

Suspected Drug Traffickers Kidnap Pastor in Mexico

Some 500 worshippers were gathered for last Sunday's (April 10) worship service at the Christian Center El Shaddai in the Mexican city of Lazaro Cardenas, Michoacan at about 8:15 a.m. when four masked men burst in firing machine guns into the air.

Before the frightened believers realized what was happening, their pastor, Josua Ramirez Santiago, had been whisked away. Divergent press reports indicated the kidnappers, suspected drug traffickers active in the state, were about 10 in number.

The following day, the pastor's family received news that the criminals wanted a ransom of 20 million pesos (US\$1.7 million). Even if the family could raise such an immense sum—considered doubtful—payment would not guarantee that the victim would be returned alive.

Arturo Farela, director of the National Fraternity of Evangelical Churches, has asserted that organized crime syndicates and drug cartels have targeted Christians because they view churches as revenue centers and because churches support programs for the rehabilitation of drug addicts and alcoholics.

"The majority of rehabilitation centers that have been attacked by organized crime in Ciudad Juarez, Tijuana, Tepic and other places belong to the evangelical community," Farela said in a declaration regarding the kidnapping of Ramirez. "Furthermore, some 100 Mexican or foreign pastors who lived in Ciudad Juarez have had to abandon the city because of the threats and demands for money. And of course many pastors and their families have been victims of extortion, threats, kidnapping and homicide."

Farela has stated that 100 Mexican clergymen have been kidnapped in recent years, with 15 of them losing their lives to organized crime. Asked if Compass could review his records of these crimes, Farela said he was not authorized to permit it.

In numerous other cases, children of pastors have been kidnapped, including one from Matehuala, San Luis Potosi, who has not been heard from for some six months. The college-age daughter of a prominent pastor in Mexico City was held by kidnappers for a week but was released when the criminals grew tired of the father's prayers every time they telephoned him; the family has not revealed whether money was given for her return.

Michoacan, the state where the most recent abduction took place, has been a center of much criminal activity and also of severe reprisals by elements of the Mexican army. The state where President Felipe Calderon was born, Michoacan was the first to implement an anti-drug military operation that expanded to northern and eastern states.

In spite of the operation, more than 34,600 people nationwide have reportedly been assassinated since it was implemented in December 2006, with most of those crimes tied to drug traffickers "settling accounts."