

Murder of Pastor in Honduras Raises Security Questions

The murder of a prominent pastor in San Pedro Sula, Honduras, this week has focused attention on that country's alarming murder rate and the regular threats that Christian workers there receive.

Pastor Carlos Roberto Marroquín, 41, was shot to death by two assailants as he walked his two Schnauzer dogs in the Colonia Aurora neighborhood near his house on Monday (Feb. 21).

Initially police said they believed theft of the dogs was the reason for the murder, but that they were investigating other possible motives. Officers said two gunmen in a white car pulled up beside the pastor and tried to snatch the dogs, shooting Marroquín when he resisted, but the city's chief prosecutor, Marlene Bane, yesterday affirmed that witnesses said the gunmen had demanded Marroquín's cell phone, not the dogs, according to El Herald newspaper.

Marroquín offered them the dogs, Bane told El Herald, but they said they wanted the cell phone – a common crime in Honduras.

Whether the high-profile pastor was targeted as a Christian leader for the murder-theft is a matter of conjecture; such killings are common in Honduras for people of all religious beliefs, and although he had received death threats, those too are not unusual for Christian leaders in the country.

Marroquín was the founding pastor of the Pentecostal Church of God in San Pedro Sula, the country's second-largest city. He was also the founder and president of the Christian Legal Fellowship and co-founder of the Latin American Network of Christian Lawyers. President-elect of the Association of Evangelical Pastors in San Pedro Sula, he was a popular

presenter on television and radio programs.

Marroquín was the second pastor to be murdered in Honduras this year, after the Jan. 30 killing of Raymundo Fuentes, 43, pastor of the New Jerusalem Temple. Fuentes was slain as he was leaving the evening service at his church with his wife. Two days prior the daughter of an evangelical pastor had been killed, though police did not link the two murders.

While police are ruling the murder of Marroquín as a robbery, others believe it was a direct attack on the work of the evangelical church.

"I cannot believe it was for stealing," said Pastor Roy Santos. "The authorities have to act. He was a man who gave a message of hope."

Misael Argeñal, a pastor of Harvest Ministry with many years' experience in San Pedro Sula, told reporters, "This was not a dog theft. There are already six pastors who have died in Honduras in recent months. There must be a project, an escalation ... they must investigate to find out who is behind everything."

Another pastor, Oswaldo Canales, president of the Evangelical Fellowship of Honduras, said that Marroquín had received threats.

"Every day we do our work, trusting in God and prepared to go with Him," he said.

A missionary with several decades of service in Honduras confirmed that Marroquín had received death threats.

"He received threats before his death," the missionary said. "Most of us...get calls from stolen cell phones threatening death if we don't deposit money in a Guatemalan account. This kind of blackmail is not unusual."

Canales called for more security measures from authorities,

not only for Christian leaders but for all Hondurans. He said that pastors are aware that, due to their evangelistic calling, "we have always been subjected to threats; we have been in the cross-hairs of those who are not in keeping with our thinking."

Another missionary, Roxanne Grego, pointed out that such murders are common.

"Every day in this country people are murdered in the same way – an average of 16 people every single day," Grego said. "It is such a violent country, especially in the big cities of San Pedro Sula, Tegucigalpa and Choloma. The people are crying out for justice and for peace."

A recent report by Honduran Human Rights Commissioner Ramon Custodio revealed that in the past five years there have been 18,500 homicides in the country.

"Life is worth nothing in Honduras," Custodio recently told La Prensa.

Many link the violence to organized crime, drug trafficking and youth gangs. An anonymous caller gave police the names of two suspects in the murder of Marroquín. Saying the two suspects were in the car and attacked him, the caller identified them as belonging to a cell of the infamous Mara Salvatrucha gang.

Police have identified the assailants but they have not been arrested yet, according to El Herald.

"The evangelical church and the country lost a strong leader," Canales of the Evangelical Fellowship of Honduras said. "Roberto was a good man, kind, and respected. They can kill the body but not the soul, because it goes to God."

Canales added, "We will continue to evangelize, because we have seen many people in gangs restored, and families coming

together.”