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ARGENTINA | Lawyer Lobbies US Policymakers

Dr. Alejandro Zeverin, the lawyer for a Baptist church in Colombia which has endured ongoing and escalating attacks for two years, briefed US policymakers in Washington D.C. last week. He called for pressure to be brought on the Argentinean government to carry out a full investigation and prosecution of those responsible.

Dr. Zeverin is the civil rights lawyer for the Pueblo Grande Baptist Church in Río Tercero, Córdoba Province. In meetings with the United States State Department and the United States Commission for International Religious Freedom, accompanied by CSW, he also called for attention to legislation at the provincial and federal levels which have led to violations of religious freedom.

In October, CSW called for a full investigation and charges to be brought against those responsible for the attempted murder of Pastor Marcelo Nieva, leader of the Pueblo Grande Baptist Church, and church member Daniel Carreño, after the car they were driving in Río Tercero on the evening of Oct. 21 was fired upon multiple times. They escaped unharmed. National and provincial Baptist leaders in Argentina expressed alarm at the attack, pointing out that attempted murder of the pastor is the latest and most severe instance of a pattern of threats and harassment against the church.

The church building has been vandalized repeatedly over the past two years and members of the church have suffered harassment and physical attacks at the hands of individuals allegedly linked to narco-trafficking groups and corrupt officials. According to Dr. Zeverin, church members have filed approximately 40 complaints related to these attacks but all have been archived or ignored by local police. Church leaders and Dr. Zeverin believe the pastor and the church have been targeted by corrupt politicians and members of the local police force because of the church's ministry with victims of sex trafficking and drug addicts. Dr. Zeverin also expressed concern that those responsible for the attacks are using the Pueblo Grande Baptist Church as a test case, and if they are successful in shutting the church down or bringing a stop to its social ministry, they will apply the same tactics to other churches and religious groups.

Pueblo Grande Baptist Church received national and international attention in 2013 when charges were brought against the pastor under 'anti-cult' legislation adopted at the provincial level. Argentinean denominational leaders and legal experts criticized the vaguely written anti-cult law used to target the church, which belongs to a denomination with a 105-year history in the country. Dr. Zeverin Escribano also pointed to Decree 2037, made under the military dictatorship in 1979, but which is still in effect, and which makes registration with the government compulsory for all religious groups except the Roman Catholic Church, as a contributory factor leading to discrimination in this case and others.

CSW's Chief Executive Mervyn Thomas said, "We continue to be very concerned for the safety and well-being of Pastor Nieva and members of the Pueblo Grande Baptist Church. We call on the federal government of Argentina to carry out a full investigation to determine who is responsible for the attacks and harassment and to prosecute them. We also urge the Argentinean government to carry out a review of laws at the provincial and federal levels which can be used to violate religious freedom, and to ensure that legislation is brought into line with its international obligations, including the Inter-American Human Rights Treaty which has clear and strong protections for the religious freedom of all."