

Table of Contents

- ***Five Protestants imprisoned***
 - ***New evidence presented in court hearings for imprisoned and forcibly displaced Protestants***
 - ***Court hearing for imprisoned and forcibly displaced Protestants***
 - ***Protestants imprisoned and forcibly displaced***
 - ***Displaced Protestants refused re-entry to village amid ongoing religious freedom violations in Chiapas***
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Five Protestants imprisoned

CSW (09.07.2015) - Five Protestants were imprisoned by local authorities in the village of Tzetelton on 7 July because of their conversion to Protestantism.

The group, which included one man named Andres Lopez, one woman named Virginia Lopez, and three girls, was later transferred to a prison in the municipal capital San Juan Chamula, the state of Chiapas to await a decision on their fate.

The three girls were released after the authorities realized they were underage, however they have been abandoned by their families, according to Luis Herrera, Director of the Coordination of Christian Organisations, who expressed frustration at the lack of any response from the state government to protect the rights of the victims. Herrera said that Andres Lopez and Virginia Lopez remain in prison in poor conditions, “in cells which open directly onto the street, without any protection from the cold or bad weather” and that a decision on their fate is expected on 9 July.

Herrera told Christian Solidarity Worldwide (CSW) that village officials cited an old community agreement that converts to Protestantism must pay a fine of 5000 pesos (approximately £200). If they cannot pay, they can be subjected to forced labor and expelled from the community. The victims in this case, who all belong to the “Jesus is the Way” Church, are being fined varying amounts. Andres Lopez has been informed that he is being fined the full amount, while Virginia Lopez’s fine has been reduced to 2500 pesos (£100) because she is a widow. They are also being charged 2000 (£80) additional pesos for the costs incurred in transferring them from the village to San Juan Chamula.

Herrera expressed concern at the resurgence of religious freedom violations in San Juan Chamula, which was the site of mass displacements of non-Catholics in the 1980s and 1990s. He pointed to the case of village of Lindavista, also in San Juan Chamula, where non-Catholic children have been blocked by the local authorities from attending school.

CSW’s Chief Executive Mervyn Thomas said, “We were disturbed to hear of this arbitrary detention and imprisonment of these Protestants simply because of their religious beliefs, a flagrant violation of Mexico’s constitution. We continue to be very concerned at the Chiapas State Government’s failure to respond to these kinds of violations, even as they escalate in severity, in a timely or meaningful way. Once again we call on Governor Velasco Coello to take strong measures to ensure that the Mexican constitution is upheld in Chiapas and that the basic rights of the citizens, including their right to freedom of religion or belief, are protected. If Governor Velasco Coello is unable or unwilling to do so, we call upon the Federal Government to take action to preserve the rule of law in Chiapas as a matter of

urgency.”

Notes to Editors:

1. The Law of Uses and Customs, which is in effect in many parts of the states of Chiapas, Oaxaca, Hidalgo, Puebla and Guerrero, gives significant autonomy to indigenous communities. It is meant to be exercised in line with the fundamental human rights protections in the Mexican Constitution and international treaties to which Mexico is party; however, this is rarely enforced. Local leaders frequently try to enforce community uniformity in terms of religious practice and belief, compelling members of the community to participate in the religious activities of the majority or face punishment. Violations range in severity, but in the absence of government intervention, and because of a failure to hold the perpetrators to account, they all too often escalate to the point of destruction of property, arbitrary detention, forced displacement and violence.
2. Interviews with Luis Herrera (in Spanish) can be arranged, please contact the Press Office.

New evidence presented in court hearings for imprisoned and forcibly displaced Protestants

CSW (29.04.2015) - Two court hearings in Mexico on 22 April, held by the State Commission for Human Rights and the Public Ministry, heard new evidence supporting the case of two men who were imprisoned and forcibly expelled from their village in Hidalgo State in March 2015 because of their religious beliefs.

Casto Hernández Hernández, aged 30, and his cousin Juan Placido Hernández Hernández, aged 25, both members of the United Pentecostal Church of Mexico, were imprisoned by village officials in Chichiltepec village, Tlanchinol Municipality, on 12 March. While imprisoned they were put under pressure to renounce their Protestant faith. When they refused to do so after 30 hours, they were released and told they had 18 hours to leave the community. Since then, Juan Placido has been allowed to return to the village, but Casto has not and is living in the city of Huejutla los Reyes. The two men are both single and have no children.

