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MEXICO | Official Denies Religious Intolerance

A government secretary in the state of Hidalgo made public claims that there are no cases of religious intolerance in the Huasteca region, despite evidence from Protestant Christians who were forcibly displaced in July and others who are currently under threat of forced displacement because of their religious beliefs.

In July 2019, Protestant families in the village of la Mesa Limantitla, located in the Huasteca region of Hidalgo State, were threatened with forced displacement by community leaders if they did not make financial contributions to local Roman Catholic festivals and participate in other activities which conflicted with their religious beliefs. On Jan. 14, eight Protestant families were forced to sign a document renouncing their faith and were warned that if they begin attending Protestant services again their access to water, electricity, drainage services, and to social benefit programs will be blocked. Two families who resisted signing the document have been without access to water, drainage, government benefit programs and the community mill since Jan. 14. The mill is of particular importance to them as it is used daily to grind corn and make dough for tortillas, one of their primary sources of food.

In an interview on Dec. 12, a member of one of the Protestant families told CSW, “They took all of the government benefit programs from us, they took everything from us. They get their benefits and they don’t let us know and they deliver them, but not to us. That is how we are left, with nothing. Right now, we are suffering.”

She added she had recently had a medical operation and that the village delegate threatened to cut off community members’ access to basic services if they visited her during her recovery. “Nobody has visited me...I feel rejected, like I am worth nothing,” she told CSW.

In an interview given Dec. 16 to local media outlet Criterio Hidalgo, Simón Vargas Aguilar, government secretary of the state of Hidalgo, denied that there are any cases of religious intolerance in the Huasteca region. In the interview, Vargas Aguilar referred

specifically to the case of La Mesa Limantitla, claiming that their situation is a result of a cultural issue and is not related to their religious beliefs.

Contrary to the claims of Vargas Aguilar, which have been repeated by other senior state officials, violations of freedom of religion or belief (FoRB), including cutting access to water and electricity, blocking religious minority children from attending school, arbitrary detention and forced displacement are common in the Huasteca region of Hidalgo. On July 28, four Protestant Christians were forcibly displaced from their village of Cuamontax Huazalingo, also in the Huasteca region, when they refused to sign an agreement that prohibits Protestants from entering the village. In August 2018, at least 15 children from Protestant families were barred from attending school in the community of Coamila.

Vargas Aguilar suggested that conflicts occur only when families refuse to involve themselves in community activities, ignoring the fact that, in general, religious minorities are happy to participate in community activities as long as they are not of a religious nature. He added that these are “social problems generated by the diversity of uses and customs within the population.”

Under the Law of Uses and Customs, indigenous communities are given the right to protect their culture and maintain traditional governing structures as long as fundamental human rights protected by the Mexican constitution, including FoRB, are respected. However, a low understanding of FoRB and a general lack of interest in the issue among government officials at the state and local level, often contributes to a high incidence of FoRB violations and impunity for those who violate these rights.

CSW’s Chief Executive Mervyn Thomas said, “We are deeply troubled by the state government’s denial of any cases of religious intolerance in the Huasteca region, despite clear evidence to the contrary. Over the past year we have witnessed numerous cases of violations of the right to freedom of religion or belief, which have been exacerbated by a prevailing culture of impunity. We call on the Hidalgo State Governor Omar Fayad Meneses, to take swift action to address the threats against religious minorities in his state, especially in the Huasteca region, and to ensure that officials in his administration do not promote resolutions that contravene Mexico’s own laws protecting fundamental human rights.”