



Members of the Pueblo Grande Baptist Church protesting violations of religious freedom
Photo: Pueblo Grande Baptist Church

ARGENTINA

PASTOR MARCELO NIEVA AND THE PUEBLO GRANDE BAPTIST CHURCH

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On 21 October 2014 Pastor Marcelo Nieva and Daniel Carreño, a member of his church, were shot at multiple times while driving in the city of Río Tercero in Córdoba Province. Pastor Nieva leads the Pueblo Grande Baptist Church and heads the church's work with drug addicts and victims of domestic violence and sex trafficking.

The two men were uninjured; however, they and a group of Baptist leaders in Argentina at the national and provincial level have expressed alarm at the attack, pointing out that the attempted murder of the pastor is the latest and most severe instance of a pattern of threats and harassment targeting the Pueblo Grande Baptist Church and Pastor Nieva. In a joint statement by the pastor, the Argentinian Evangelical Baptist Convention and the Association of Evangelical Baptist Churches of the Province of Córdoba, the group directly accused "narco-trafficking linked assassins who have infiltrated the Córdoba Police and out of revenge [have targeted him] because of his pastoral work and the earlier complaints he filed about them to the Federal Court of Córdoba." The statement refers to a campaign of harassment, including vandalism, attacks on the church and its members, and a series of false charges filed against Pastor Nieva which they believe is in retaliation for the church's work with vulnerable groups, in particular the work with victims of domestic violence and of sex trafficking; and their exposure of support from members of the police and regional government for the criminal groups responsible for these human rights violations.

Alejandro Zeverin Escribano, the lawyer representing Pastor Nieva, has indicated that the Federal Court of Córdoba immediately ordered that the pastor and Mr Carreño be assigned federal guards for their protection. Dr Zeverin Escribano pointed out that the new protection order followed a Federal Court order this summer to provide the church with round the clock protection. He expressed concern that the protection order did not go far enough, and echoed calls for a full investigation and prosecution of those responsible for the campaign of harassment, attacks and recent murder attempt.

Pastor Nieva received national and international attention last year when charges were brought against him under 'anti-cult' legislation adopted on the provincial level. Argentinian denominational leaders and legal experts criticised the vaguely written anti-cult law used to target the church, which belongs to a denomination with a 105-year history in the country. Church leaders and Pastor Nieva's lawyer all maintain that there is strong evidence that the law was manipulated by corrupt politicians and members of the regional police force, to target the pastor because of the church's work with drug addicts and victims of sex trafficking.

CSW has regularly expressed concern about the adoption of anti-cult legislation which can be used to limit religious freedom. Such legislation often goes beyond targeting criminal actions to criminalise a system of belief and non-criminal acts of worship. Minority religious groups, even those with a lengthy history, are often targeted by these laws. Law 9891 in Argentina, which has only been adopted at the state level in Córdoba, exemplifies the problematic nature of these laws and their potential for arbitrary and abusive implementation in Article 1, where it states: "Any person who demonstrates a change in personality is a possible victim of a dangerous cult that uses coercive methods of manipulation." Argentinian religious leaders have expressed concern that the law on the provincial level is a test run for an attempt to pass anti-cult legislation on the national level.



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RECOMMENDATIONS

To the federal government of Argentina:

- Initiate a full investigation into the attempted murder of Pastor Marcelo Nieva and Daniel Carreño, taking seriously allegations of the involvement of regional government officials and members of the Cordoba police force.

To the international community:

- Direct embassies in Buenos Aires to monitor the situation of Pastor Nieva and the Pueblo Grande Baptist Church;
- Urge the Argentinian government to offer adequate protection to Pastor Nieva and members of his church, to carry out a thorough investigation into the attempted murder of Pastor Nieva, and to prosecute those responsible;
- Encourage the Argentinian government to repeal Córdoba Province Law 9891 which infringes upon the fundamental rights to freedom of religion or belief enshrined in the constitution of Argentina, the Inter-American Convention on Human Rights, the International Convention on Civil and Political Rights, and the International Convention on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights.

APPENDIX

Press release: Joint statement by Pastor Marcelo Nieva, Dr. Jorge Ferrari, the Secretary for the Argentinian Evangelical Baptist Convention and/or the Argentinian Evangelical Baptist Confederation (CEBA), the Directors of the Association of Evangelical Baptist Churches of the Province of Córdoba, which belongs to CEBA, led by Pastor Sergio Bettin, and its directing board represented by the following pastors: Pastor Alejandro Adjian, Dr Pablo Nieva and Pastor Hugo Cepeda:

Marcelo Edgardo Nieva, Lead Pastor of the Pueblo Grande Baptist Church, responsible for the religious work "Transition Home for Women", in the city of Río Tercero, along with the Secretary for the Argentinian Evangelical Baptist Convention and/or the Argentinian Evangelical Baptist Confederation (CEBA), Dr. Jorge Ferrari, Directors

of the Association of Evangelical Baptist Churches of the Province of Córdoba which belongs to CEBA, which is led by Pastor Sergio Bettin and its directing board represented by the pastors: Pastor Alejandro Adjian, Dr. Pablo Nieva, and Pastor Hugo Cepeda, who all belong to the religious group with a more than 105 year presence in Argentina and registered with the Ministry of Foreign Relations, International Commerce and Worship – Secretary of Worship – of the Nation under number 672 – Law 21745 and Regulating Decree number 2037/79 presents itself before the delegation of the Federal Police of Cordoba today at 17:30 to:

Denounce the attempted murder of one of its pastors, shot at in David Luque Street at the corner of 24 September in our city, yesterday at 19:00 as he was driving with a member of his church. The denunciation accuses narco-trafficking linked assassins who have infiltrated the Córdoba Police and out of revenge because of his pastoral work and the earlier complaint he filed about them to the Federal Court of Córdoba.

The church in Río Tercero is under guard for this reason, under orders from the Federal Judge Dr. Alejandro Sanchez Freytes.

The attack was carried out by an unknown person who, in the middle of a public road and with impunity, shot at the vehicle with a presumed 9mm weapon. A bullet hit the back door of the mini-van, stopping inside, after hitting an internal stud; had it passed through on its trajectory it would have hit the neck or head of the driver, Marcelo Nieva.

On 15 October 2014, the highest authorities of the church and their lawyer met with the Government Minister, Dr. Walter Saieg and the Secretary of Worship, Américo Romero Camano, where they expressed their concern about the ongoing spate of crimes against member of the church in this province and about the passivity of the police under Chief of Police Commissariat General Suarez and the policeman responsible for Río Tercero, Commissariat Inspector Ariel Innamorato.

On Friday 24 October 2014, a press conference will be held on Boulevard San Juan 620, floor 12, "Estudio Zeverin and Associates".