



8.15.16

MEXICO | US Ambassador to Raise Concerns With Government

CSW welcomes this week's unprecedented visit to Mexico by the United States Ambassador at Large for International Religious Freedom, who will raise ongoing issues related to freedom of religion or belief (FoRB) with the Mexican government.

Ambassador David Saperstein's visit to Mexico starts Aug. 15, and he will engage with Mexican government officials at both Federal and State levels. He will visit Mexico City as well as the state of Hidalgo, where the number of FoRB violations affecting religious minorities is very high.

CSW has documented 29 new FoRB violations in Mexico in 2016, including four mass forced displacements in the states of Chiapas, Jalisco and Oaxaca. In each case, members of a religious minority were targeted by local leaders linked to the religious majority.

Most of these violations are linked to the Law of Uses and Customs which gives indigenous communities the right to maintain their traditional forms of government but which is supposed to be practiced in accordance with human rights guarantees in the Mexican constitution and in international law.

In practice, however, the government rarely takes action to ensure that fundamental rights are protected. As a result, local leaders linked to a religious majority often try to force members of religious minorities to convert to the majority religion or to actively contribute to rituals and festivals connected to the majority religion. Those who refuse are subjected to sanctions, including having their water and electricity cut and their children barred from attending public schools. The most severe cases usually end in the forced displacement of the minority.

The Mexican government systematically fails to address these violations, even when they are given advance warning, and victims are usually left with few options. At the end of 2015, for example, the Jalisco state government failed to respond to multiple requests from Baptist families in Tuxpan de Bolaños to intervene to protect their religious freedom. In late January, 2016, Baptist families were forcibly displaced by the religious majority and seven months later have yet to see their situation resolved.

Even when the government does take action, it often fails to uphold FoRB. In the states of Hidalgo and Chiapas, victims of forced displacement were able to return to their villages earlier

this year after the government negotiated agreements with the local authorities who promised to respect their religious freedom. After their return, however, the members of the religious minority have been pressured to participate in and contribute financially to festivals associated with the majority religion and have been explicitly prohibited from talking about their religious beliefs.

Mervyn Thomas, Chief Executive of CSW said, "We warmly welcome the visit of Ambassador at Large for International Religious Freedom Saperstein to Mexico to discuss issues related to freedom of religion or belief. We are particularly pleased that the Ambassador will visit the state of Hidalgo, where the state government has consistently denied that FoRB violations are a problem despite having one of the highest numbers of serious FoRB violations in the country. We hope that the Ambassador's visit will raise the profile of FoRB in Mexico and that it will lead to constructive discussions with the Mexican government, at all levels, and action to protect FoRB for all."