



MEXICO: FREEDOM OF RELIGION OR BELIEF

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Cover image: Pastors from Hidalgo

Photo: CSW

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CSW is a Christian organisation working for religious freedom through advocacy and human rights, in the pursuit of justice.

Registered Charity No. 281836

PO Box 99, New Malden, Surrey, KT3 3YF, United Kingdom
T: +44 (0)845 456 5464 F: +44 (0)20 8942 8821
E: admin@csw.org.uk www.csw.org.uk

1. EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The Mexican constitution guarantees freedom of religion or belief to all its citizens, and Article 2 of the Law on Religious Associations and Public Worship, adopted in 1992 and amended in 2011, clearly lays out the rights and protections associated with freedom of religion or belief. Mexico is party to a number of international agreements including the San Jose Pact, the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR) and the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights (ICESCR).

However, in practice religious freedom violations are a common and widespread occurrence in certain regions. While the country has a highly religious population, Mexico has historically had a complicated relationship with religion, and both Roman Catholics and Protestants have suffered severe persecution over the course of the country's history. According to the National Commission for Human Rights (CNDH), the number of religious freedom violations has risen significantly in recent years.¹ Studies by the National Council for the Prevention of Discrimination (CONAPRED) show that religious discrimination remains a serious and pervasive problem in many parts of the country, with the potential to worsen in the face of government inaction.

Although root causes vary, the most important is an entrenched culture of impunity. An extremely strict interpretation of the concept of separation of church and state means that the Mexican state is averse to involving itself in 'religious affairs', and reluctant to prosecute those responsible for criminal acts linked to religious freedom violations. The end result is that the government fails to actively protect the individual's right to religious freedom.

The state's reluctance to defend religious freedom proactively is in some parts of the country compounded by the Law of Uses and Customs, which gives significant autonomy to indigenous communities. While this is meant to be exercised in line with human rights guarantees laid out in the Mexican constitution, in practice this is not enforced. Many local leaders in communities functioning under the Law of Uses and Customs mandate 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, violence and forced displacement.

All state and federal governments have a designated office to deal with religious affairs, and it is the responsibility of these offices, particularly on the state level, to address violations of religious freedom and actively mediate a

solution to religious conflicts. In reality the officials are often poorly resourced and usually lack expertise and training in human rights, including religious freedom. This severely limits their ability to address these situations effectively. The fact that the religious affairs office is a political appointment, responding to the governor of the relevant state – rather than an integrated office within the permanent state civil service – means that the activities of the office are often heavily influenced by political interests, compounding the problem. Most religious affairs officials appear to view their responsibility as primarily to contain cases of religious freedom violations or to make them 'disappear', and bring numbers down, rather than to ensure that religious freedom is protected.

Finally, increased general violence in Mexico due to the activity of different illegal groups involved in drugs, arms and human trafficking, and extortion rackets, has had a chilling impact on religious freedom. The illegal groups see churches as an attractive target for extortion and fronts for money laundering, and their leaders as threats to their influence and aims. Some groups have incorporated religious beliefs into their identity and aggressively attempted to promote them, bringing them into direct conflict with mainstream religious leaders. In 2014 Mexico officially became the most dangerous country in the world for Roman Catholic leaders, with more priests and lay leaders killed there than any other country.² While not as well documented, non-Roman Catholic religious leaders face the same threats. A significant number of religious leaders have been killed or kidnapped; though precise figures are difficult to obtain because of witnesses' fear of retaliation by those responsible, and because of fear of repercussions for the wider religious body if it is perceived to be speaking out.

¹ *El Proceso*, 'CNDH indaga intolerancia religiosa en comunidad oaxaqueña', 8 November 2013 <http://www.proceso.com.mx/?p=357398>

² *El Proceso*, 'Mexico, el país más peligroso del mundo para ejercer sacerdocio', 2 January 2015 <http://www.proceso.com.mx/?p=391992>

2. RECOMMENDATIONS

2.1 TO THE MEXICAN GOVERNMENT

- Uphold legal guarantees for freedom of religion or belief for all, and where other laws apply, for example in communities governed by the Law of Uses and Customs, practise these in accordance with Mexico's constitution and its international human rights obligations;
- Give regular training in mediation and in human rights law, particularly pertaining to religious freedom, and sufficient resources to carry out their duties, to government officials at the state and federal levels responsible for religious affairs, and in particular those in regions where there are frequent violations of religious freedom or conflicts between religious communities;
- Actively pursue legal action against all individuals and groups responsible for violations of religious freedom and other fundamental rights, and hold them to account for their actions. Individuals and groups who have committed criminal acts should be charged and prosecuted according to the law;
- Carry out thorough investigations and prosecute those responsible for the violations committed in all the cases listed in this report;
- Where possible, provide protection to church leaders, including Catholic priests and Protestant pastors, who are under threat from illegal armed groups;
- Carry out thorough investigations into assassinations, kidnappings of and threats against church leaders, to establish motive and to hold those responsible to account.

2.1.1 TO THE NATIONAL COMMISSION FOR HUMAN RIGHTS

- Redesignate religious minorities as a category of vulnerable groups.

2.1.2 TO THE NATIONAL COMMISSION FOR HUMAN RIGHTS, INDIVIDUAL STATE COMMISSIONS FOR HUMAN RIGHTS, AND THE NATIONAL COUNCIL FOR THE PREVENTION OF DISCRIMINATION

- Continue their important work monitoring and investigating cases of religious freedom violations and religious discrimination.

2.1.3 TO STATE GOVERNMENTS

- Ensure safe return for the victims of forced displacement in those states and/or compensation including provision for adequate and safe resettlement, only when there is no alternative.

2.1.4 TO THE CHIAPAS STATE AUTHORITIES

- Take swift measures to implement the November 2010 and 2012 recommendations of the National Human Rights Commission on the Los Llanos and Chilil cases respectively.

2.1.5 TO THE OAXACA STATE AUTHORITIES

- Take swift measures to implement the March 2014 Oaxaca state ombudsman's recommendation on the San Juan Ozolotepec case.

2.2 TO THE EUROPEAN UNION (EU) AND MEMBER STATES

- In line with the Guidelines on Freedom of Religion or Belief, regularly engage with the Mexican government on cases and issues related to violations of freedom of religion or belief and encourage them to implement the recommendations above.

2.2.1. TO THE EU DELEGATION IN MEXICO CITY

- Actively monitor cases of violations of freedom of religion or belief;
- Work closely with the National Commission for Human Rights, the National Council for the Prevention of Discrimination, and state commissions for human rights on issues related to freedom of religion or belief, and cooperate in awareness raising and capacity building within government institutions;
- Develop and maintain ties with civil society groups working on the issue of freedom of religion or belief and work with them in awareness raising and capacity building on the subject within Mexican civil society.

2.3 TO THE UNITED STATES (US)

- In line with the International Religious Freedom Act, regularly engage with the Mexican government on cases and issues related to violations of freedom of religion or belief and encourage them to implement the recommendations above.

2.3.1 TO THE US EMBASSY AND CONSULATES IN MEXICO

- Actively monitor cases of violations of freedom of religion or belief, feeding these back to the State Department for use in its reports and designation of countries of particular concern;
- Work closely with the National Commission for Human Rights, the National Council for the Prevention of Discrimination, and state commissions for human rights on issues related to freedom of religion or belief, and cooperate in awareness raising and capacity building within government institutions;
- Develop and maintain ties with civil society groups working on the issue of freedom of religion or belief, and work with them in awareness raising and capacity building on the subject within Mexican civil society.

3. LAW OF USES AND CUSTOMS

Constitution of Mexico Article 1: Every person in the United Mexican States shall enjoy the guarantees granted by this Constitution, which cannot be restricted or suspended except in such cases and under such conditions as are herein provided.

