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MEXICO | Seventh Day Adventists Detained

Two men from the Iglesia Adventista (Seventh Day Adventists) in Santo Domingo Corona, Chiapas state, Mexico, were arrested May 23 in San Miguel Chiptic, where local officials have attempted to forcibly expel members of the Iglesia Adventista from their homes. One of the men was released from prison May 28.

Samuel Vázquez Sánchez, 23, a member of Iglesia Adventista from the community of Santo Domingo Corona, Las Margaritas, Chiapas state, was arrested in San Miguel Chiptic on May 23 on the accusation of preaching the gospel. A few days earlier, on May 19, he had visited families belonging to Iglesia Adventista in San Miguel Chiptic whose homes were destroyed by local officials a few months earlier. Vázquez Sánchez sang and prayed with them before returning to his home in Santo Domingo Corona.

On May 23, Vázquez Sánchez was arrested as he drove through San Miguel Chiptic after local authorities recognized him. He was detained and charged with preaching the gospel. Local leaders in Santo Domingo Corona were informed of his arrest, asking them to come and negotiate his release. His uncle, Juan Vázquez Álvarez, came to find his nephew and was arrested on the same grounds, but was released May 28. The authorities were demanding approximately \$2,542 each for their release.

Local authorities in San Miguel Chiptic have made multiple attempts to expel members of Iglesia Adventista, a religious minority, from their homes, a situation that often arises due to the Law of Uses and Customs. To date, six families have been displaced and are now sheltering with other church members in the municipality of Ocosingo, approximately 12 miles from Altamirano. They continue to fear reprisals by leaders in San Miguel Chiptic.

The first family affected was that of Agustín Álvarez, who had its house destroyed and belongings left in the street in August 2013. The family did not take legal action as they intended to reach an agreement through mediation; however, the village authorities and the family affected have not managed to reach an agreement. The state government in Chiapas also hosted meetings, which were unfruitful. The municipal government offered a measure compensation, but the family didn't accept it.

On March 4, local authorities in San Miguel Chiptic threatened three more families belonging to the Iglesia Adventista, telling them that if they did not renounce their faith their properties would be destroyed and they would be expelled. At 2 p.m. on March 15, local community members came to destroy their properties, without removing their belongings.

At 9 p.m. on the same day, the men from Iglesia Adventista, who also belong to the Tojolabal indigenous group, decided to wait outside the office of the municipal president of Altamirano for a response. No one from the municipal or state authorities responded, and the municipal police have declined to get involved, despite being aware of the threats to the community. The three families stayed in what remained of their homes until last week, when they left the area due to fear of the local authorities.

On April 9, community leaders destroyed the fences of properties belonging to two more families from the Iglesia Adventista, and threatened them with the destruction of their homes, because they helped the three families whose homes were destroyed in March. They have also left the area.

CSW's Chief Executive Mervyn Thomas said, "We are deeply concerned that almost five years on from the illegal expulsion of one family because of their religious beliefs, both state and federal governments have failed to protect religious minorities in San Miguel Chiptic. As a result, five more families have had parts of their properties destroyed and have had to leave," CSW's Chief Executive Mervyn Thomas said. "We call on the Mexican government, at both federal and state levels, to ensure the unconditional release of Samuel Vázquez Sánchez, and to ensure that adequate compensation is provided to the families whose property was destroyed. The government must also take steps to prevent further attempted expulsions and to guarantee that human rights, including freedom of religion or belief, are respected and upheld by the authorities at every level."