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CHALLENGES TO RELIGIOUS FREEDOM IN THE AMERICAS

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BEFORE THE

SUBCOMMITTEE ON
THE WESTERN HEMISPHERE

OF THE

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CHALLENGES TO RELIGIOUS FREEDOM IN THE AMERICAS

THURSDAY, SEPTEMBER 17, 2015

HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES,
SUBCOMMITTEE ON THE WESTERN HEMISPHERE,
COMMITTEE ON FOREIGN AFFAIRS,
Washington, DC.

The committee met, pursuant to notice, at 2 o'clock p.m., in room 2200 Rayburn House Office Building, Hon. Jeff Duncan (chairman of the subcommittee) presiding.

Mr. DUNCAN. We will go ahead and call the subcommittee meeting to order. And we are waiting on one witness, which we will go ahead and get started. We will be interrupted by votes—2:20, 2:40—and we will have to recess at that point in time but we will deal with it.

Before I read my opening statement, let me just take this opportunity to let the folks in Chile know that we are thinking about them and they are in our prayers with the earthquake and tsunami flooding and other issues they have experienced this year, but last night with the very strong earthquake that happened off the coast and the resulting tsunami-type waves. And I don't know that the Pacific Rim is out of the woods yet with regard to tsunamis, so they will continue to be in our thoughts and prayers.

So a quorum being present, the subcommittee will come to order and I will now recognize myself for an opening statement.

Religious freedom was a major inspiration for the founding of the early American republic, revered by our founding fathers and recognized in the First Amendment of the U.S. Constitution as a fundamental right.

And I will pause and say that today is Constitution Day. Happy Constitution Day. 1787, the Constitution was ratified with the promise that the first ten amendments would be added as the Bill of Rights, and so we recognize and celebrate that today.

It has also been repeatedly recognized internationally. The first U.S. President, George Washington, affirmed in his 1796 farewell address that "of all the dispositions and habits which lead to political prosperity, religion and morality are indispensable supports." This view enjoyed continued support in the nineteenth century with a de Tocqueville writing that "religion in America...must be regarded as the first of their political institutions; for if it does not impart a taste for freedom, it facilitates the use of it."

Indeed, religious liberty provided the foundation for our country's modern political order, respect for democracy, and rule of law.

Similarly, the ability to worship and exercise one's faith without fear of attack, censure, bribery, or government reprisal is one of the most important metrics of freedom in any country.

Today, we meet to examine the state of religious freedom in the Western Hemisphere, home to Catholic, Protestant, Jewish, and Muslim faiths as well as a range of indigenous beliefs. In particular, as Latin America contains nearly half of the world's Catholics and the first Latin American Pope is set to address Congress next week, I believe this hearing is timely in bringing public awareness to the importance of international freedom.

While religious minorities in Latin America and the Caribbean do not experience the same level of persecution they face elsewhere in the world, i.e., ISIS and the Middle East, the state of religious freedom in our own hemisphere does deserve our attention. Unfortunately, this year has seen a noticeable uptick in violations of religious freedoms in several countries in the region.

While most governments have constitutions with clauses that protect religious freedom, the implementation of those protections is often not rigorously enforced, and in certain countries other laws or regulations have been written that make religious worship and activities hard. For instance, in countries such as Bolivia, Cuba, Ecuador, Nicaragua, and Venezuela, it is government action itself that contributes directly to difficulties in religious practice.

In other countries such as Argentina, Mexico, and Colombia, the combination of criminal groups, lawless environment, or impunity prevents the free exercise of religious worship and activities. In particular, this subcommittee has heard multiple reports of Catholic and Protestant churches being forced to pay fines to criminal groups in the region in order to remain open, church members have been threatened and internally displaced in some cases, and pastors have faced extortion and assassination attempts.

Significantly, churches that engage in outreach and assistance to victims of human trafficking, drug and alcohol addicts, or former members of criminal groups have found themselves targets of criminal groups which see church efforts as a threat to their own control, objectives, or activities. Furthermore, many countries in Latin America require government registration of churches, and in the cases of Bolivia and Peru this registration can be cumbersome, intrusive, or just plain difficult.