Constitution of Mexico Article 2: [Indigenous Communities have the right to] apply their own normative systems to deal with the regulation and solution of internal conflicts, subject to the general principles of this Constitution, respecting the individual guarantees, human rights, and when relevant, the dignity and integrity of women.³

A major contributor to violations of freedom of religion or belief in Mexico is the conflict between constitutional law, which guarantees religious freedom to all citizens, and the Law of Uses and Customs, a local and regional autonomy, in place in parts of the country where there is a high indigenous population.⁴ Article 2 of the Mexican constitution affirms that Mexico is a 'pluri-ethnic' nation and affords a number of rights to its indigenous peoples, including the right to implement their own social, economic, political and cultural organisation and the right to maintain and enrich their language and culture; with the caveat that this must be practised in accordance with Mexican constitutional law and that human rights and gender equality must be respected. Despite these safeguards, cases of gender discrimination and violations of fundamental human rights, including religious freedom, occur frequently in many of these areas. There is often little or no response from state or federal governments to violations of religious freedom.

The majority of the violations of religious freedom linked to abuse of the Law of Uses and Customs are concentrated in the states of Puebla, Hidalgo, Oaxaca,⁵

Guerrero⁶ and Chiapas, where there are significant indigenous populations. Cases have also been reported in Michoacán, Jalisco and Nayarit. Authority structures are often localised, giving village and municipal authorities significant power over their populations. In many of these populations, which can be relatively remote, there is no real state presence to monitor the implementation of the Law of Uses and Customs and to ensure that it is practised in accordance with human rights guarantees laid out in state and federal law. While it is the responsibility of state officials to intervene when religious freedom violations occur, they are often disinclined to do so.

Historically, the majority of religious liberty violations have tended to arise out of conflicts between traditionalist or syncretistic Roman Catholic local leaders, and non-Roman Catholics who do not wish to participate in or contribute financially to religious festivals, or who wish to practise a different faith or no faith. The entrenched culture of impunity when it comes to violations of religious freedom has led to a still small but significant number of cases of non-Roman Catholics attempting to enforce religious conformity in their communities and persecuting those who do not comply. Over the past year CSW has received information on a handful of such cases, including cases where a particular Protestant denomination has signed a pact with local Roman Catholics to exclude a third group, usually another Protestant denomination. In all these cases, abuses can range in severity from cutting off water and electricity, preventing the children of the targeted group from attending school, to beatings, forced displacement, and in the most extreme instances murder. Local authorities often justify these abuses with the excuse that it is their right, under the Law of Uses and Customs, to protect their culture; and that the majority religion, usually Roman Catholicism, is a key part of that.

According to the law, the state government is primarily responsible for dealing with such conflicts; however, it often fails to take swift action to do so. State government officials have also been accused of trying to 'eliminate' or lower statistics of cases of religious freedom violations by labelling them 'political and social' not religious problems. Such situations are often allowed to escalate to the point of violence before state officials take steps to address the conflict in question. In addition, charges are rarely, if ever, filed against those responsible for criminal acts including vandalism and acts of violence.

Given the failure of the state government to fulfil its responsibilities, the federal government should intervene. However, apart from recommendations issued by the

³ Instituto de Investigaciones Jurídicas, 'Constitucion Política de los Estados Unidos Mexicanos' (Spanish) <http://info4.juridicas.unam.mx/ijure/fed/9/default.htm?s>

⁴ It should be noted that in states where the Law of Uses and Customs is prevalent, even communities that do not qualify to be governed under the law sometimes invoke it to enforce religious conformity. One such case is that of Matamoros, Chiapas, mentioned later in the report.

⁵ In August the Oaxaca state government announced that it had received a total of 16 cases of religious freedom violations (which it refers to as 'religious intolerance') between January and August 2014. At the end of the year it stated that there were a total of 12 open cases. While the official number is most likely considerably lower than the actual number, it is a positive step towards more transparency. The state reported that the 12 open cases are in Sabinillo, Santo Domingo Tonalá municipality; Santiago Teotlasco, Ixtlán de Juárez municipality; San Juan Bautista Cuicatlán, Cañada municipality; La Palma, Ixtlán de Juárez municipality; San Andrés Yaa, Villa Alta municipality; Santa María Yohueche, Yatzachi municipality; El Bajo, Villa Alta municipality; and San Juan Ozolotepec municipality. Many of these cases appear to have gone unresolved for a number of years; see CSW's previous reports on Mexico from 2013 and 2011.

⁶ In August, the Guerrero state government announced that there were nine open cases of violations of religious freedom in the state. Given the instability and the extremely weak presence of the government throughout the state, the real number is likely to be much higher. However, the announcement is a positive step towards more transparency.

CNDH, this never happens. The failure of the government at all levels to protect religious freedom, in addition to the geographic remoteness of these populations, language barriers, poverty, and the victims' low awareness of their rights, along with the historic marginalisation of these communities, all contribute to a culture of impunity and the cycle of religious intolerance continues.

3.1. RIGHT TO AN EDUCATION

Constitution of Mexico, Article 3: The education imparted by the Federal State shall be designed to develop harmoniously all the faculties of the human being and shall foster in him at the same time a love of country and a consciousness of international solidarity, in independence and justice.

I. Freedom of religious beliefs being guaranteed by Article 24, the standard which shall guide such education shall be maintained entirely apart from any religious doctrine.

The children of families belonging to minority religious groups are often the subject of discrimination at the local level. As village and municipal leaders attempt to pressure the members of the minority religion to renounce their faith and participate in majority religion activities, one of the first and most common tactics is to bar children of minority families from school. The schools in question are state institutions and under Mexican law should be strictly secular; however, in these cases, school officials often collaborate with local officials to prohibit minority children from attending.

In August the state ombudsman of Oaxaca announced that the religious freedom of eight children at the Cinco de Mayo school in Salina Cruz, Tehuantepec municipality had been violated, after the children were barred from attending because of their religious beliefs. The children were all from families who are practising Jehovah's Witnesses, a group that has reported extensive discrimination in state schools because of their refusal to salute the flag and sing the national anthem. Systematic discrimination against Jehovah's Witnesses in schools across Mexico persists, despite recommendations issued in 2003 by the CNDH to all state governments to instruct all authorities of educational institutions that they should not punish or discriminate against children who, because of their religious beliefs, were unable to participate in the flag salute and singing of the national anthem.⁷

It is worth noting that the ombudsman said that while they were speaking about one specific case, they found that the problem is widespread and endemic in state schools across the state of Oaxaca. The ombudsman went on to say that non-Catholic children are frequently expelled from school in the state and denied their right

to an education because of their beliefs.⁸ In San Juan Ozolotepec municipality, Oaxaca, at least one Protestant child has been expelled from the municipal school and the other approximately 50 Protestant families have reported pressure to withdraw their children from the same school.⁹

The same month, at least one child from a Pentecostal family was barred from attending the local school in Tepeolol, Huejutla de Reyes municipality in the state of Hidalgo because the child was not Roman Catholic. The parents were told that the child would be enrolled if they converted to Catholicism. The case came to light when the 17 Pentecostal families in Tepeolol, who had also been threatened with forced displacement if they did not convert, made an appeal to the state government.

The government official responsible for the region, Alejandro Ramírez Furiati, told journalists from *La Jornada* that "Since [the Pentecostals] belong to another religion they cannot cooperate because some belief of theirs says so; however, in meetings with [the Pentecostals] I have explained that they must participate...in order not to disrupt harmony."¹⁰ Mr Ramírez Furiati's view that the onus is on the minority religious group to conform is unfortunately not unusual in areas with a high incidence of religious freedom violations, and demonstrates a fairly typical low understanding of religious freedom and constitutional rights among state officials.

3.2. RIGHT TO WATER, ELECTRICITY AND OTHER BASIC SERVICES

Constitution of Mexico, Article 4: Everyone has the right to access, disposal and treatment of water for personal and household consumption in sufficient measure, safely, acceptably and affordably.

One of the most common violations associated with attacks on freedom of religion is the cutting of basic services, including water and electricity. The vast majority of cases involving violations of religious freedom begin in this way. State government officials rarely intervene to restore access to water and electricity, although these are both public services; and these situations can go on for years. This not only creates a burden for those who are targeted but also can lead to serious health issues for the community.

