

**February 2014
For Public Use**

**Written Statement
by Mr Jorge Lee Galindo, Director, Impulso 18
to the United States House of Representatives Foreign Affairs Committee
Subcommittee on Africa, Global Health, Global Human Rights, and International
Organisations**

**Hearing on the Worldwide Persecution of Christians
Tuesday, February 11, 2014**

Thank you very much for giving me the opportunity to speak today.

Latin America is often overlooked in discussions of international religious freedom, yet serious violations of religious freedom regularly take place in the region, most notably in my own country, Mexico, but also in countries like Cuba and Colombia.

To understand the situation in Mexico, one must first understand the history of the country.

Mexico was conquered by Spain in 1521. The different cultures which comprised what is known today as Mexico were made up of indigenous groups who practiced polytheistic religions. The Spanish, for their part, were Catholic and believed in one God. Aside from the physical conquest, this was also a religious conquest. The conquistadors attempted to turn the indigenous people to Catholicism, however many of the indigenous peoples held onto their beliefs and customs, fusing them with the Catholic religion that was imposed upon them.

This is why, in many communities in Mexico, the people are governed by what is termed 'uses and customs', taking precedence over civil law.

As protestant Christianity began to spread in the twentieth century, many people began to change, rejecting the festivals and pagan celebrations. This left the village authorities disgruntled because the spreading conversions brought with them a reduction in economic profits generated by the festivals.

Religious intolerance is most prevalent in the south-west of Mexico – particularly in the states of Chiapas and Oaxaca – but some central states including Michoacán, Hidalgo, Puebla and Guerrero also suffer these kinds of conflicts. Christians in these regions are threatened and persecuted by those who disagree with their choice to change their religion and beliefs. These authorities believe that their culture is being damaged and they do not accept that the freedom of the individual can take precedence over their traditions.

The central conflict often arises around the financial contribution requested by local authorities and traditional religious leaders to be used for the 'patron saint' religious festival. Protestant Christians refuse to pay these fees. At that point the situation deteriorates to the extent that, because of a lack of wisdom on both sides, we see all kinds of violations including, in some cases, the forced expulsion or displacement of these people from their lands. Violence is frequently used against the victims, and in some cases this has escalated to murder. Unfortunately, the

government almost never chooses to prosecute those responsible for these criminal acts and a culture of impunity in regard to violations of religious freedom becomes further entrenched.

There have been attempts in Mexico to address this problem through the law, however, the conflicts continue. One of the reasons, in my point of view, is that no government up until the present day has taken the matter as seriously as it merits.

Although the Mexican Constitution recognises the right of all individuals to freedom of religion and conscience and although the law, in respect to religious affairs, establishes clear parameters – for example that the Mexican State guarantee individual rights and freedoms including the right to maintain or adopt the religious belief of one's own choosing or no belief and against discrimination, coercion or hostility because of one's religious beliefs – the issue has never been a priority in the political agenda of the Mexican government.

The situation is exemplified in the case of the forcibly displaced community of Los Llanos. In late April 2009, a traditionalist mob attacked the Protestant church in the Tzotzil village during a prayer service, beating the pastor. One month later, the same church was attacked again and completely destroyed. In September of the same year, local authorities sent a letter to the governor of Chiapas State explicitly declaring that they had given the Protestants a deadline to leave the village and if they did not do so before the beginning of October, they would use force to expel them. In January 2010 the local authorities informed the Protestants that they were no longer permitted to attend village assemblies, and that they were prohibited from cultivating their crops. In addition, thirteen homes belonging to members of the Protestant church were completely destroyed, leaving 31 people homeless and finally forcibly displacing the community.

The group filed a complaint with the National Human Rights Commission (CNDH) in late January 2010. In its conclusions and recommendations, issued on 30 November 2010, the CNDH found that the fundamental rights of the Protestants had been violated by the local and state authorities in Chiapas and recommended that they be allowed to return to their homes, afforded protection by the government, and that their right to religious freedom be upheld.

In April 2011, the CNDH visited San Cristóbal de las Casas to follow up on progress on the implementation of the recommendations. No action had been taken by the state or federal authorities.