So I am deeply concerned about Bolivia's Law 351, passed in 2013, which forces all religious organizations to reapply for legal standing while imposing burdensome preconditions that appear restrictive to the rights of religious organizations. Moreover, in Nicaragua reports surfaced in July 2013 that President Ortega was exploiting religious symbols for political gain and using financial pressure on Catholic and Protestant groups to exert political influence.

Similarly, in Ecuador there have been reports of action by the Ecuadoran Government to remove all religious images from regional hospitals and obstruct the work of Catholic priests in prisons.

Given the hearing that this subcommittee held in July on threats to press freedoms in the Americas and President Correa's actions last week to shut down Fundamedios, an organization with a crit-

ical mission to provide information on freedom of expression in Ecuador, I am troubled at what might be next for religious organizations in Ecuador who dare to diverge from Correa's views.

So in June 2014, I sent a letter to the Ambassador of Mexico highlighting two cases of religious freedom violations and requesting that Mexico prioritize accountability for perpetrators who commit violent crimes under the guise of religion. I would like to commend Mexico's actions in taking steps to address some of these issues while acknowledging that more work still remains.

Given the security environment in Mexico, the Catholic Multimedia Center reported last December that Mexico is the most dangerous country in the world to be a Catholic priest, and 80 percent of cases involving attacks on priests in Mexico are not resolved. Further, while Mexico's constitution guarantees freedom of religion, an abuse of Mexico's law of uses and customs has led to widespread cases of religious intolerance which remain unaddressed today.

Furthermore, in Colombia, various NGOs are reporting an increase in violence toward religious organizations by criminal paramilitary groups given the internal armed conflict and Colombia-FARC peace talks. Allegedly, this violence has included poisoning, burning of houses and the closing of about 20 churches, torture, killings, and kidnapping of children for use as child soldiers.

In contrast, in Cuba, the persecution of religious organizations have been driven by the government. Although its constitution guarantees freedom of religion, it has a caveat that this can be restricted if it does not align with the socialist objectives. Today, Cuban Government continues to severely restrict religious liberty. Churches must be registered in order to import religious material, meet in houses authorized for worship, or travel abroad for religious purposes. No Protestant religious schools are allowed and the Jehovah's Witness' and Mormons have yet to receive recognition by the government.

Last year, two pastors were arrested and detained by the police, and early this year the government began enforcing Legal Decree 322 to seize churches, church properties, and in May, the property of Maranatha First Baptist Church was confiscated. Cuban authorities also continue their brutality against religious worshippers, often violently dragging out women affiliated with the Ladies in White group from Sunday morning services.

In conclusion, there are many disturbing reports of religious freedom violations in our own hemisphere and this does not bode well for the health of these countries for religious freedom is utterly critical to the protection and development of free societies. As historian Russell Kirk has written, "all the aspects of any civilization arise out of the people's religion: Its politics, its economics, its arts, its sciences, even its simple crafts are the by-product of religious insights." Consequently, countries that respect religious freedom allow all of these aspects of their cultures to flourish while those that fail to protect religious freedom will not see these benefits.

I look forward to hearing from our expert witnesses today on how they rate the Obama administration's priority of religious freedom in the Western Hemisphere and how and what the U.S. can engage with the countries in the region to support religious freedom. So it should be a very lively hearing, and again I apologize that we will

be interrupted. But I will now yield to the ranking member Mr. Sires from New Jersey for an opening statement.

Mr. SIRES. Thank you, Mr. Chairman. I would like to join you in the words about Chile. It is very difficult to think in living in a country that is constantly receiving earthquakes and in such a little country and we certainly pray for the people in that country. And I want to thank you, Mr. Chairman, for convening this hearing and thank you to our witnesses for being here today.

Today we are here to examine challenges to religious freedom in the Americas. While the Western Hemisphere has long enjoyed considerable freedom to practice religion compared to other regions in the world, it is important to remain vigilant and pay attention to troubling trends that may be on the horizon. While leaders like Maduro, Castro, and Correa continue to undermine democratic principles, we must do our part to ensure our faith-based communities are able to live free from persecution.

In Mexico, priests are under constant pressure and threat from drug cartels trying to extort money from the church. Additionally, there has been a concerning rise in violence against Protestants and indigenous communities in Mexico. While the culture of impunity in Mexico is strong, we must work to ensure those targeted faith-based communities aim at doing good in their neighborhoods.