8 *El Sol del Istmo*, 'Confirma Derechos Humanos intolerancia religiosa en escuelas', 22 August 2014 http://elsoldelismo.com.mx/site/index.php?option=com_k2&view=item&id=8670%3Aconfirma-derechos-humanos-intolerancia-religiosa-en-escuelas&Itemid=478

9 *Diario Oaxaca*, 'San Juan Ozolotepec no está listo para elecciones; priva conflicto religioso y político', 14 May 2014 <http://diariooaxaca.com/capital/7-capital/65725-san-juan-ozolotepec-no-esta-listo-para-elecciones-privado-conflicto-religioso-y-politico>

10 *La Jornada*, 'Acusan amenazas por diferencias religiosas', 30 August 2014 <http://www.jornada.unam.mx/2014/08/31/estados/028n3est>

7 Emite CNDH recomendación a gobernadores y a la SEP por discriminación

On 11 February 2014 Roman Catholic village authorities cut the water and electricity supply to 25 Protestant families in La Unión, Trinitaria municipality, Chiapas, and arbitrarily detained one member of the community who attempted to reconnect his water supply. According to the Coordination of Christian Organizations of Chiapas (COOC), which has been working on the case, the state government was notified but was slow to respond. Exactly two months later the village council moved to cut the water supply to two additional families belonging to the Mount Tabor Evangelical Church, because of the Protestants' continued refusal to participate actively in Catholic ceremonies.

In August, in the community of Cuahutémoc Cardenas, Palenque municipality, Chiapas, 42 Protestants saw their water and electricity cut and access to their farmland blocked by the village council. The council justified its actions by referencing an old agreement which stipulates that the inhabitants of the village must be Roman Catholics and members of the PRI political party. In addition to having their water and electricity cut off and access to their farmland restricted, members of the community were subjected to sustained harassment and attacks. According to the COOC, which has been working on the case, the most serious of these attacks resulted in the hospitalisation of Juan Alvaro. Mr Alvaro is a Protestant who was attacked and badly beaten on 30 March 2014 by Felipe de Jesús Cruz Damas, the son of a village council member. Although a complaint was filed and Cruz Damas admitted guilt, the government declined to prosecute, and Alvaro received no compensation for his injuries and hospital bills. Similarly, the municipal council has failed to respond to citations issued by religious affairs officials to restore the Protestants' electricity and water.

Even when action is taken by the state government to restore services, this is often done through negotiated, extra-legal agreements, and those responsible for cutting the services in the first place are rarely held to account for their actions. As a result the victims remain vulnerable. In one example, Protestants in the community of La Florecilla in San Cristóbal de Las Casas municipality, Chiapas, saw their water and electricity cut by village authorities in 2011. In January 2014 a negotiated agreement resulted in their electricity connection being restored but their water supply was not. In December 2014 tensions resurged and the electricity was cut once again as the village council threatened to forcibly expel the Protestants. The threats of displacement were carried out on 14 January 2015.

One of the most egregious cases encountered by CSW is that of Alfredo Brijido Isidro Cervantes who has had his water supply in El Bondho, Cardonal municipality, Hidalgo, blocked for 12 years. Mr Isidro Cervantes' water, for which he continues to pay, was first cut on 28 December 2002 as punishment because he did not wish to participate in Catholic festivals. Over the past 12 years Mr Isidro Cervantes has made numerous appeals at the local, municipal, state and federal levels, to no avail.

He informed CSW that he filed a complaint with the National Commission for Human Rights and was told that they would raise the case with the municipality, but as

far as he is aware no action was taken, and he remains without water.

In another case in Hidalgo, in Puerto de Bangandhó, Ixmiquilpan municipality, five Protestant families had their water supply cut in June 2014 after they resisted attempts to force them to participate in a Roman Catholic festival. In an interview with *Diario Plaza Juarez*, state government secretary Fernando Moctezuma Pereda admitted the conflict was based on religious differences but said that the priority of the government was to avoid social conflict and to help reach an internal agreement, not to address the root cause.¹¹ The fact that a government official was willing to go on record as saying that 'avoiding social hostilities' rather than upholding constitutional rights was the state government's priority, is indicative of the culture in Hidalgo and other states where the incidence of religious freedom violations is high. The state governments' default to extra-legal 'internal agreements' that often violate religious freedom is extremely problematic, as these agreements have no legal basis and there is no way to enforce them.

3.3. RIGHT OF BURIAL

Law on Religious Associations and Public Worship, Article 2: ... c) Not to be a target of discrimination, coercion or hostility because of their religious beliefs, nor to be obligated to publicly state their beliefs.

Another common violation associated with freedom of religion in Mexico is the denial of the right to burial. The cemeteries in question are state property¹² and are thus open to the public regardless of the faith of the deceased. However, many local authorities in states where the incidence of religious freedom violations is high, frequently use access to the cemetery as a pressure point, denying the right of burial in the cemetery if the deceased or their family are of a minority faith. CSW interviewed Protestant representatives from a number of villages in the municipalities of Ixmiquilpan and Huejutla de los Reyes, Hidalgo during a fact-finding visit in November 2014. The representatives all said this was common and accepted practice in the villages in those municipalities, and that it had been the status quo for years.

Without intervention from the state government to ensure that all are granted access to state cemeteries, many take

11 *Diario Plaza Juarez*, 'El problema en Bangandhó sí es religioso: Fernando Moctezuma Pereda', 9 July 2014 <http://www.plazajuarez.mx/index.php/region/item/8724-el-problema-en-bangandho-si-es-religioso-fernando-moctezuma-pereda/8724-el-problema-en-bangandho-si-es-religioso-fernando-moctezuma-pereda>

12 Cemeteries were nationalised and made state property in 1859 by President Benito Juárez under the Law for Secularising Cemeteries to ensure equal burial rights for all.

for granted that they and their loved ones will not be able to be buried in the local public cemetery because of their beliefs. The only alternative many of them see is to purchase land for a private, religion-specific cemetery. This remedy again puts the onus on the victims to find a solution and highlights the failure of the state, at all levels, to uphold religious freedom.

Even when the state does intervene in these situations, as in other cases, the approach is usually to contain the situation rather than to address the root cause and to ensure that religious freedom is upheld. In early 2014 in the village of Comachuén, Nahuatzen municipality, Michoacán state, a dispute erupted when the village council announced that Absalón Felipe Santiago, who died on 29 December 2013, could not be buried in the public cemetery because, as a Protestant, he and his family had not participated in the village Catholic traditional festivals.

The case received national media attention and the municipal government intervened to negotiate a solution. It was agreed that each Protestant family would pay the community between 1,000 and 1,500 pesos (approximately £45-70) twice a year which cannot be used towards any Roman Catholic activities. The agreement also stipulated that all Roman Catholics in the village are obligated to participate fully in every religious festival. While a temporary peaceful resolution was achieved, the extra-legal agreement is problematic. Protestants are expected to pay a special tax which is not applied to the Roman Catholics. The Roman Catholics, whether they individually agree or not, are now obligated to participate fully in every religious festival, violating Mexico's constitutional protection that no one shall be compelled to participate in religious activities against their wishes.¹³

3.4. RIGHT TO PROPERTY

Constitution of Mexico, Article 27: Private property shall not be expropriated except for reasons of public use and subject to payment of indemnity.

As tensions rise, and in the absence of any state intervention to uphold religious freedom, in many of these cases the situation often escalates to direct attacks on the property of the members of the minority religious group. These attacks can range from arbitrary confiscation of property, attacks on homes or personal property, including land or vehicles, to violent attacks and destructions of their place of worship. In one example, during CSW's November fact-finding visit to Hidalgo state delegates were told that two Protestant families in the village of Kuamila, Huejutla los Reyes municipality have been prohibited by the village council from meeting

with each other or anyone else for religious purposes. They have been threatened with the confiscation of their homes and property if they are caught in defiance of the ban.

