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MEXICO | Religious Freedom Violation Victims Will Brief U.S. Policymakers

Casto Hernandez Hernandez and Fidel Lopez Hernandez will meet with U.S. policymakers in Washington, D.C. this week to share their testimonies as the victims of forced displacement from their homes because of their religious beliefs. It's the first time victims of similar offenses in Mexico have done so first-hand.

The two men arrived in Washington, D.C. on May 23 accompanied by the directors of two Mexican organizations working on the right to freedom of religion or belief (FoRB), Dr. Jorge Lee Galindo of Impulso 18 and Luis Herrera of the Coordination of Christian Organizations (COOC).

As part of an advocacy visit organized by Christian Solidarity Worldwide (CSW), the delegation will raise concerns about ongoing FoRB violations in Mexico which include the forced displacement of religious minorities, the removal of basic services such as water and electricity from them and attempted forced conversion. CSW has documented 18 cases of FoRB violations in Mexico in 2016, including four mass forced displacements. The most recent displacement took place in Mitzitón, Chiapas on May 12 and resulted in 86 families from three protestant churches being forcibly expelled from their village after they refused to make financial contributions to Roman Catholic festivals. CSW estimates there are currently 150 open cases across the country.

Fidel Lopez Hernandez was forcibly displaced from his community of Buenavista Bahuitz in Chiapas state in 2012 along with 47 other Protestant Christians after local authorities failed to force them to renounce their faith, illegally imprisoning and then physically attacking them. The State government negotiated the displaced community's return to their village in early 2015, but they still are subject to illegal restrictions on their right to FoRB, including a prohibition on their children's right to speak openly about their religious beliefs outside their homes.

Casto Hernandez Hernandez and his cousin were forcibly displaced from their community of

Chichiltepec in Hidalgo state in March 2015 after they were illegally imprisoned for 30 hours in an effort to force them to renounce their religious beliefs. Casto pursued his legal case with representation from Impulso 18 and a grant facilitated by CSW. After an 11-month legal battle, he was allowed to return to his village with his right to FoRB guaranteed, but local authorities have failed to uphold the agreement and their right to FoRB continues to be violated.

Impunity is an ongoing concern in FoRB violations in Mexico. In both of these cases, the government did not prosecute those responsible.

CSW's Chief Executive Mervyn Thomas, said, "CSW is privileged to facilitate this visit to Washington, D.C. for these four men, who bring valuable first-hand testimonies and research from Mexico about violations of their right to freedom of religion or belief and that of their communities. We trust that their presentations will give U.S. policymakers a clearer picture of the reality for religious minorities in Mexico and inspire them to make representations to the Mexican government about ongoing human rights concerns. We continue to call on the Mexican government to make systematic changes at both the state and federal levels that will strengthen the rule of law and protect the right freedom of religion and belief for all."