And in Argentina there has been a track record of anti-Semitism with the still unsolved 1994 AMIA bombing in Buenos Aires that killed 85 people. The Cuban regime does not spare religious groups while exercising its total control over the island. They actively monitor and limit religious practices through government authorized surveillance and harassment.

And I would like to stop here for a minute, because what I was looking at, Chairman, before, was a very disturbing video that I received recently where the priest was chasing away from the church a Ladies in White and called her a mercenary and that she could not come into that church. To me, being a Catholic, that is very disturbing. The church has a history of being a sanctuary for people through its history and I cannot understand why a priest would chase someone away from the church. To me it is just very disturbing.

And I will finish my—when the Pope comes to visit the Western Hemisphere this month, he plans to stop in Cuba before heading to the United States. I hope he uses this as an opportunity to implore the Castro brothers to loosen their grip on the Cuban people who have long been oppressed for too many years.

And I look forward to hearing from our panelists today as they examine these and other religious freedom issues in the region, and I thank you.

Mr. DUNCAN. I will thank the ranking member. And there is no lighting system in here so I am going to do my best to try to keep up with the time, but we give them 5 minutes. Their biographies are in our folders. So Ms. Stangl testified earlier this year. Welcome back to the subcommittee and you are recognized for 5 minutes.

STATEMENT OF MS. ANNA–LEE STANGL, SENIOR ADVOCACY OFFICE FOR THE AMERICAS, CHRISTIAN SOLIDARITY WORLDWIDE—UK

Ms. STANGL. Thank you so much, Mr. Chairman, and I thank you for holding this hearing which I think might be the first time a hearing like this has been held.

A number of Latin American countries including Mexico and Peru have problematic legal requirements for the registration of religious groups. In 2013, Bolivia also adopted legislation requiring registration but which was expanded to exert control over not just religious groups but all nongovernmental organizations. The law was supposed to enter into force last month, but is not under review by the Constitutional Tribunal and it forces all religious organizations to re-register.

Of most concern to religious leaders, however, is a clause in the new law which states that religious groups must operate within the parameters of "vivir bien," a political ideology incorporating elements of indigenous spiritual beliefs and promoting, and this is a quote, "alternatives to capitalism, to modernity, and to development." This clearly poses a problem for many religious organizations whose belief systems do not align with a particular ideology.

Problematic anti-cult legislation has also cropped up in Bolivia's southern neighbor Argentina. CSW has regularly expressed concern about the adoption of anti-cult legislation which can be used to limit religious freedom. Such legislation often goes beyond targeting criminal actions to criminalizing a system of belief and noncriminal acts of worship. In 2013, the law was used unsuccessfully to target the Pueblo Grande Baptist Church in Rio Tercero.

While the laws in many Latin American countries present a potential threat to religious freedom, a state of lawlessness in many countries presents an even more urgent threat. More Catholic priests were killed in Mexico in 2014 than in any other country in the world. According to the Catholic Multimedia Center, which has been documenting attacks on Catholic church leaders since 2000, criminal groups tend to see priests and lay leaders as promoting a way of life that goes contrary to the objectives of the criminal groups in their preaching and ministry.

Although not as well documented, the situation for Protestant leaders is similar. In some cases the criminal groups have prohibited evangelistic work, demanded the active cooperation of church leaders or attempted to use the church as a front for money laundering or a target for extortion.

Uniquely to Mexico, some criminal groups have incorporated a religious element into their ideology—the cult of Santa Muerte, for example—and attempted to force church leaders to endorse these beliefs through word or actions. Church leaders who refuse to comply with these demands are met with serious repercussions. Mexico is one example of where widespread criminal violence has had a chilling effect on religious freedom, but similar situations can be found Colombia, El Salvador, Honduras, Guatemala, and Argentina.

I now want to turn to unique religious freedom situations in three countries which CSW consider to be a priority for religious freedom advocate in the region. Returning to Mexico, criminal vio-

lence is not the only source of religious freedom violation. Religious intolerance in some states manifested by local leaders attempting to force all inhabitants to adhere to the majority religion results in widespread and egregious violations of religious freedom. If the government does not intervene, as it rarely does, these situations often escalate to violence, including arbitrary detention, physical assault and expropriation or destruction of property, and end in mass expulsion and forced displacement.