The confiscations and attacks are usually carried out by violent mobs with the backing of local government officials on the village or municipal level. Village officials also sometimes target the place of worship in an effort to reinforce the ban on non-Catholic religious activities. In 2013 Pedro Cruz González, the mayor of San Juan Ozolotepec municipality, chained and barred the entrance to the Independent Pentecostal Christian Church and subsequently ordered the demolition of the church. This was followed by his calls for lynching of the local Protestants and his leadership of a mob in November 2013 that arbitrarily imprisoned and tortured four men from the church, including the pastor, for days before the state government intervened to release them. To date the church remains closed and in a state of ruin. No government action has been taken, despite strong recommendations from the Oaxaca state Ombudsman (see section 3.6), to hold Mr Cruz González to account for the destruction and forced closure of the church, and for the other crimes committed; and the members of the Pentecostal church are left without a place of worship.

In Chiapas, signs around the village of Matamoros, Venustiano Carranza municipality, declare that the village does not 'authorize the entry of Protestants or pastors'. According to the COOC, which has been working on the case, the community of Protestants in the village has seen their property successively attacked and confiscated over a period of three years. Village officials at first targeted the communal land allocated to the families and reassigned it to Roman Catholic families in the same community, says the COOC. More recently village officials have targeted the private property of the same victims and have cut off the water supply to three homes.

The illegal confiscation of their land leaves the victims with no way to earn a living. While government officials intervened at one particularly tense point, to free a number of the Protestants who had been arbitrarily imprisoned and pressured to renounce their faith, no action has been taken to restore the property of the victims nor to hold the village officials to account for their illegal actions, despite numerous complaints filed with government offices by the victims.

3.5. RIGHT TO WORK

Law on Religious Associations and Public Worship, Article 2: Religious reasons cannot be invoked in order to impede anyone from engaging in any kind of work or activity.

As noted in the case of Matamoros, Venustiano Carranza municipality, Chiapas in the previous section, the arbitrary confiscation of property is often carried out with the specific objective of removing the victims' ability to earn a living. Most of the communities where the property of members of religious minorities is attacked or confiscated are rural, and composed of small scale farmers with low

¹³ La Jornada, 'El Cid en Michoacán', 8 January 2014 <http://www.jornada.unam.mx/2014/01/08/opinion/016a1pol>

levels of education and who speak Spanish as a second language, if they speak it at all. Barred from working their land, they are often left with few other options to earn an income. In the case of Cuahutémoc Cardenas, Palenque municipality, Chiapas (mentioned in section 3.2), village authorities specifically barred the victims' access to their farmland, depriving them of their right to work and earn an income to support themselves and their families.

In the more extreme cases, where forced displacement occurs, the victims are also separated from their land and often forced to take refuge in larger cities where they are extremely limited in terms of finding employment. Many of the displaced religious minority communities interviewed by CSW in visits to Chiapas in April 2014 and Hidalgo and Puebla in November 2014 are living in extreme poverty. The groups are composed of families, including infants and the elderly. They are dependent on government assistance, which is not always forthcoming, or charity from local churches, which are often operating with limited resources. The working age adults in these communities, who usually have few transferable skills in an urban setting, are often forced to seek work in the informal sector. This leaves them vulnerable to human traffickers and others who would take advantage of their situation. Most reported that their homes and lands had been taken over by the same people responsible for their expulsion, and expressed doubt as to whether they would ever be able to recover their property.

3.6. RIGHT TO WORSHIP

Law on Religious Associations and Public Worship, Article 2: The State of Mexico guarantees to the individual, the following rights and freedoms as they pertain to religion: a) To hold or to adopt the religious belief of one's choosing and to practice, individually or collectively, the acts of worship or rites according to their preference.

In the majority of these cases the right to worship is consistently violated. Local officials seek to bar the members of the minority religious group from engaging in any kind of religious activity, whether that be Sunday morning church services, Bible studies or even meeting together for prayer. This is exemplified by the case mentioned in section 3.4, where two Protestant families in Kuamila, Huejutla de los Reyes municipality, Hidalgo have been prohibited by the village authorities from meeting with each other or anyone else for religious purposes.

During a November fact-finding visit to Hidalgo, CSW was told that a similar situation, on a larger scale, also exists in Hueyapa, Tlanichinol municipality, where 70 Protestants have been prohibited from participating in non-Catholic religious activities and have been threatened with forced expulsion if they do not comply. During the same visit CSW was also told that Protestants in Santa Ana, San Felipe Orizatlan municipality have been prohibited from holding any kind of worship service and have also been threatened with forced expulsion.

In March 2014 the Oaxaca state Ombudsman's Office found that serious religious freedom violations in the municipality of San Juan Ozolotepec had been committed, and recommended that reparations be made to the victims.¹⁴ The victims, members of the Independent Christian Pentecostal Church, had filed a complaint with the Ombudsman's office in April 2013 after municipal authorities declared the area to be a 'Protestant-free' zone, and forcibly closed the Pentecostal church with 'concrete tubes, chains and padlocks'. The municipal mayor, Pedro Cruz González, called for the destruction of the church building and demanded that the Protestants pay a 7,000 peso fine (approximately £335) for 'not being Catholic'. Unfortunately the Ombudsman's recommendations were ignored by the municipality and were not implemented by the state government, leading to further problems later in the year (see section 3.8).

Some villages and municipalities have implemented local regulations that ban the entry of religious minorities across the board. Anyone perceived as defying this ban is often met with severe consequences. According to the COOC, on 19 June 2014 Remigio Rodríguez, a Presbyterian pastor, was visiting family in Nueva la Tacita, Ocosingo municipality, Chiapas; he was arbitrarily detained, beaten and imprisoned at 8am. Another man, Jose Maldonado, was imprisoned with him. The aggressors justified their actions by referencing signs placed around the village which stipulate that Protestants are not permitted to enter. The village authorities threatened to imprison the men for a week, but there was some disagreement on the village council and the men were freed at 9pm that night. Both had suffered serious injuries.

3.7. FORCED PARTICIPATION IN RELIGIOUS ACTIVITIES

Law on Religious Associations and Public Worship, Article 2: The State of Mexico guarantees to the individual, the following rights and freedoms as they pertain to religion:... b) Not to profess religious beliefs, to abstain from practicing religious rites and acts and not to belong to a religious association... d) Not to be obligated to lend personal services nor to contribute money or any other kind of support to an association, church, or any other religious grouping, nor to participate or contribute in the same way to rites, ceremonies, festivals, services or acts of religious worship.

Government officials, usually at the local and municipal levels, but sometimes at higher levels of government in areas where the incidence of religious freedom violations is high, frequently attempt to compel citizens to

14 For a copy of the findings and recommendations of the Ombudsman (in Spanish) see <http://www.derechoshumanosoaxaca.org/recomendacionescontenedor.php?idreco=469>

participate in activities of a religion to which they do not belong. Many of the conflicts in areas where the Law of Uses and Customs is in effect, arise out of an expectation that all members of a given community will participate fully, through financial donations, labour contributions and physical participation, in religious activities and festivals organised around the celebration of the locale's Roman Catholic patron saint. Citizens who convert to other religions, or no religion, or even those who may remain Roman Catholic but not wish to participate in the activities around the festival are often targeted for punitive measures.

In May 2013 six Protestant families in Chijilte, Teopisca municipality, Chiapas, were threatened with having their water and/or electricity cut if they refused to participate actively in the Catholic festival of San Isidro, the patron saint of the village. Village authorities demanded that each family pay 250 pesos (approximately £11) as a contribution to the festival.

