

Community: Rancho Nuevo

Municipality: Huejutla de los Reyes

State: Hidalgo

Ethno-linguistic identity: Nahuatl

Religious majority: Roman Catholic

Religious minorities: Protestant Christian

Introduction

The Mexican constitution guarantees freedom of religion and belief (FoRB), and other human rights included in international covenants and treaties to which it is party, to all citizens. In practice FoRB violations are common among indigenous communities governed under the Law of Uses and Customs. This law protects the right of indigenous communities to maintain their cultural and traditional methods of local governance with the caveat that it must be applied in line with human rights guarantees in the Mexican constitution and in the international conventions to which Mexico is party. However, the Mexican government, at both the federal and state levels, does little to ensure that these protections are upheld. As a result, in many communities, a religious majority attempts to enforce religious uniformity with consequences ranging in severity for members of minorities who wish to practice a religion or belief of their choosing.

Rancho Nuevo and Coamila are indigenous Nahuatl-speaking communities in the Huasteca region of Hidalgo State. Both are located in the municipality of Huejutla los Reyes. Religious tensions in the two communities have been ongoing since 2015 as outlined in the timeline below.¹ Local authorities have repeatedly attempted to force members of the religious minority to convert to Roman Catholicism and participate in Roman Catholic religious festivals, including through financial donations, lighting candles and actively participating in acts of worship. Members of the religious minority community have been arbitrarily detained, beaten, barred from accessing medical care, sacked from their jobs, blocked from burying their dead, and had their lands arbitrarily confiscated. Since 2018, religious minority children have been barred from attending the local, state run school. The consistent response from the Hidalgo state government over the past decade has been to uphold the position of the religious majority leaders and to advise the members of the religious minority to comply with their demands, even when they violate Mexico's FoRB protections.²

2015

Village leaders in both villages prohibited members of the religious minority from carrying out their faenas, required acts of community service. This also removes their rights to be recognized as members of the community. In one example, Brígida Hernández Hernández, was forbidden from carrying out her assigned task of cleaning the school that her children attend. Because she was not able to complete her faena, she was not permitted to receive medical attention at the local health clinic and was denied access to government benefit programmes for indigenous women. In addition to this, local leaders ordered that members of the religious minority were forbidden from working their plots of land, which they depend on both for sustenance and income.

2016

January-March

Members of the religious minority in both villages continued to be forbidden from carrying out their faenas and were repeatedly ordered to attend meetings and community assemblies, where they were threatened with various types of punishment by leaders, including Alfredo Zerón Ordiz. In March, the religious minorities were ordered to present themselves before a community assembly where they were held for three hours, from 8pm to 11pm, and were ordered by local leaders to continue participating in Roman Catholic festivals by making financial contributions, lighting candles and actively participating in acts of worship.

In late March the local Roman Catholic catechist, Julio Hernández Hernández, visited the home of Protestant Pastor Rogelio Hernández Baltazar and ordered him not to share the Bible with others in the community. He threatened the pastor with 'consequences' if he did not obey the order. The same day, Pastor Hernández Baltazar was forced to provide food to Roman Catholic missionaries who were visiting the community.

April-July

Members of the religious minority in Rancho Nuevo and Coamila were prohibited from carrying out their faenas throughout this period. They were threatened with being permanently removed from the community list which would mean they would not be recognized as members of the community and lose all associated rights. Despite this, Pastor Hernández Baltazar was elected by the community as president of the Committee of Parents and Family. He received documents from the government notifying the community of the construction of a new pre-school

1 The timeline is not comprehensive of all FoRB violations that have taken place in Rancho Nuevo and Coamila since 2015. The community has historically been hesitant to report FoRB violations, fearing that this would make their situation worse. Many of these incidents were documented during CSW visits to the region. The gaps between documented cases largely reflect periods in which CSW was not able to carry out a field assignment.