Moving now to Colombia. The internal conflict in this country which has gone on now for more than a half century has also had a direct impact on religious freedom. I have already mentioned criminal violence perpetuated in Colombia by neo-paramilitary groups, one of which, the Black Eagles, issued public death threats to civil society leaders including five named Protestant leaders in the Atlantic Coast region earlier this year. The group also named all Protestant churches in the cities of Barranquilla and Sincelejo as military targets.

On the other side of the conflict, leftist guerillas, the FARC and the ELN, have historically severely restricted religious freedom in areas under their influence or control. In some cases they have prohibited all Christian activity and persecuted, even killed, Christian leaders who defied these orders. In other cases, while not prohibiting Christian activity across the board, they have imposed severe restrictions.

In Colombia, state actors have also been accused of violations of religious freedom. Despite numerous rulings by the Constitutional Court that the right to conscientious objection on religious grounds to obligatory military service is protected by the constitution, military forces have not respected this right and have forcibly inducted young men who hold strong religious beliefs that prohibit them from taking up arms.

I conclude now with Cuba where religious organizations and their activities come under the authority of the Office of Religious Affairs of the Central Committee of the Cuban Communist Party. Religious groups must seek permission from this office for things ranging from the right to own a vehicle to something as simple as expanding a bathroom or repairing a roof. The office, in turn, uses the granting or withholding of these permits to manipulate religious groups.

Church leaders of legally recognized denominations report harassment, discrimination and threats from government officials as a daily part of their ministry. Religious groups that do not have legal recognition are severely persecuted and threatened with confiscation or destruction of their property.

Over the past 5 years, CSW has documented a continuous and sharp rise in religious freedom violations in Cuba. Much of this is rooted in the decades-long government policy of attempting to separate Cubans linked to human rights groups and pro-democracy movements from bodies of faith.

In recent years more and more church leaders have defied this policy and welcome all Cubans regardless of their political beliefs into their churches. This has become a flashpoint for religious freedom violations, perhaps most obviously manifested in the violent arbitrary detention each weekend of women linked to the Ladies in

White movement in order to prevent them from attending Sunday Mass.

The general global perception that Latin America is a Christian region of the world with strong Western values has often led to violations of religious freedom, many of them serious, being overlooked. Well thought out policies by the United States to promote freedom of religion or belief in the region carried out in consultation and cooperation with civil society on the ground could have real potential to make a change. Thank you.

[The prepared statement of Ms. Stangl follows:]

WRITTEN BRIEFING

SEPTEMBER 2015

RELIGIOUS FREEDOM CHALLENGES IN LATIN AMERICA

REGISTRATION LAWS AND ANTI-CULT LAWS

A number of Latin American countries have problematic legal requirements for the registration of religious groups. In Mexico, for example, in order to register as a religious association, the group must submit various pieces of evidence to the federal government for review and approval. This includes evidence that it has existed in the country for more than five years, as well as detailed information on its internal statutes, governance and doctrine. Once approval is granted, however, a notice is published in the official gazette and any member of the public has 20 days to lodge a protest. This can derail the entire process and is open to abuse.

Over the past five years there have been attempts, some successful, in other countries in Latin America to establish prohibitively high membership thresholds for legal recognition. In Peru in 2010, legislation misleadingly named the Religious Freedom Law was adopted which effectively stripped all religious organisations of their registered status and forced them to reregister under the new criteria. These criteria included a membership of at least 10,000 adults who all have to be verified individually by the National Elections Board. While unregistered religious groups are not illegal, registered groups receive preferential treatment including tax exemptions and the right to run religious schools, obtain missionary visas for foreigners, own property, and solicit and receive voluntary donations. The law was implemented in 2013 and while our contacts on the ground in Peru say that it has not been applied as vigorously as some feared, the fact that it is still on the books and open to abuse is a cause for concern.