On 4 November 2014, according to the COOC, three Protestants in the village of Lindavista, San Juan Chamula municipality, which has been the site of serious religious tensions for over 30 years, were badly beaten and required hospitalisation in San Cristobal de las Casas after they declined to participate in a Roman Catholic festival. In December, also in San Juan Chamula, tensions erupted when Protestants in the village of Las Ollas declined to be involved in festivals surrounding 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 in December that they would no longer do so. In retaliation the villagers were attacked and beaten, and had their water and electricity cut. In January 2015, in a press conference held by OPEACH, one of the victims, Patricia Pérez Díaz, said:

They arrested us because we are evangelicals [Protestants]; they forced us to cooperate in idolatry and many other things. This is unjust and for this reason we ask for justice so that the situation would be made clear and so that there will be peace in the community. Around 200 of our families are under threat and the aggressors are around 20 or 30 people, armed and masked...In addition, supposedly as of Monday [12 January 2015], the children will be expelled from school and they will not have a right to education, and in addition to that, they are going to do away with the financial support that some of the women, our companions, received from the

government for the traditional handicrafts they make each year.¹⁵

While attempts to force religious conformity are common on the local level and in regions where the Law of Uses and Customs is in effect, there are also examples of government officials in other states responsible for similar actions. In late November Mayor Tomas Ríos Bernal circulated a memo to all municipal employees in the city of Cordoba, Xalapa municipality, Veracruz state, stating that participation in an annual pilgrimage for Our Lady of Guadalupe would be mandatory and that employees who did not comply would be subject to administrative punishment. The memo was published online and received national media attention but it does not appear that any action was taken, despite evidence that the mayor had issued the same order in previous years.¹⁶ This is unfortunately emblematic of attitudes on the municipal and local level across Mexico. The fact that Mayor Ríos Bernal could issue such an order over many years, with no repercussions, is another example of how religious freedom violations are frequently reinforced by government officials rather than addressed.

3.8. CIVIL AND POLITICAL RIGHTS

Constitution of Mexico Article 35: The prerogatives of citizens are: I. To vote at popular elections; Article 36: The obligations of citizens of the Republic are:...III. To vote in popular elections in the electoral district to which they belong.

Local and municipal officials frequently strip the local citizens of their rights and legal access to benefits as yet another way to pressure them to join the majority religion. Communities operating under the Law of Uses and Customs are also the target of a number of government programs. In Chiapas the COOC reported that four Protestant families in Lindavista, Chamula municipality and three families in Ejido Nuevas las Tacitas, Ocosingo municipality have been threatened with the loss of their government benefits, including specific benefits targeting families living in extreme poverty under the Progresá program, which offers support in nutrition, education, health and income.

In Boquerón, La Trinitaria municipality, Chiapas, four non-Roman Catholic families have been removed from the village electoral register and official residency list, according to information received from the COOC. As a result they have lost access to financial aid allocated to the community by the municipal, state and federal governments. In 2004 water was cut to the first family, Jehovah's Witnesses, after they refused to accept a Roman Catholic religious assignment and declined to cooperate in the traditional village Roman Catholic festival. In 2007

15 *Prensa Libre Chiapas*, 'Denuncian agresión a evangelicos en Chamula', 10 January 2015 <http://www.prensalibrechiapas.com/2014/index.php/locales/item/1113-denuncian-agresion-a-evangelicos-en-chamula>

16 *El Proceso*, 'Edil de Veracruz obliga a empleados a asistir a peregrinación guadalupana', 3 December 2014 <http://www.proceso.com.mx/?p=389798>

and 2009 respectively, the water supply was cut to two additional families who both belong to the Only Christ Saves Church. On 28 December 2013 village authorities, apparently instigated by a local Roman Catholic catechist, tried to force the father of the fourth family, which belongs to the Strong Tower Pentecostal Church, to take up the role of janitor of the Roman Catholic Church and to make him participate in the traditional festival. When he refused, they cut the family's water supply. On 2 March 2014 village authorities forced a local evangelical pastor out of his car at gunpoint, and stole 10,000 pesos (approximately £450) that he had in the car. The state government has made no effort to hold those responsible for the crimes to account, nor to restore civil rights to the four families who have been removed from the village residency list and electoral register.

In May 2014 approximately 50 Protestant families in San Juan Ozolotepec municipality, Oaxaca state saw their rights, including the right to vote, stripped by the municipal council under the leadership of Mayor Pedro Cruz González. The move was publicly condemned by municipal administrator, Carlos Holder, who recommended that elections be postponed until the irregular situation was resolved and all rights restored. Despite press coverage at the state level no government action was taken. The municipal administrator specifically cited the failure to implement the Oaxaca state Ombudsman's recommendations, issued in March (see section 3.6), as leading to the situation.¹⁷

3.9. FORCED DISPLACEMENT

Constitution of Mexico Article 24: Everyone is free to embrace the religion of his choice and to practice all ceremonies, devotions, or observances of his respective faith, either in places of public worship or at home, provided they do not constitute an offense punishable by law.

In the most extreme cases and in the face of government inaction to uphold religious freedom, forced displacement commonly takes place as hostilities against religious minorities escalate. This frequently takes place with violent mob action and is accompanied by physical violence, and damage and destruction of property. Once displaced, options for the victims are few, in the absence of government assistance and intervention. Many communities have spent years in a state of displacement, waiting on state government promises of a 'solution'.

Around half of the cases the COOC works on involve forced displacement.¹⁸ Many of the affected groups

have been displaced for years. Some, including the Los Llanos group, a Protestant group of 35 who were forcibly displaced in early 2010, and the Chilil group, a Protestant group of 29 displaced in 2009, filed their cases with the National Commission for Human Rights. The Commission found that the groups' rights had been violated and issued a series of recommendations made with the aim of restoring those rights. The recommendations were made to the state government of Chiapas, which ignored the recommendations for the Los Llanos case and declared that the recommendations for the Chilil case had already been implemented – which is untrue. Both groups remain displaced.

Some of the groups, tired of waiting for government action on their cases, have attempted to return to their homes on their own account. In June 2013 the Los Llanos group attempted to return, accompanied by supporters and journalists. Their return was met with violence, when, a kilometre outside Los Llanos, the group found that the road was blocked and they were surrounded by a Roman Catholic mob who proceeded to stone them. Two Protestant pastors, supporters of the displaced, were reportedly taken hostage and separated from the larger group by the Roman Catholics. The two men were tied up, stripped of their clothing, beaten, and had gasoline poured on them. They were forced to walk, with their hands and feet shackled, the one kilometre to the village centre of Los Llanos where the Roman Catholics threatened to burn them alive. The entire group was held in the centre of the village until state officials arrived and freed the group, after negotiating an agreement in which the Roman Catholics agreed not to beat or mistreat the prisoners or force them to pay a fee for their liberation, and the Protestants agreed not to press charges. The Protestants returned to the city San Cristobal de las Casas, where they live in extreme poverty in the grounds of a church. In April 2014 the group told CSW that the state government had promised to relocate¹⁹ them in 'about eight months'. To date, however, there has been no report of action on their case.

In July 2014 200 displaced Protestant families, numbering around 1,000 people, publicly denounced the Guerrero state government for failing to address their situation. The families had been forcibly expelled from Cochoapa la Grande municipality in 2009, after the municipal authorities refused to allow them to bury their dead in the public cemeteries, threatened them with violence and burnt down their church. Following the group's public appeals through the media, the government reacted by purchasing land for a new settlement in October. They did not address the issues of religious intolerance or the religious freedom violations that led to the displacement,

17 *Diario Oaxaca*, 'San Juan Ozolotepec no está listo para elecciones; priva conflicto religioso y político', 14 May 2014 <http://diariooaxaca.com/capital/7-capital/65725-san-juan-ozolotepec-no-esta-listo-para-elecciones-priva-conflicto-religioso-y-politico>

18 The displaced communities supported by the COOC are La Piedad, Buenavista Bahuitz, Rosario Bahuitz, San Miguel Chiptic, La Libertad, Los Llanos, Yashtinin, La Florecilla, Chilil, San Gregorio Huixtan, and José María y Pavón. See the appendix for details on the COOC cases.

19 In the face of impunity for those responsible for the violent attacks on the group, they now believe it is too unsafe to return to their homes and have accepted a government offer of relocation, which has still not materialised.

and there have apparently been no consequences for those responsible.

The approach of relocating communities displaced for religious reasons is frequently used as a solution by state government officials who feel it necessary to resolve the case, but who do not wish to address the root cause of the problem, uphold religious freedom, or hold those responsible for criminal acts in the name of religion to account. Unfortunately, while providing a temporary solution for the victims, it does nothing to address the problem itself, leading to a culture of impunity. In addition, rather than promoting religious tolerance and pluralism, this strategy reinforces the principle of exclusivity by creating a new community based on a single religion while allowing the old community to continue in its enforcement of the majority religious beliefs.