The first hearing with the State Commission for Human Rights focused on the religious intolerance instigated by the village delegate, Jesús Domínguez Hernández. New evidence was presented including a photograph showing the two men in detention and a 40-minute video of the assembly at which Casto Hernández Hernández was pressured to renounce his faith. A local representative from the State Human Rights Commission also gave testimony to support Casto and Juan Placido's case.

Casto Hernández Hernández said: "Because of the delegate's intolerance, he would not allow us to preach the word of God. He imprisoned me after he tried to force me to renounce my faith in writing but I would not do it." In his response to the complaint, village delegate Jesús Domínguez Hernández admitted to some of the actions he was accused of but claimed that he acted in ignorance of the law.

The new evidence was also presented at the hearing with the Public Ministry, at which two new witnesses came forward to give oral testimony on behalf of Casto Hernández Hernández. Despite initial concerns about impartiality and due process by church leaders, lawyers representing the men were positive about both court hearings. However, since the hearings, both Casto and Juan Placido have received death threats and are facing

intense pressure to withdraw their case and pursue an informal, non-legally binding resolution.

Dr Jorge Lee Galindo, director of Mexican religious freedom organisation Impulso 18, which organised legal support for the men, said: "The hearing went well and we hope that this will be the beginning of new era in Mexico, in which the law is applied correctly and religious freedom for all, as protected in our constitution and in the various international treaties to which we are party, is upheld."

CSW's Chief Executive Mervyn Thomas said, "We are encouraged by positive reports of the hearings on 22 April and call on the Hidalgo State and Mexican federal government to continue to ensure a transparent and fair court process. Given that Casto and Juan Placido's arbitrary imprisonment and forced expulsion are part of a much larger and entrenched pattern of religious freedom violations in the region, we hope that their case will prove to be a watershed moment, galvanizing the authorities to uphold freedom of religion or belief for religious minorities in Mexico."

Court hearing for imprisoned and forcibly displaced Protestants

CSW (20.04.2015) - A court hearing is due to take place on 22 April in the city of Huejutla los Reyes, Mexico, concerning the case of two men who were imprisoned and forcibly expelled from their village in Hidalgo State in March 2015 because of their religious beliefs.

Casto Hernández Hernández, aged 30, and his cousin Juan Placido Hernández Hernández, aged 25, both members of the United Pentecostal Church of Mexico, were imprisoned by village officials in Chichiltepec village, Tlanchinol Municipality, on 12 March. While imprisoned they were put under pressure to renounce their Protestant faith. When they refused to do so after 30 hours, they were released and told they had 18 hours to leave the community.

Since then, Juan Placido has been allowed to return to the village, but Casto has not and is living in the city of Huejutla los Reyes. The two men are both single and have no children.

Christian Solidarity Worldwide (CSW), along with partners from the Mexican religious freedom organisation Impulso 18, met with the victims and their pastor on a recent visit to Hidalgo State. They told CSW that 15 other Protestants remain in the village but had been forced to sign documents renouncing their faith. Since the events in March, Pastor Gregorio Reyes Cruz has been prohibited from entering the village to visit them and any non-Catholic religious activities have been banned.

"We did not commit any crime," Casto told CSW. He stated that they have submitted the case to the Hidalgo State Human Rights Commission.

Church leaders in the area raised doubts that the court hearing on 22 April would be impartial and expressed concern about the lack of government response to the case as well as an atmosphere of intimidation leading up to the hearing. Local lawyers hired by the victims told Impulso 18 that they would be unable to fulfil their responsibilities. Impulso 18 has contracted an experienced legal team from outside the region to represent the men in the hearing on 22 April, using funds raised by CSW.