2 Governor Julio Ramón Menchaca Salazar took office in September 2022. Under the previous, six-year term of the previous governor of Hidalgo, Omar Fayad government, officials repeatedly and publicly denied the existence of any cases of religious intolerance in the state. In 2019 José Antonio Vital Pérez, Director of Religious Affairs in the Huasteca region, and Iván Huesca Licona, General Coordinator of Religious Affairs for the Hidalgo state government, gave numerous interviews to local press in which they blamed Protestant Christians for rebuffing an agreement that would obligate them to participate in and contribute financially to Roman Catholic religious activities. On 16 December 2019 Simón Vargas Aguilar, Government Secretary of Hidalgo State, denied that there were any cases of religious intolerance in the Huasteca region during an interview with a local media outlet, Criterio Hidalgo. CSW's research has shown that it has one of the highest numbers of such cases in the country.

classroom, requiring the signature and stamp of the community delegate. The community delegate refused to recognize Pastor Hernández Baltazar because of his association with the religious minority, and would not sign or stamp the documents, preventing him from carrying out his community duties.

In May, Mr Zerón Ortiz called a community assembly where he threatened Pastor Hernández Baltazar with permanent removal from the list of 'faeneros' and to remove him from his position as President of the Committee of Parents and Family. During the meeting, a community leader, Juan Hernández Hernández, grabbed Pastor Hernández Baltazar's Bible and attempted to destroy it. Another community member, Jose Luis Hernández Cruz, attempted to physically attack the pastor.

The religious minority women continued to be prohibited from carrying out their community responsibilities which included cleaning the local primary school, and Paulina Hernández Bautista was removed from her position as secretary of the Women's Committee.

August-October

During this period, members of the religious minority in Rancho Nuevo and Coamila began to build a church on land belonging to them. A neighbour who helped them, Juan Nicolas Hernández Solórzano, was threatened and beaten by community leaders.

In October 2016, Paulina Hernández Bautista had a late term miscarriage. When her husband, José Silverio Gutiérrez Bautista, approached Mr Zerón Ortiz to arrange the burial of the body, he was refused. Mr Zerón Ortiz stated, 'I tried to warn you, but you didn't listen to me,' referring to the fact that Mr Gutiérrez Bautista had converted to Protestantism. After Mr Gutiérrez Bautista pointed out that he had continued to carry out his community responsibilities, with the exception of those associated with Roman Catholicism, Mr Zerón Ortiz called a community meeting. Mr Gutiérrez Bautista was ordered to take the baby's body to Coamila for burial.

Religious minority leaders at this point requested the intervention of the state government. Two state government officials, including José Antonio Vital Pérez, the municipal official responsible for religious affairs, arrived and were informed that the community would not allow the baby to be buried there because the couple had 'outstanding matters' to attend to, specifically their failure to participate in religious activities associated with the Roman Catholic church. Mr Vital Pérez then asked community leaders in Coamila to allow the burial, but they also refused, pointing out that the couple is not part of their community. Mr Vital Perez then returned to Rancho Nuevo where he spoke with community leaders who agreed to allow the baby to be buried there, two days after the miscarriage. However, Mr Vital Perez refused to sign any documentation formalizing the burial and strongly advised the members of the religious minority to 'obey the community leaders,' with the clear

implication that they should participate in Roman Catholic activities.

2017

Six Protestant families in Coamila were threatened by community leaders with the removal of benefits including a access to government social programmes and the right to attend school.

In December, Angélica Hernández Baltazar attended a Bible study at Fundamental Baptist Church of the Great Commission in Coamila. The Bible study was interrupted by an intoxicated man, holding a machete, who kicked over a bench upon which Mrs Hernández Baltazar, who was pregnant at the time, and a 70-year-old woman, were sitting, throwing the two women to the ground. Throughout her pregnancy, the local health clinic refused to provide Mrs Hernández Baltazar with folic acid supplements. She was forced to travel a one hour journey by bus to the city of Huejutla de Reyes, for pre-natal care.

2018

January-March

Members of the religious minority in both villages were informed that their children were no longer welcome to attend classes at the local primary school. When the parents continued to send their children to school, the teachers then refused to teach their children.

In February, a man who converted to the minority religion was beaten by the community delegate Félix Hernández Hernández.

In March, five men, Diego Hernández Hernández, Juan Nicolas Hernández Solórzano, Rogelio Hernández Baltazar, Ricardo Hernández Baltazar and Jose Silverio Gutierrez Bautista - all members of the religious minority - were illegally detained and beaten by the local authorities. Four of the men were violently removed from a church service on Saturday 3 March; they were tied up and held until just after noon the following day. A fifth man was taken out of his home at 2am on Sunday 4 March and held along with the others. They were not permitted food or water and were later ordered to pay a large fine as punishment for not joining the religious majority. Ten days later, Mr Félix Hernández Hernández threatened members of the religious minority with the confiscation of their land.