Communities of displaced Protestants in Chiapas, including those mentioned above, held a month-long peaceful sit-in in front of the state government palace in Tuxtla Gutierrez, from 31 October to 1 December 2014. They were accompanied by local NGOs including the COOC and Open Doors Mexico, and members of local churches. The protestors called an end to the sit-in when state officials, including those responsible for religious affairs, agreed to meet with them to discuss their cases. As part of these talks, the state officials made verbal promises to find ways to resolve their cases as quickly as possible.

One of the cases which the government promised to address is that of the Protestant community of Buenavista Bahuitz. The 12 families, 47 individuals including small children, have been living in very basic conditions on the property of a church in the city of Comitán de Domínguez since their displacement on 23 July 2012. This was their second expulsion; religious tensions emerged in 2008 and worsened after the Catholic catechist's son converted to Protestantism, culminating in the first expulsion of the Protestants in 2010. The group returned the same year after agreements guaranteeing religious freedom were endorsed by village authorities. Unfortunately, once they returned these agreements were not upheld by the village authorities. Threats and acts of violence against the Protestant community escalated, including arbitrary detention and sexual assaults, leading to the second forced displacement in 2012.

According to the COOC, the case was filed with the San Cristóbal de las Casas prosecutor's office in 2012; but little progress was made due to the village authorities' failure to appear at meetings convened by the government to address the situation. This intransigence on the part of the village authorities has continued, and appeared to catch state officials off guard when they attempted to make good on their December promise to ensure the displaced groups' right to return to their homes.

According to the COOC, in the early hours of 20 January 2015 the Buenavista Bahuitz group began the trip back to their village, accompanied by government officials. The same officials had assured them that agreements had been reached with the village council, and that their safe return and religious freedom had been guaranteed. When the bus carrying the displaced group arrived at the village they were met by the village leaders who informed them that they could return only if they 'returned to Catholicism and participated in the Catholic festivals.' Luis Herrera of the COOC, who had accompanied the group, stated that the government officials appeared surprised by this and attempted to negotiate a new agreement on the spot. After hours of unsuccessful negotiations the displaced group returned to Comitán de Domínguez.²⁰

The unprepared and apparently ad hoc approach of the government officials involved in the attempted return of the Buenavista Bahuitz group, illustrates a pervasive attitude at the state level that cases involving religious freedom violations are not serious enough to merit a careful and comprehensive approach. This attitude is found not only in Chiapas but also in Oaxaca, Hidalgo, Puebla and Guerrero. Crimes committed for religious reasons are brushed aside and very rarely investigated, let alone prosecuted, creating a deeply entrenched culture of impunity. The state officials tasked with dealing with religious affairs, including violations of religious freedom, are often inept and unequipped in terms of knowledge, training and resources to carry out their job. As a result, once a community is displaced because of religious violence and threats, they can expect to wait years for their case to be resolved, if it ever is. Those affected by displacement are a minority within an already marginalised indigenous minority in their states and in Mexico, their plight largely unknown among the general public and disregarded by the government at all levels, which sees no political advantage to helping them.

4. CRIMINAL VIOLENCE

The spread and entrenchment of violent criminal groups across Mexico has had a substantial and devastating impact on religious freedom in many parts of Mexico. Criminal groups often demand total cooperation on the part of civilians in areas under their influence. Civil society institutions, including religious groups, are often seen as competition in the criminal groups' goal of total and active loyalty within the population. Some criminal groups have also incorporated religious beliefs into their identity, and seek to enforce the practice of these beliefs in areas under their control. A significant portion of the income of the drug cartels battling for power and territory across Mexico comes from extortion, and many of the groups see churches as attractive targets. In addition, churches are often perceived by the illegal groups to be useful fronts for money laundering. Church leaders who openly refuse to cooperate with the criminal groups

20 Coordinación de Organizaciones Cristianas, 'El engaño de los mas vulnerables', 21 January 2015 <http://orgcristiana.blogspot.mx/2015/01/el-engano-los-mas-vulnerables.html?m=1>

in any of these areas, or who simply attempt to remain independent, often face severe repercussions. This, in turn, has a chilling effect on the free exercise of religion.

According to data from the Mexican Catholic Bishops' Conference, more than 520 priests reported receiving threats over the past two years and 31 priests have been killed in the past decade.²¹ The situation remains grave. In 2014 the Mexican Catholic Bishops' Conference made a number of public calls for the government to protect civilians and civil society, and to bring an end to impunity following attacks on Roman Catholic leaders. The states with the highest number of attacks and threats against priests are Chiapas, Oaxaca, Michoacán, Guerrero, Veracruz, the Federal District, México State, San Luis Potosí and Chihuahua.

Five priests were killed in 2014. Father Roland Martinez Lara of the Santa María de Guadalupe parish in Canaletas, Jilotepec municipality, Mexico State was killed during an attack on the parish church on 19 February. Two months later, on the night of 12 April, a 21-year-old seminarian named Samuel Gustavo Gómez Veleta was apparently abducted from his bed in San Ignacio parish, Aldama municipality, Chihuahua state. He had expressed concern in the days preceding his abduction that he was being followed. His body was found, riddled with bullets, on Monday 14 April, on the outskirts of Aldama. On both occasions local police were quick to label the murders of the two men as the result of robberies gone wrong. The circumstances around the two men's deaths, however, in particular the well-organised abduction of Mr Gómez Veleta, have caused many to question the police's version of events.

Three of the murdered priests in 2014 were from one state, Guerrero, which has been hard hit by criminal violence and official corruption. Father John Ssenyando was a Ugandan-born priest working in Guerrero, who disappeared in April and whose body was recovered in October. He was reportedly targeted by an illegal group called Los Rojos, after he made public statements that he would not collaborate with the group and urged his parishioners to do the same.²² Father José Ascención Acuña Osorio worked in the San Miguel Totolapan parish in Altamirano municipality, and disappeared on 21 September. The body of the 42-year-old priest was found floating in the Balsas River three days later and showed signs of torture. On Christmas Day the body of Father Gregorio Lopez Gorostieta, who had been missing for four days, was found with a gunshot wound to the head, also in Altamirano, Guerrero.

The municipality of Altamirano in Guerrero was particularly hard hit in 2014. Lay leader Nicolás Carrillo Vargas, who was based in Altamirano, was killed on 20 February during an attempted kidnapping in Ajuchitlán

del Progreso. A priest who was with him at the time, Father José Damián Hernández Veloz, managed to escape. At least three additional Roman Catholic church leaders were kidnapped in Altamirano in 2014. While church officials declined to name the victims because of fears for their safety, they said that they believed the kidnapping was meant to be a warning to the Church not to participate in anti-violence public marches.

Church leaders have complained that local and state police are quick to label these attacks and murders as 'common crime', most frequently as robberies gone wrong, rather than investigating the cases fully. In an interview with El Excelsior Media, Father Omar Sotelo Aguilar, director of the Catholic Multimedia Centre, expressed concern that the authorities were intentionally choosing not to fully investigate the crimes. "Many of these cases have not been resolved; it's unfortunate that sometimes [the authorities] treat these cases as if they were all similar. I listened to the judicial authorities in the city of Altamirano talking about the death of Father Gregorio [Lopez Gorostieta] and they said, 'Well, it was a personal issue and that's why they killed him.'...That's how they try to wash their hands of it and say, 'Well, that's how it happened.'"²³

Individual Protestant leaders report similar trends in their churches and denominations; however, threats and attacks on Protestant leaders are less well documented. In 2014 at least two Protestant pastors were killed in suspicious circumstances that indicate the involvement of criminal groups. On 8 July 2014 Pastor Fernando Jesús Albañil León was found beaten to death and with severe head injuries in Celaya municipality, Guanajuato state. His body was left about 13km from the Cortazar-Salvaterria highway, but he appeared to have been abducted from the Biblical Baptist Church office, in the Laureles neighbourhood, where he had been working and where his wallet and mobile phone were found. On 3 November 2014 the body of Pastor Rubén Román Castillo Tobar was found with hands and feet bound and a bag over his head in a freezer in his home. The body showed signs of torture. The pastor, who led an evangelical church in Ixtapaluca, Mexico state, had been missing for about three weeks before his body was found.