[Religious freedom violations](#) are common in the state of Hidalgo, where local leaders

often attempt to force conformity to the majority religion. State officials tasked with upholding the law, including human rights protections enshrined in the Mexican constitution, rarely intervene to protect religious freedom. Protestant Christians from a wide number of different villages in the Huasteca, the region in which these events occurred, told CSW that regional government officials regularly warn them that it is their responsibility as a religious minority to submit to the majority, regardless of any violation of Constitutional rights.

CSW's Chief Executive Mervyn Thomas said, "We call on the Hidalgo State and Mexican federal government to ensure that the hearing on 22 April and any subsequent court process is conducted in a transparent and fair manner, and that protection is afforded to the victims and their legal representatives. It is clear from our recent visit that the arbitrary imprisonment and forced expulsion of Casto and Juan Placido is part of a much larger and entrenched pattern of religious freedom violations in the region. We continue to call on Hidalgo State Governor Francisco Olvera Ruz in particular to take steps to improve respect for religious freedom in his State, to ensure that these men can return to their homes and practice their faith in peace, and to hold those responsible for their illegal imprisonment, the arbitrary confiscation of their property and their forced expulsion to account."

Protestants imprisoned and forcibly displaced

CSW (23.03.2015) - Two men in Hidalgo State, Mexico were arbitrarily imprisoned and then expelled from their community, along with their families, after refusing to renounce their religious beliefs on 12 March.

Casto Hernández Hernández and his cousin Juan Placido Hernández, both Protestant Christians, were imprisoned for approximately 30 hours by village officials in Chichiltepec village, Tlanchinol Municipality.

According to Pastor Marcopolo Valdéz Guzmán, president of the Pastors' Alliance for the Sierra and Huasteca, the region in which the religious freedom violations took place, the efforts to expel the men were led by local leaders, including the village delegate, Jesús Domínguez Hernández. A campaign targeting the Protestant minority began in April 2014 when the village authorities attempted to force them to sign a document prohibiting them from belonging to any non-Roman Catholic religion. The Protestants refused to do so, but the village leaders signed the document, which they claimed was binding on the community.

On 12 March, Casto Hernández Hernández received a summons while at work to appear at special meeting of the village council to discuss community concerns. When he presented himself at the meeting, he was informed of complaints that he had been hosting non-Roman Catholic religious meetings in his home. The local authorities produced a document that stated that he renounced all his rights as a member of the community and that he was surrendering all of his property to the community, including his land and house. When Casto Hernández Hernández refused to sign, they imprisoned him and his cousin, who had accompanied him to the meeting. According to Pastor Valdéz Guzmán, the two men were held in unhygienic conditions in a cell with no bathroom. Casto Hernández Hernández was removed from the cell twice during the 30 hour period to try to force him to sign the document.

The men were released just after midnight on 21 March but told they had 18 hours to leave the community. They are now displaced and have received temporary shelter in the city of Huejutla de Reyes, with members of Pastor Valdéz Guzmán's congregation. Pastor

Valdéz Guzmán has also headed up community efforts to supply the family with basic necessities as, according to him, they were able to bring very few belongings with them.

Religious freedom violations are common in the state of Hidalgo, where local leaders often attempt to force conformity to the majority religion. State officials tasked with upholding the law, including human rights protections enshrined in the Mexican constitution, rarely intervene to protect religious freedom.

Mervyn Thomas, Chief Executive of Christian Solidarity Worldwide (CSW), said, "We were disturbed to hear of the unlawful imprisonment and forced expulsion of these two men and their families simply because of their religious beliefs. However, it is even more disturbing to know that those responsible for these illegal acts remain in a position of authority and have seen no legal consequences for their actions. While we welcome the efforts of local churches in Huejutla to support the families, it is the responsibility of the State government, which appears to have absented itself, to help the victims both in terms of material support and in seeking justice for the crimes that have been committed against them by local authorities. We call on Hidalgo State Governor Francisco Olvera Ruz to take swift action in this case to ensure that the families can return to their homes, practice their faith in peace and that those responsible for their illegal imprisonment, the arbitrary confiscation of their property and their forced expulsion are held to account."

Displaced Protestants refused re-entry to village amid ongoing religious freedom violations in Chiapas

CSW (27.01.2015) - A group of 47 displaced Protestants from Chiapas State, Mexico, were refused re-entry to their village despite state government promises that village leaders had agreed to uphold religious freedom.