In 2013 Peru's neighbour, Bolivia, adopted legislation that was, in some way, strikingly similar but which was expanded to exert control over not just religious groups but all non-governmental organisations. The law, which was supposed to enter into force last month but which is under review by the Constitutional Tribunal, forces all religious organisations to reregister. In order to do so they must submit a notarised list of all of their members to the government, and submit an annual calendar of planned activities to the Ministry of Foreign Affairs for 'control and follow up'. The law also removes the cancellation of a religious group's registration from the courts and turns it over to the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, leaving groups with little legal recourse or transparency should their registration be revoked. Of most concern to religious leaders, however, is a clause in the new law which states that religious groups must operate within the parameters of 'vivir bien',[1] a political ideology incorporating elements of indigenous spiritual beliefs and promoting alternatives 'to capitalism, to modernity and to development'. This clearly poses a problem for many religious organisations whose belief systems do not align with this particular ideology.

Problematic anti-cult legislation has also cropped up in Bolivia's southern neighbour Argentina. CSW has regularly expressed concern about the adoption of anti-cult legislation which can be used to limit religious freedom. Such legislation often goes beyond targeting criminal actions to criminalising a system of belief and non-criminal acts of worship.

Minority religious groups, even those with a lengthy history, are often targeted by these laws. Law 9891 in Argentina, which was adopted at the state level in Córdoba, exemplifies the problematic nature of these laws and their potential for arbitrary and abusive implementation in Article 1, where it states, 'Any person who demonstrates a change in personality is a possible victim of a dangerous cult that uses coercive methods of manipulation.' Argentinian religious leaders have expressed concern that the law on the provincial level is a test run for an attempt to pass anti-cult legislation on the national level. In 2013 the law was used, unsuccessfully, to target the Pueblo Grande Baptist Church in Rio Tercero; it remains on the books.

While the laws in many Latin American countries present a potential threat to religious freedom, a state of lawlessness in many countries presents an even more urgent threat. More Catholic priests were killed in Mexico in 2014 than in any other country in the world. According to the Catholic Multimedia Centre, which has been documenting attacks on Catholic church leaders since 2000, criminal groups tend to see priests and lay leaders as promoting a way of life that is contrary to the objectives of the criminal groups in their preaching and ministry. Although not as well documented, the situation for Protestant leaders is similar. In some cases the criminal groups have prohibited evangelistic work, demanded the active cooperation of church leaders, or attempted to use the church as a front for money laundering or a target for extortion. Uniquely to Mexico, some criminal groups have incorporated a religious element into their ideology – the cult of Santa Muerte for example – and attempted to force church leaders to endorse these beliefs through word or actions. Church leaders who refuse to comply with these demands are met with serious repercussions.

The threats do not always come from criminal groups, however, but sadly sometimes from government security forces. I have just returned from El Salvador, where criminal violence is out of control and where the government is implementing repressive policies that violate fundamental human rights including religious freedom. One pastor told me, "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 programme 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." Earlier this year, Pastor Mario Vega, pastor of a megachurch in San Salvador and head of Elim International Christian Ministries, a major denomination in the country and internationally, was named and threatened on an

1 Praxis en América Latina, 'Horizontes del vivir bien' (Spanish) www.praxisenamericalatina.org/4-12/horizontes.html

internet message board allegedly run by a police death squad. Pastor Vega has openly spoken about the impact of these repressive policies on the churches' ministries, and made calls for the government to incorporate respect for fundamental human rights in its security policies.

Mexico and El Salvador are two examples where widespread criminal violence has had a chilling effect on religious freedom, but similar situations can be found in Colombia, Honduras, Guatemala, and Argentina.

I now want to turn to unique religious freedom situations in three countries which CSW considers to be a priority for religious freedom advocacy in the region. Returning to Mexico, criminal violence is not the only source of religious freedom violations. Religious intolerance in some states, manifested by local leaders attempting to force all inhabitants to adhere to the majority religion, results in widespread and egregious violations of religious freedom. Most cases follow a common trajectory: first the local leaders declare the village to be one particular religion and prohibit the practice of any other. Members of minority faiths are pressured to convert to the majority. If they refuse they will likely first see their water and electricity cut off, their children will be banned from attending school, and they will be prohibited from burying their dead in the public cemetery. If the government does not intervene, as it rarely does, these situations often escalate to violence including arbitrary detention, physical assault and expropriation or destruction of property, and end in mass expulsion and forced displacement.

