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MEXICO | Hidalgo State Official Defends Religious Freedom Violations

An official in the Hidalgo state government made public statements defending religious freedom violations, including barring children from attending primary school because of their religious beliefs and threats of expulsion, in the village of Tepeolel according to reports by the *La Jornada* newspaper.

At least one Protestant child was barred from attending primary school because of his refusal to convert to Catholicism, and 17 families are at risk of being expelled from their village, located in the municipality of Huejutla los Reyes. The group of Pentecostals from the Huastec indigenous group were threatened by village officials in the village of Tepeolel because of their refusal to participate in or contribute to Roman Catholic religious festivals.

Alejandro Ramírez Furiati, a representative of the Hidalgo state government who is responsible for the Huasteca region, told *La Jornada* the fault lies with the Pentecostals because "...since they belong to another religion, they have some belief that says they cannot cooperate, however, in the meetings with them, it has been explained that for the sake of keeping harmony they must participate..."

There is a history of government complicity in religious freedom violations in the Huejutla los Reyes municipality. In March 2012, four protestant pastors were imprisoned because of their congregations' refusal to contribute financially to local Catholic festivals. In December of the same year, 38 Baptists in the village of Pahuatlán were held captive for days because of their refusal to participate in Catholic festivals. After they were released, threats against the Protestants became so severe that 165 people fled the village.

An agreement was negotiated with state and municipal government officials, but at the time, religious leaders expressed concern that the agreement did not include any commitment to respect religious freedom. The agreement also included a troubling clause that commits the Protestants to paying what they owe for "community works" which seems to refer to the community religious festivals. There was no criminal prosecution of those responsible for the false imprisonments or the threats that caused the flight of the 165.

Mervyn Thomas, CSW's Chief Executive, said, "It is of grave concern that a representative of the government of Hidalgo is on record publicly defending violations of religious freedom that contravene the Mexican Constitution. His position, unfortunately, is not uncommon and is illustrative of a low level of understanding of human rights law among the very same government officials who are tasked with upholding religious freedom and other fundamental

rights. It highlights the urgent need for the Mexican government to make training on religious freedom obligatory for civil servants working on these issues. We call on the state and federal governments to ensure the right of all Mexican children to attend school, regardless of their religious beliefs, and to protect the right of all not to be compelled to participate in religious activities against their will.”