April-July

Angélica Hernández Baltazar was blocked from burying her stillborn baby in the local cemetery because the local authorities of Coamila, including Diego Hernández Solórzano, had removed her and other Protestant Christians from the register of inhabitants. The parents were forced to go to the municipal capital to bury their baby.

Two men, the adult children of a widow who is a member of the religious minority and who lives with her son and daughter-in-law and grandchildren, ordered the family to

vacate their home because 'having embraced the Protestant faith, they have lost their right of inheritance.' The widow produced documents from the Huejutla Agrarian Attorney's Office, proving she owns the property, but the community leaders said they do not recognize any law other than that of Uses and Customs.

August-October

Diego Hernandez Solórzano directed the closure of the local school in order to prevent 16 children, whose parents are Protestant Christians, from attending classes there. When a teacher, who was hired by the government and from outside the community, tried to defend the children's constitutional right to study, the local authorities expelled her from the community. She was warned not to return.

In October, Mr Félix Hernández Hernández, who was intoxicated and carrying a machete, attempted to break into the home of Pastor Hernández Baltazar. Pastor Hernández Baltazar said that this was the fifth time this has happened and that his three younger children and his sister were in the house with him.

November-December

Members of the religious minority were cleaning the church grounds when Marcelino Gutierrez, a member of the religious majority, attacked Juan Nicolas Hernández Solórzano, knocking out one of his front teeth.

2019

In 2019, members of the religious majority community placed two signs outside the religious minority church stating that Protestant Christians were not permitted to enter.

Through the year, local authorities in Rancho Nuevo also refused to issue birth certificates to babies born to members of the religious minority. Parents also found it difficult to obtain the birth certificates from the civil registry at the municipal seat in Huejutla de los Reyes, where officials questioned why their community had refused to issue them the documentation, implying there had been misconduct on the part of the religious minority parents. The parents were eventually referred to the local human rights commission, which provided documentation affirming religious discrimination. This allowed the civil registry to issue a birth certificate and register the birth of the child.

2022

December

Maria Concepcion Hernández Hernández, a member of the religious minority was attacked on the morning of

Wednesday, 21 December after she visited her plot of land in response to a request from a neighbour who had requested the removal of two trees. Local leaders in Rancho Nuevo, including Mr Benito Rocha, community leader Fermín Hernández Hernández, delegate Octaviano Gutierrez Hernández, Mr Margarito Gutierrez Hernández, Mr Francisco Wenses, and catechist Juan Hernández Hernández, who all belong to the Roman Catholic religious majority in the village, participated in the attack after being informed of her presence.

When Pastor Hernández Baltazar intervened to ask the authorities to stop the attack he was physically assaulted and detained for two hours. Local leaders demanded that he hand over the deeds to ten plots of land that belong to members of the Baptist church. When the pastor refused to do so, the authorities threatened to take the documents by force and to confiscate the properties.

Mrs Hernández Hernández filed a complaint at the state human rights commission and state public prosecutor's office before returning home. She was later hospitalised and continues to experience health challenges related to the incident.

2024

March

Pastor Rogelio Hernández Baltazar was beaten and arbitrarily detained by village leaders for 48 hours along with other leaders of the church. After the intervention of government officials an agreement, prohibiting any more families from joining the religious minority church and applying a 15,000 MXP fine (approximately £700), was signed, allowing for the men's release.

April

At the beginning of the month, village leaders, ignoring the March agreement, sanctioned the takeover of five plots of land belonging to members of the religious minority, cutting down trees, removing stones, and destroying their crops. On 27 April, over 100 Protestants were forced to flee the villages of Coamila and Rancho Nuevo in the state of Hidalgo on 26 April, after village leaders cut off their electricity, vandalised and blocked access to their church and some of their homes, and posted guards at the entry points to the villages. 134 people, including five infants and 70 children under the age of 17, all of whom attend the Great Commission Baptist Church, sought sanctuary in the municipal seat of Huejutla de los Reyes, where they requested government intervention to protect their rights. The total number of Protestants affected is 172 but 38 of them are working outside the village.

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