Despite numerous investigations and strong recommendations from national and state government human rights commissions on some of these cases, the Mexican government at all levels has utterly failed to address this problem. To give one example, 127 people in the village of Union Juarez in the state of Chiapas have been living without electricity or access to clean water for a year and a half. Many now, especially the children, suffer poor health as a result of this. Despite being fully aware of what is happening from the beginning, the government has failed to do anything to remedy the situation. Those responsible for these serious violations which constitute criminal acts are virtually never held to account in the legal system, as if committing a crime for religious reasons constitutes a kind of exemption. To give another example, in 2013 four Protestant men were arbitrarily imprisoned and tortured for four days by the mayor of the municipality of San Juan Ozolotepec in the state of Oaxaca. Their church was destroyed, and the mayor made public calls to lynch all the Protestants. The men were only released after the case received national attention in the media and the National Human Rights Commission opened an investigation. Almost two years later, the mayor, Pedro Cruz Gonzalez, remains in his position with no repercussions. He has in fact gone on to commit even more religious freedom violations, stripping all Protestant members of the municipality of their civil and political rights, including the right to vote in 2014. The victims of the 2013 attack have seen no justice and have been doubly victimised as they are now displaced and unable to return to their homes because of fears for their safety. We estimate there to be at least 100 of these kinds of cases in Mexico today, each involving anywhere from 20 to 130 victims.

Moving now to Colombia. The internal conflict in this country which has gone on for more than a half century has also had a direct impact on religious freedom. I have already mentioned criminal violence, perpetuated in Colombia by neo-paramilitary groups; one of which, the Black Eagles, issued public death threats to civil society leaders, including five named Protestant leaders in the Atlantic Coast region, earlier this year. The group also named 'all Protestant churches' in the cities of Barranquilla and Sincelejo as military targets.

On the other side of the conflict, leftist guerrillas the FARC and the ELN have historically severely restricted religious freedom in areas under their influence or control. In some cases they have prohibited any Christian activity and persecuted, even killed, church leaders who defied these orders. In other cases, while not prohibiting Christian activity across the board they have imposed severe restrictions. In 2013 a document published by the FARC called the *Manual for Co-Existence*, which is still in effect today in the southern region of Putumayo, was leaked. It states that 'Evangelical chapels may only be built in municipal capitals', and 'Pastors and priests will only hold their masses in the churches in the municipal capitals.' Priests and pastors in the heavily rural Putumayo region who have attempted to conduct ministry outside of the municipal capitals have come under threat or been forced to flee.

The manual's restrictions on religious practice are in line with other reports received by CSW. The FARC-EP, a left wing guerrilla group which took up arms in the 1960s and is currently in the midst of an ongoing peace dialogue with the government, has targeted religious groups and leaders since its inception. It is believed to be responsible for the targeted assassinations of hundreds of church leaders over the past 50 years. These include the murders of Reverend Manuel Camacho in the Guaviare region in 2009 and Pastors Humberto Mendez and Joel Cruz Garcia in Huila in 2007; all three pastors reportedly defied FARC-EP restrictions on preaching and evangelising.

Once again, in Colombia state actors have also been accused of violations of religious freedom. Despite numerous rulings by the Constitutional Court that the right to conscientious objection on religious grounds to obligatory military service is protected by the constitution, military forces have not respected this right and have forcibly inducted young men who hold strong religious beliefs that prohibit them from taking up arms. Following a study and recommendations from the National Ombudsman's Office, there are currently efforts underway to put in place legislation that would establish the legal parameters of this right.

I conclude now with Cuba – unique in the Western Hemisphere. From the very beginning the Castro regime attempted to co-opt or control religious expression as much as possible. Religious organisations are overseen by the Office of Religious Affairs of the Central Committee of the Cuban Communist Party. They must seek permission from this office for things ranging from the right to own a vehicle to something as simple as expanding a bathroom or repairing a roof. The Office, in turn, uses the granting or withholding of these permits to manipulate religious groups. Those perceived as uncooperative or unsupportive of government policies often struggle to receive any response at all, much less permits from the Office. Church leaders of legally recognised denominations report harassment, discrimination and threats from government officials as a daily part of their ministry. Religious groups that do not have legal recognition are severely persecuted, and threatened with confiscation or destruction of their property. This year, Reverend Jesús Noel Carballeda spent six months in prison for holding unauthorised religious meetings in Marianao. Another national leader of an unrecognised group, Reverend Yiorvis Bravo, has been fighting a government order to arbitrarily expropriate his home and the location of his ministry since 2013. A request for preventative measures was filed earlier this year at the Inter-American Human Rights Commission.

