yashtinín community. This tragedy was made even more painful by the intransigence of village authorities in refusing his right of return, even in death. During his visit to Chiapas last week, Pope Francis commented on the way indigenous people have been systematically misunderstood and excluded in Mexico. Religious minorities within indigenous communities are often doubly marginalized. We continue to call upon the Chiapas state and the Mexican federal governments to put in place effective policies and mechanisms to respond to these cases in a timely and effective manner that upholds the rights enshrined in the Mexican constitution.”