In June 2013, in the face of government inaction, the group of 31 attempted to return to their homes on their own. They were accompanied by supporters and journalists. Their attempt to return was met with violence, when a mile outside of Los Llanos, the group found the road blocked. They were surrounded by traditionalists who proceeded to stone them. Two pastors, supporters of the displaced, were reportedly taken hostage and separated from the larger group by the traditionalists. The two men were tied up, stripped of their clothing, beaten, and had gasoline poured on them. They were forced to walk one mile, with their hands and feet shackled, to the village centre of Los Llanos where the traditionalists threatened to burn them alive. The entire group was held until state officials arrived and freed the group. They negotiated an agreement in which the local authorities agreed not to beat or mistreat the prisoners or to force them to pay a fee for their liberation, and the Protestants agreed not to press charges.

Of course, as in so many other cases, no charges were filed, no one was prosecuted and the community remains displaced.

This case may seem extreme – but it is unfortunately typical, both in terms of the level of intolerance and violence and the state and federal governments’ failure to respond in any meaningful way to protect the rights of the victims and to uphold the rule of law.

If I may, I will now switch to another serious and growing threat to religious freedom in Mexico today. As I am sure you are aware, over the past six years, the government has attempted to confront narco-trafficking criminal networks with the full force of the law. Extortion aimed at houses of worship has become ‘normal’ in the north of the country and criminal groups see churches as attractive targets for money laundering. Pastors and priests who refuse to cooperate with criminal activities are threatened and kidnapped – in some cases in the middle of religious services. In 2011, the Catholic Bishop’s Conference announced that more than 1000 priests had reported receiving threats. In December of 2013, two priests in the state of Veracruz were murdered and in the state of Tamaulipas, three priests were forcibly disappeared, a fourth was beaten to death and a fifth was attacked with a baseball bat and admitted to the hospital in critical condition. All of these are separate cases.

In addition, many of the criminal groups have adopted a kind of pseudo-religiosity. Some adhere to the cult of Santa Muerte or Saint Death. Others, like the Knights Templar in Michoacán have cultivated their own kind of theology – mandating that all places of worship in villages they control, must place a bust of their leader “El Chayo” inside the temples, to be venerated and worshipped. There are severe penalties for refusing. One of those priests murdered in December is believed to have been targeted because he refused to bow to a narco-group’s demand to hold a mass dedicated to Saint Death in the Catholic Church. I am aware of at least one Catholic parish in the state of Michoacán which has been effectively shut down because the Knights Templar have vowed to kill any priest the Catholic church sends there.

Religious freedom violations in Mexico, while severe, are not completely unique in Latin America. Recently, we have seen the adoption of ‘anti-sect’ laws, targeting religious minorities, on the regional level in Argentina. Colombia has a very similar situation to Mexico in terms of the impact of illegal criminal groups on religious freedom. Similarly, Colombia also has a parallel legal system for indigenous communities which allows for the promotion of collective cultural rights over individual rights, and this has led to severe violations of religious freedom. It is worth pointing out, that in contrast to Mexico, where the National Commission for Human Rights has found traditional authorities to be in violation of the Mexican Constitution in attempting to enforce religious conformity, the Colombian Constitutional Court found in a split decision in 2007 that the religious rights of individual members of Colombia’s indigenous communities are trumped by the ‘right’ of the traditional authorities to protect their traditions.

Religious freedom violations are also widespread in Cuba. In recent years, religious freedom groups like Christian Solidarity Worldwide have documented a steady rise in these violations – from 40 documented religious freedom violations in 2011, to 120 in 2012 and 185 in 2013. Unlike Mexico and Colombia, these violations are, in their entirety, perpetrated by the government which seeks onerous control over religious groups. Most of the more recent violations have centered

around the resistance by religious leaders to government's attempts to dictate who may or may not attend church or participate in the activities of a religious group. The Cuban government is very aware of the positive role religious organisations have played in toppling repressive regimes over the course of history and is doing all it can to prevent a similar scenario in Cuba.

This concludes my presentation. I am grateful for the opportunity to address you all, to highlight the serious threats to religious freedom in my country and in the larger region, and I sincerely hope this will begin a discussion that will lead to the protection of religious freedom for all in Mexico.