

4 Christians Imprisoned, Tortured in Mexico

Christian Solidarity Worldwide (CSW) is calling on the Mexican government to prosecute local officials responsible for the unjust imprisonment and torture of four Protestant Christians from Nov. 5-8 in the western state of Oaxaca.

The Rev. Leopoldo Alonso, leader of the Independent Pentecostal Christian Church in San Juan Ozolotepec, and three members of his church—Manuel Martínez Silva, Miguel Silva Reyes and Plácido Aragón—were imprisoned on Nov. 5 on the orders of the municipal president, who had ordered the destruction of their Pentecostal church on Nov. 4.

The four men were freed on Nov. 8 after government officials, accompanied by state police, traveled to the municipality to intervene. Photos of the men, who were admitted to the local hospital, showed signs that they had been severely beaten.

Threats against the Protestants were first reported in May when church members made a public declaration calling for state government intervention in reaction to threats from the municipal president, Pedro Cruz González. The church members said Cruz González had threatened to burn them and throw their bodies into a canyon if they did not renounce their faith. When government officials failed to respond, the situation escalated.

In July, a member of the church, Vicente Aragon Hernandez, was imprisoned by Cruz González. Municipal leaders indicated this was punishment for speaking out publicly about the situation in San Juan Ozolotepec. In the face of continued inaction on the part of the state government, the situation took a violent turn when Cruz González made a public order to “demolish the temple, lynch, imprison and torture” the members of the

Pentecostal church.

The National Commission for Human Rights has opened a complaint into the San Juan Ozolotepec case and issued a statement indicating that cases of religious intolerance are on the rise in Mexico, particularly in rural areas and regions with a significant indigenous population.

Jorge Lee Galindo, an expert on freedom of religion and conscience in Mexico who is currently hosting a CSW delegation there, told CSW that incidents of religious intolerance continue to occur in parts of Mexico, in part because of a culture of impunity.

“The government, on the occasions when it decides to act, often intervenes only to calm the situation but rarely takes legal action against those responsible for these violations. Local authorities see that there are no real consequences for acts of violence and exclusion targeting religious minorities, and these cases escalate and spread,” he says.

CSW’s Chief Executive Mervyn Thomas says, “It is imperative that the Mexican government take swift legal action against those responsible for this horrific crime. If the state government is unable or unwilling to uphold the law, the federal government must intervene. Freedom of religion is guaranteed in the Mexican Constitution and enshrined in international law to which Mexico is party. It is past time for all of Mexico’s citizens to enjoy the fundamental right to choose and practice their own faith.”