The Protestants, who were forcibly expelled from Buenavista Bahuitz village in Chiapas State in 2012, were initially told that they could only return to their homes if they converted to Roman Catholicism and participated in Roman Catholic religious activities. According to Luis Herrera, director of the Coordination of Christian Organizations of Chiapas (COOC), the group later received assurances from the state government that they had negotiated the return of the displaced group and that their religious freedom would be protected.

The government promise of action came after a month-long peaceful sit-in in front of the state government palace in Tuxtla Gutierrez by the Buenavista Bahuitz group and other communities of forcibly displaced Protestants. The sit-in ended on 1 December after the state government made verbal commitments to address their situation.

The group set out for Buenavista Bahuitz in the early hours of 20 January by bus, accompanied by some state government officials. Upon arrival at the village, they were met by village leaders who demanded that the Protestants convert to Catholicism before they would be permitted to stay. Herrera noted that the government officials present appeared to be taken by surprise by the village leaders' stance and questioned their preparations. Negotiations were held on the spot and the village leaders eventually agreed to allow the Protestants to stay if they paid a fine which Herrera described as "extremely high." The group declined and went to the capital of Chiapas, Tuxtla Gutierrez, where they sought refuge in the Jesus is the Way Church.

The events of 20 January follow a series of serious religious freedom violations and forced displacements in Chiapas this month. In early January in the municipality of San Juan Chamula, tensions erupted after Protestants in the village of Las Ollas declined to

participate in festivals celebrating the Roman Catholic patron saint of Mexico, the Virgin of Guadalupe. According to the Organización de Pueblos Evangélicos de los Altos de Chiapas (OPEACH), the villagers had been compelled to pay financial contributions to Catholic festivals in the village over the past year, but had decided they would no longer do so in December 2014. They were subsequently attacked, beaten, and had their water and electricity cut on 8 January 2015. OPEACH stated that the village leaders have also threatened to bar the Protestant children from attending school and to block Protestant families from receiving state benefits allocated to the community.

On 14 January, a group of ten Protestants were forcibly displaced from the community of La Florecilla in San Cristóbal de las Casas municipality after having their water and electricity supplies interrupted, and after being physically attacked, arbitrarily imprisoned and given a deadline by village authorities to renounce their faith or be forced to leave. Local religious leaders in San Cristóbal de las Casas, who have offered refuge to the families, informed Christian Solidarity Worldwide (CSW) that the problem had been going on since 2011 and that numerous complaints to the municipal and state governments had been made but no action had been taken to protect the rights of the group or to uphold the rule of law.

CSW's Chief Executive Mervyn Thomas said, "We are extremely disappointed that the government of Chiapas did not follow through on its promises to assure the safe return of the Buenavista Bahuitz community and to uphold their religious freedom. The events of 20 January, which have occurred amidst serious violations of religious freedom and the forced displacement of religious minorities in other parts of the state, call into question the state government's purported commitment to defending religious freedom and addressing these and the approximately 30 other cases of religious freedom violations in the state of Chiapas. We continue to call on the state government to meet its obligations under Mexican and international law and urge the federal government to intervene if the state government is unable or unwilling to fulfill its responsibilities."

Notes to Editors:

1. Conflict between traditionalist and/or syncretistic Catholics and non-Catholics is common in the states of Chiapas, Oaxaca, Guerrero, Hidalgo and Puebla where there are large indigenous populations. According to Mexican legal experts, ambiguity as to the relationship between the rights laid out in the Mexican Constitution and the Law of Uses and Customs, which gives indigenous communities a degree of autonomy to exercise traditional law in line with individual human rights guarantees, have allowed local authorities to violate the rights of members of the local communities with impunity. In addition, the Mexican government's reluctance to involve itself in religious conflicts has allowed such situations to escalate.
 2. For more information on freedom of religion or belief in Mexico, see [CSW's report on Religious Freedom and Equality in Mexico \(http://dynamic.csw.org.uk/article.asp?t=report&id=178&search%20=\)](http://dynamic.csw.org.uk/article.asp?t=report&id=178&search%20=).
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