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MEXICO | Protestant Man Imprisoned, Children Barred from School

The state Ombudsman in Oaxaca publicly condemned a series of severe religious freedom violations targeting a Protestant man and his family in the village of La Chachalaca. Lauro Núñez Pérez was arbitrarily imprisoned three times since July, and his children have been denied access to education because of his refusal to renounce his faith.

The Ombudsman opened an official investigation July 9 following complaints that village and municipal leaders barred the family from attending non-Catholic religious services in a neighboring village. They also threatened to imprison Núñez Pérez if he did not convert to Catholicism. According to the Ombudsman, the municipal agent, Priciliano Alejo, gave a direct order to the village school director to bar Núñez Pérez's children from enrolling for the new school year. La Chachalaca is located in Santiago Camotlán Municipality which is in the region of Villa Alta. The region has a history of serious religious freedom violations.

Despite several instructions from the Office of the State Ombudsman to implement preventative measures to protect the constitutional rights of Núñez Pérez and his family, the government has taken no action. Meetings between local leaders and officials from the state government's religious affairs department failed to bear fruit as the local leaders refused to soften their policy prohibiting the profession of any religion but the Catholic faith in their village.

Luis Herrera of the Coordination of Christian Organizations informed Christian Solidarity Worldwide (CSW) that Núñez Pérez is currently confined to his home as he fears that leaving the house would result in another arbitrary imprisonment. Herrera told CSW that last week several other villagers, who defended Núñez Pérez's right to choose his religion, were also temporarily imprisoned by local authorities. Herrera also noted that other members of the Ambassadors of Christ Evangelistic Ministry, a registered religious association to which Núñez Pérez belongs, have faced ongoing violations of their right to freedom of religion or belief in other parts of Oaxaca, specifically in the municipality of Loma Bonita. The state government has not taken action to address this issue.

Mervyn Thomas, Chief Executive of CSW said, "We are concerned that despite the excellent work of the Office of the State Ombudsman, the Oaxaca state government continues to ignore its calls to protect religious freedom. We call upon the Oaxaca state government and the federal government of Mexico to take the concerning reports from the Office of the State Ombudsman seriously and to take swift action to implement their recommendations to protect the rights of Mr. Núñez Pérez and his children. It is unacceptable that in modern Mexico children can be banned from attending school because of the religious beliefs of their father or that people can be

imprisoned because of their faith. It is even more egregious in this case as a state employee is directly responsible for these human rights violations.”