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MEXICO | Evangelical Church Leader Stabbed

Christian Solidarity Worldwide (CSW) supports a statement by the Baja California state Evangelical Alliance (AEBC) condemning an attack on a church leader in the city of Tijuana on May 18 and calling for a full investigation and the prosecution of those responsible.

Pastor Guillermo Favela, President of the AEBC Tijuana Ministerial Evangelical Alliance and pastor of the Rios de Agua Viva Church was stabbed May 18 on a street near his church.

AEBC's President, Dr. Carlos E. Perea Zaldívar, told CSW that the assailant demanded that Pastor Favela pay approximately \$1,640 per month in protection money for the church and threatened to cut off one finger for each time the pastor refused.

When Pastor Favela rebuffed the attempt to extort the church, the assailant stabbed him under his left arm before fleeing the scene. The pastor's wounds were not serious, and he was able to file a formal complaint. However, while the assailant was subsequently apprehended by the authorities, he has since been released.

Dr. Perea Zaldívar said that the AEBC is closely following the case and has made a public call for the authorities to carry out a full investigation to identify the individuals behind the attack and to prosecute those responsible. He expressed concern to CSW that "unfortunately, it could be an attack on religious freedom borne out of intolerance."

According to the AEBC statement: "We firmly believe in a state of law and in a government structure that, by its nature, should not allow these types of abuses and should persistently pursue these types of attacks, which are on the increase in our city of Tijuana. We are extremely concerned that governability is being lost, and that now the religious sector is being targeted for harassment and intimidation in order to obtain more resources through the sowing of fear."

"In addition, we hope that those responsible are not motivated by vile interests, motivated by

religious intolerance, that seek to undermine religious freedom. We make this public denunciation because we do not want this case to end up a simple archived case file, without answers and without the prosecution of the crime against a very prominent leader and representative of our evangelical community. We will be closely monitoring the performance of our authorities.”

Over the past decade, criminal groups have increasingly targeted churches for extortion. In many cases, religious leaders have been threatened or murdered for refusing to comply with these demands or declining to cooperate with the criminal groups in other ways.

The Catholic Multimedia Centre has documented the murder or forced disappearance of 13 Catholic priests and two church leaders since President Peña Nieto took office in 2012. Ninety-eight percent of all crimes in Mexico are met with impunity, according to the Centro PRODH, a Mexican human rights organization.

CSW’s Chief Executive Mervyn Thomas said, “We were troubled to learn of the attack on Pastor Favela and we stand with the Baja California Evangelical Alliance in their call for a full investigation and prosecution. Attempts to extort churches and attacks on religious leaders, like this one, can have a chilling effect on religious freedom as those targeted come under pressure to compromise their beliefs and actively cooperate with illegal criminal groups. We are concerned by the increase in attacks on church leaders and deterioration in the rule of law in many parts of Mexico and call on the Mexican government to strengthen its efforts to fight impunity.”