Criminal organisations' reasons for targeting church leaders are complex. Church leaders who speak out publicly, for example in sermons, against violence or criminal activity are often perceived as directly challenging the criminal groups' authority. Those who are actively involved in church ministries that support drug and alcohol addicts, victims of human rights violations including trafficking, and those looking to leave or avoid involvement in criminal groups are also at

21 *El Excelsior*, 'Crimen acecha a sacerdotes de la iglesia católica', 11 January 2015 <http://excelsior.com.mx/nacional/2015/01/11/1002029>

22 *Milenio*, 'El cura ugandés que tenía una cita con una bala... y fue en Guerrero', 22 December 2014 <http://sipse.com/mexico/historia-muerte-sacerdote-ugandes-john-ssenyondo-chilapa-guerrero-128807.html>

23 *El Excelsior*, 'Crimen acecha a los sacerdotes de la iglesia católica', 11 January 2015 <http://excelsior.com.mx/nacional/2015/01/11/1002029>

risk. Criminal groups work to coerce church leaders into active cooperation, for example by allowing the criminal group to use the church as a front for money laundering or by turning over money from the offering plate to the criminal group. Church leaders who resist these attempts often receive an ultimatum to 'leave or die'.

Some criminal groups in Mexico have incorporated religious beliefs into their identity and this can bring them into direct confrontation with religious leaders who do not share those beliefs. The Zetas group, factions of the Gulf and Sinaloa cartels, and some Mara Salvatrucha, also known as MS13, and Mara 18 members are thought to be significantly involved in the cult of Santa Muerte, or Saint Death.²⁴ A rash of murders, kidnappings, disappearances and attacks on Catholic Church leaders in the municipality of Victoria, in Tamaulipas state in 2013 and 2014, is believed to have been precipitated by an order by one of the two Zetas criminal factions in the municipality, after priests refused to dedicate masses to Santa Muerte.²⁵ In the state of Michoacán criminal groups La Familia and Los Caballeros Templares (Knights Templar) have aggressively promoted their own religious cults, to the extent that some Catholic parishes in the state have been shut down and priests withdrawn because of threats from the criminal groups. In early 2014 CSW received reports that groups affiliated with La Familia were demanding that churches, both Protestant and Catholic, place a statue of 'El Chayo', the late leader of the criminal group, in their sanctuaries in Michoacán.

The high level of fear engendered by the brutal and very public tactics of the illegal groups to intimidate the population means that church leaders, and other victims of these violations of religious freedom are usually extremely reluctant to speak out. While this makes it difficult to measure precisely the extent of these abuses, both Catholic and Protestant leaders have told CSW that this is one of the most serious problems facing the Church at the current time, and its impact on religious freedom has been alarming.

5. CONCLUSION

Although the federal and state governments are usually not generally directly responsible for committing serious violations of religious freedom, government officials on the municipal and village level often are. The federal

and state governments fail in their duty to ensure that the rights laid out in the Mexican constitution are upheld for all its citizens, and that wayward local officials are held to account when they break the law. The separation between church and state does not exempt the state from responding effectively to breaches of its own law, whatever the motivation behind the crime. In the same way, the right to protect one's culture cannot be used as an excuse to abuse the fundamental rights of or take advantage of individual members of one's community. It is the government's obligation to ensure that its law is practised and upheld for all citizens and in every part of Mexico, from the Federal District to the most remote highlands of Chiapas and Oaxaca.

It is not enough simply to mediate an extra-legal resolution to the conflict, as can be seen in many of the cases mentioned in this report where egregious violations have occurred. Those responsible for monitoring and responding to religious freedom violations at the state and federal level must have adequate training in human rights law, on religious freedom specifically, and be sufficiently resourced to carry out their duties. Any agreement must be in line with Mexican law, uphold religious freedom, monitored, and actively enforced in a constructive way. Those responsible for crimes including the destruction of religious buildings, acts of violence, exclusion and forced displacement must be held to account in a court of law. Violations of religious freedom cannot be a special category of crime that is exempt from prosecution. The Mexican government must take steps to destroy a culture of impunity in this area, and proactively ensure that these crimes will not be tolerated.

Finally, it is clear that with the difficult and complicated security situation facing the Mexican government, it will not be easy to guarantee the safety and protection of all religious leaders when threats come from illegal groups and criminal gangs. CSW acknowledges the Mexican government's efforts in actively fighting the illegal groups responsible for the extortion of, threats against and attacks on Catholic and Protestant church leaders; however, more steps could be taken to root out the corruption and collusion in state security forces that have contributed to the rise of the cartels. Full investigations into these crimes must be carried out and the true motives and authors of the crimes uncovered and prosecuted. Stringent protections for those who speak out against instances of corruption and violations of human rights and in favour of justice, including religious leaders, must be made a priority of the government at the highest levels.

24 Our Lady of Saint Death, or Saint Death, is a folk saint in Mexico which is venerated throughout the country and has risen significantly in popularity over the past decade. Although the rites associated with Saint Death are based largely on Catholic liturgy and adherents sometimes use Catholic churches for worship, the Vatican has called the cult of Saint Death blasphemous.

25 *Small Wars Journal*, 'Recent Santa Muerte Spiritual Conflict Trends', 15 January 2014 <http://smallwarsjournal.com/printpdf/15139>

6. APPENDIX

This case list compiled by the Coordination of Christian Organizations (COOC) uses the term 'evangelicals' when we would normally use 'Protestants'.

Case	Victim	Situation
La Piedad, Las Margaritas municipality	134 people (32 families)	Problems began in 2009 and led to forced displacement in March 2013 following the cutting of the victims' water and electricity which made the victims' living conditions impossible. They sought refuge in the city of Comitán. Needs: food, warm clothing, medical attention (some cases require specialised care) and cooking utensils
Buenavista Bahuitz, Las Margaritas municipality	47 people (12 families)	Problems began in 2008 when local authorities began to make life difficult for the evangelicals. They were imprisoned and then expelled in 2010. The same year they returned, after signing an agreement for their return which included guarantees that they would be allowed to practice their faith. However, the agreement was not respected; confrontations and threats continued leading to the final expulsion of the evangelicals on 23 July 2012. The main problem is with the Catholic Catechist, who became involved when her son converted and became an evangelical. Needs: food, warm clothing, medical attention and cooking utensils
Rosario Bahuitz, Las Margaritas municipality	8 people (2 families)	The problem began in 2009 and is rooted in forced participation in religious activities. Various agreements to respect freedom of worship have been made, and the evangelicals had agreed that they would continue to cooperate in terms of the religious [Catholic] festivals; however this was made impossible by members of the community. As the evangelicals were unable to fulfil their promise to cooperate with the religious festivals, they (including the children) were imprisoned and beaten. In 2012 the villagers refused to allow the evangelicals to cooperate with the religious festivals and refused to allow them to participate in community work. This led to the cutting of their water supply and electricity and the destruction of their animal pens which led to their forced displacement in September 2013. Needs: financial support and cooking utensils
La Libertad, Las Margaritas municipality	5 people (1 family)	Rubén L, a member of the village of Libertad, was summoned by the village assembly to ask him publicly whether or not he belonged to another religion. He confirmed that this was true on Tuesday, 20 March 2012, and at approximately 6PM he was detained and illegally imprisoned. He was not given food or allowed visits. On Wednesday, the village authorities met with him and asked him to sign a document but would not tell him what it said. On Thursday 22 March 2012, his wife managed to deliver him something to eat, this was done with great difficulty and was the only day he received any food. He was freed on Saturday 24 March 2012 thanks to negotiations carried out by the State Government, but one of the conditions was that he had to sign the document, the content of which is still unknown. The same day he was expelled from the village; he was not allowed to gather his possessions. The family has sought refuge in the community of Chacalá. Needs: food, warm clothing, general medical attention and cooking utensils.

