



9.17.15

GLOBAL | Statement of Solidarity with Churches in Northern Triangle

Christian Solidarity Worldwide (CSW) endorsed a statement by the Inter-American Federation of Christian Jurists (FIAJC) expressing solidarity with churches in Guatemala, El Salvador and Honduras as many church leaders have come under threat from both violent criminal groups and government security forces.

Guatemala, El Salvador and Honduras comprise a region commonly referred to as the Northern Triangle.

The FIAJC statement was issued following a joint conference held by FIAJC and CSW in San Salvador from Sept. 3-6. The conference focused on high levels of violence in Latin America and brought legal professionals, church leaders and activists together to share their knowledge and expertise on issues related to violence with one another.

Throughout the conference, participants pointed to the impact of high levels of violence on religious freedom and the statement notes “concern regarding the condition of high risk in which our Central American brothers and sisters live and carry out their pastoral work in environments saturated by violence and by derogatory statements regarding their efforts; principally, those made by high ranking public officials, which put our brother and sisters in true danger from the extremists.”

CSW learned that earlier this year Pastor Mario Vega, the prominent international evangelical leader of Elim International Christian Mission based in El Salvador, was named and threatened on an internet message board run by government security forces. The threats, which have since been deleted, received regional media coverage last month. They are believed to be linked to Pastor Vega’s criticism of government policies to crackdown on criminal gangs in El Salvador, which have been criticized for serious human rights violations.

In a tragic example of how innocent civilians have been caught between violent criminal gangs and equally violent government security forces, two evangelical Christians were killed in a massacre by an elite police unit targeting suspected gang members last month. A third evangelical, the uncle of one of those killed, later disappeared after speaking out about the massacre. His body was eventually recovered and showed signs of torture.

One church leader in El Salvador who asked to remain anonymous told CSW, “We are in an impossible situation. You cannot work in most of this country without some contact with the gangs. In our children’s ministries, for example, 90% of them are the children of gang members. If we hold a special program their parents, the gang members attend. We want to use these

opportunities to reach out to them and to try to change their lives and turn them away from violence, but for the simple act of having contact with gang members the government security forces label us collaborators. 'Illicit association' is a crime in El Salvador even if you don't commit a criminal act. Pastors working in difficult zones are especially vulnerable to this charge. We need to learn from our brothers and sisters in Latin America who have worked in these impossible situations."

A second church leader, who also asked to remain anonymous, said, "As a pastor I have seen innocent members of my church affected by the violence from both sides. Earlier this month a young Christian man was extra-judicially executed by the police and then falsely presented as a gang member. This summer a bus carrying one of our youth groups came under fire because one of the gangs wrongly believed that there was a policeman on board. A woman in my church's son was wrongly arrested and she has spent the last month going to every prison in the country trying to find him but he has disappeared. And when I speak out about these abuses, I myself receive death threats."

CSW's Senior Advocacy Officer for the Americas Anna-Lee Stangl said, "In our work at CSW over the years we have seen how violence in its different forms can have direct impact on the ability of civilians to practice their faith freely. Criminal violence, like that we have documented in Colombia and Mexico and which we now see in Central America, can have an insidious effect on religious freedom as criminal groups attempt to censor the messages of pastors and priests, extort religious groups and minimize the impact of church's work on society. Unfortunately, when governments implement security policies that have the potential to result in human rights violations, church leaders also sometimes come under threat from security forces as well. The statement by FIAJC comes at an opportune time. We hope it will be an encouragement to church leaders working in very difficult circumstances and often at great personal risk across the region and that it also signifies the beginning of a new effort to share lessons learned by church leaders in other parts of Latin America who have experienced and worked under similar conditions."