

Pastor Narrowly Survives Assassination Attempt

A Mexican pastor who survived an assassination attempt in the notorious border city of Juarez in June says he was targeted because his church's work is seen to negatively impact upon the efforts of drug cartels.

A hit man entered the pastor's home on June 12, making him kneel down on the floor and telling him, "You don't know who you are messing about with." The man then pulled the trigger on his gun, but it failed to fire, so he knocked the pastor unconscious and stole his wallet, before fleeing.

"All I can say is that with the work we do as a church we have affected the activities of those groups involved in drug trafficking and also the organized crime. We are not sure what comes next," said the pastor, whose name is being withheld to protect him.

The attack came just days after the murder of fellow local pastor Eduardo Garcia.

In recent years the number of violent deaths in Mexico has gone up dramatically. According to the National Institute of Statistics and Geography, in 2017 there were over 30,000 homicides in Mexico, the highest figure on record since the statistics were first collected in 1997.

In cities like Ciudad Juarez, in the state of Chihuahua, one of the most violent places in the country, 80 per cent of the murders relate to the drugs industry.

In June alone, there were 177 murders in Juarez, according to municipal authorities—that's six a day.

Background

Although the violence affects everyone, “actively practicing Christians” are particularly vulnerable, according to Dennis Petri, Latin American analyst at Open Doors International, a charity that supports Christians under pressure for their faith around the world.

Given that as many as 90 percent of Mexico’s population would identify as Christian, Petri told World Watch Monitor last year that “it’s important not to look so much at their identity as Christians, but more at their behavior that results from their Christian convictions. Whenever a Christian starts to engage in social work—for example, setting up a drug rehabilitation clinic or organizing youth work—that is a direct threat to the activities and interests of organized crime, because it takes the youth away from them, so it is a direct threat to their market”.

Petri mentioned one church leader who was killed for setting up a drug rehabilitation clinic and then refusing to close it despite threats. He also cited the example of a church leader who set up a football team for vulnerable boys, some of whom were working as informants for cartels. When one boy then told the cartels he no longer wished to be an informant, he was killed.

A more obvious example of why active Christians are easy targets comes from the perception that churches and their leaders have a lot of money, so congregations offer a ready source of cash. Cartels can simply enter, lock the doors and ask the congregation to empty their pockets.

Chito Aguilar, 62, a former drug trafficker who now leads a church, told World Watch Monitor: “Compared to a convenience store, they say, ‘Well if in a church there are 40 or 50 people, or 100’ –because [the cartels] do this on Sunday, not during the week—they say, ‘So they will bring money, they’re

going to give their offerings'. So they become an easy target, because [the cartels] will come here, as they do here in Ciudad Juarez: eight people walk into a church, one or two will remain at the doors and the others will start collecting watches, rings, wallets ... everything. So they become an easy target of the attackers." {eo}

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