Ejido Unión Juárez, La Trinitaria municipality	110 people (25 families)	The problem in this village has been ongoing since 2010. The evangelicals' water supply was cut and later reconnected with support from the public prosecutor's office, but there was no formal resolution. On 11 February 2014, the hostilities began again and the water and electricity supply to 25 families was cut. This took place after Mr. Aarón attempted to set up a water connection to a his new house. He had requested permission but the [village authority] Commissioner did not respond in time. Legal action has not yet been taken. The evangelicals continue to live in the community. Although the government has offered the village water pipes and water takes, none of these has been allocated to the evangelicals in the community. Needs: water, food and a system to provide a subsistence income.
San Miguel Chiptic, Altamirano municipality	1 family	The home of a family, who belong to the Adventist Church, was destroyed in August 2013. Their belongings were thrown in the street. The motive behind the attack was because the family is evangelical. No legal action has been taken against those responsible. Attempts have been made to resolve the situation through dialogue, but the village authorities and the victims have not been able to come to an agreement. Crimes committed include: dispossession, theft and abuse of authority. Needs: food, warm clothing, cooking utensils
Los Llanos, San Cristóbal de Las Casas municipality	35 people (6 families) (31 people were originally expelled; four babies have been born during their time in exile.)	The problem began in 2009, when the evangelical church building was burned, their homes were destroyed and the six families were expelled. They are currently living in the Alas de Águila Church in San Cristóbal de las Casas city. The National Commission for Human Rights published recommendations regarding the case (71-2010) in 2010 but the government has not responded. The current government is negotiating their relocation, having rejected the option of return to their community. The State sub-Secretary of Religious Affairs verbally presented a plan for relocation to them on 29 April 2014, and they are waiting for this verbal offer to be fulfilled. Needs: financial support, cooking utensils, warm clothing, general medical attention, toys
Yashtinin, San Cristóbal de Las Casas municipality	56 people (17 families)	The problem began in June 2012. They were violently expelled by the village authorities and sought refuge in Casa Digna [a homeless shelter] run by the municipal government in San Cristóbal de Las Casas city, where they remain today. The state government has considered relocating them but an agreement has not been reached. Currently the building in which they are living, which was designated by City Hall, does not have electricity and their water has been cut on numerous occasions. They are waiting for a quick answer for their relocation, in the village there are continued threats to expel more families. Needs: financial support, warm clothing, cooking utensils, help to pay water and electricity bills

La Florecilla, San Cristóbal de Las Casas municipality	10 people (2 families)	In 2011, the inhabitants of La Florecilla, under instruction from the convent which is located in the community, cut the water and electricity to the homes of the evangelicals. They now have to purchase potable water, before, the City Hall sent water but this was obstructed by the local authorities. They now have to buy water from a private vendor. The village authorities, in a meeting with City Hall, said that they require a payment of 80,000 pesos [approximate USD \$5500] to pay for the costs which have arisen because of this problem and the village assembly also reserved the right to dictate under what conditions the evangelicals can stay. Recently, the lawyer withdrew the case which had been filed with the Public Ministry, leaving the victims without any representation, but with a promise to reconnect the water and electricity. As of January 2014, the electricity had been restored but the water supply has not, and the evangelicals continue to purchase their water. The community is calm and they permit the evangelicals to hold meetings in their homes, they do not block visits from outside. Threats of expulsion persist. In December 2014, the electricity was again cut and threats to expel the evangelicals escalated.
Chilil, Huixtán municipality	29 people (6 families)	The expulsion of the evangelicals took place in November 2009, but since this date provocations, threats, verbal aggression and restrictions on evangelicals still living in the community continue. When the expulsion took place, some of the victims were beaten, insulted and some had their belongings destroyed or stolen. This case was ruled upon by the National Commission for Human Rights which issued recommendations (53-2010) in 2010, but the government has not responded. Currently the group is living in San Cristóbal de Las Casas city, in a house that is rented by the state government which also gives them some periodic financial support. The government is considering relocating the displaced families, having eliminated the possibility of return.
San Gregorio, Huixtán municipality	46 people (11 families)	In May 2010 an evangelical fired a gun in self-defence as a mob came to his house to attack him and burn it down. He wounded someone, and later two evangelicals who had nothing to do with the problem were arrested. They were in prison for three years and four months, they finally were released but without any kind of reparation. Because of this situation, additional families were displaced and went to San Cristóbal de las Casas, where they are currently living in a house rented by the state government, which also gives them periodic financial support. Some of the families have returned on their own initiative but at least one cannot return because of crimes for which he is responsible. Regarding the case of the two men freed on bail, Pedro Ara Bautista and Pedro Ara Perez, on 5 May 2014 they signed their parole papers for the last time and were completely freed. Now they need to petition the authorities in order to have their rights and recognition in San Gregorio village restored. Needs: food, financial support to pay for a confiscated vehicle, support for productive projects which can help with reconciliation in the community

Matamoros, Venustiano Carranza municipality	115 people (31 families)	A group of evangelical villagers have had their community land confiscated and redistributed to other people in the community. This has been going on since May 2012. After all their community land was taken away, the non-evangelicals began to invade the private property of the same villagers. They have also cut off the water supply to three houses. The victims have no income because the confiscation of their land means they cannot work. At one point the evangelicals were imprisoned because they refused to renounce their faith. The evangelicals were later freed when government officials appeared, but no legal action was taken against those responsible for the illegal imprisonment. Currently, there are signs around the community which say that they do not 'authorize' the entry of evangelicals or pastors. Needs: food, warm clothing, cooking utensils, specialised medical attention, general medical attention
El Avellanal, Ocosingo municipality	18 people (4 families) initially. Currently the group has grown to include 8 families and more than 35 people	In May 2013, the village authorities summoned four sets of parents to come to the General Assembly and tried to force them to renounce their faith. When they refused, they were imprisoned for six days. In the end they threatened that they would take them by foot to six neighbouring communities, they would imprison them and they would each have to pay a fine. They also threatened to beat their families. The group signed the papers under pressure in order to be freed. They have been threatened with the withdrawal of government benefits and have been told if they persist in their faith their property will be confiscated. In the middle of December 2013, an agreement was reached that relocated the evangelicals to an annex of Avellano. The settlement offered to provide them with water and electricity in this area and gave them permission to construct a church building and guaranteed them the respective rights. At the end of February 2014, a visit [by COOC] was made to the settlement and it was clear that the Municipal Presidency had not fulfilled its promises. At that time, after a meeting with the Municipal President the materials needed by the evangelicals to construct their homes were allocated. The materials were transferred the following week and the situation continues to be monitored. Needs: food, warm clothing, cooking utensils, general medical attention to promote reconciliation
Ejido Nuevas las Tacitas, Ocosingo municipality	16 people (3 families)	The problem began in 2004 when the evangelicals were imprisoned in the community jail. The tensions were resolved with very basic agreements. The problem was reignited in 2009 and in 2010 they were imprisoned again for six days during which time they were intimidated with threats of beatings if they did not renounce their faith. Despite official complaints there has been little progress in finding a solution. They imprisoned the evangelicals, they fined them and currently they are restricting their federal benefits. They have threatened to block them from the Opportunities program [a federal program]. They continue living in the community. Needs: Food, cooking utensils, warm clothing, general medical attention which should also be extended to the community as an effort to promote reconciliation

Jose Maria Morelos y Pavón, Tumbalá municipality	3 families	The three families who were displaced on 15 August 2013 have not received any attention from the municipal, state or judicial authorities. They are currently living in the community of Pactium. They were displaced after attacks that included the burning of a car, an attack on a home and stolen belongings. The problem is rooted in a conflict between a group of Pentecostals who meet in the village which is majority Presbyterian and the Presbyterians who wanted to force them to help build a Presbyterian church. Needs: food, warm clothing, medical attention
Copropiedad Las Palmas Santa Catarina, Sabanilla municipality	10 people (3 families)	Evangelicals are obligated to pay higher amounts than the other villagers in village 'tax'. They have complained that it is unfair to target them because they do not participate in the community religious festivals, and they also do not want them to force them to take up active roles in the traditional ceremonies. The City Hall has expressed its intention to resolve the problem without obligating the evangelicals to cooperate or participate in traditional religious ceremonies, and they have promised to invite the Coordination of Christian Organizations in Chiapas to the dialogue tables. However, every time the patron saint festivals approach, the problem resurges.