Over the past five years, CSW has documented a continuous and sharp rise in religious freedom violations. Much of this is rooted in the decades-long government policy of attempting to separate Cubans linked to human rights or pro-democracy movements from bodies of faith. In recent years more and

more church leaders have defied this policy and welcomed all Cubans regardless of their political beliefs into their churches. This has become a flashpoint for religious freedom violations – perhaps most obviously manifested in the violent arbitrary detention each weekend of women linked to the Ladies in White movement, in order to prevent them from attending Sunday Mass. Protestant churches which have opened their doors to all Cubans have also seen repercussions. The Trinidad First Baptist Church in Santa Clara, for example, had its bank account frozen by the government in 2010 as retaliation for the then pastor's permitting of prayers for political prisoners in the church, and the presence of Sakharov Prize-winning dissident Guillermo Farinas in church services.

Finally, new legislation, Legal Decree 322: the General Law on Housing, announced on 5 September 2014 and which went into force in 5 January 2015,[2] has reportedly been used by government officials to claim the right to seize church properties and to force the churches into the role of paying tenant. Cuban lawyers have told CSW that while the law is meant to regulate private properties (mostly homes) and enforce zoning, and does not specifically mention religious groups, government officials have claimed that it gives them the authority to expropriate property when they deem it 'necessary.' One of the most prominent cases is that of the Maranatha First Baptist Church in Holguin which was informed earlier this year that the property where the church is located, and which has belonged to the church since 1947, now belongs to the government. An international campaign appears to have caused government officials to review their position, and the head of the Office of Religious Affairs informed the denominational leadership that they could expect a decision on the status of the property in October.

The general global perception that Latin America is a Christian region of the world with strong western values has often led to violations of religious freedom, many of them serious, being overlooked. As I have mentioned, the causes for these violations are varied and some are unique to particular countries; however, the good news is that most governments in Latin America, with the exception of Cuba, are willing and open to engage on this issue. Well thought out policies by the United States to promote freedom of religion or belief in the region, carried out in consultation and cooperation with civil society on the ground, have real potential to make a change.

As religious freedom violations in other parts of the world grow in severity and numbers, I believe that Latin America could be a valuable ally in the fight to defend the freedoms and rights we all hold dear. Before it can do this effectively, however, Latin American countries must get their own houses in order.

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2 More information on the law can be found at www.cubadebate.cu/noticias/2014/09/24/cuales-son-las-principales-modificaciones-a-la-ley-general-de-la-vivienda/#.VXCxNM9Viko (Spanish)

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CSW is a Christian organisation working for religious freedom through advocacy and human rights, in the pursuit of justice.

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Mr. DUNCAN. Thank you. Mr. Petri, you are recognized for 5 minutes.

STATEMENT OF MR. DENNIS P. PETRI, RESEARCH COORDINATOR FOR LATIN AMERICA, ASSOCIATE DIRECTOR, WORLD WATCH RESEARCH, OPEN DOORS INTERNATIONAL

Mr. PETRI. Thank you, Mr. Chairman. I will summarize my written testimony. The majority of all Latin American citizens is formally Christian, but actively practicing Christians, that is Christians who regularly attend church, are a minority, and this minority is specifically vulnerable to suffering human rights abuses. As far as the legal framework is concerned, it can be concluded that there are no major obstacles to religious freedom in the vast majority of Latin American countries, with the exception of Cuba. But from the perspective of human security, the enforcement of religious freedom poses challenges.

Religious freedom in Latin America is restricted by three dynamics. The first is organized crime. The main feature of organized crime is the creation of a climate of impunity, anarchy and corruption, in which actively practicing Christians are vulnerable because their behavior, which is based on the biblical world view, is contrary to the greed of organized crime. Of course, organized crime affects societies as a whole, and not only Christians. But actively participating Christians possess a specific vulnerability for suffering human rights abuses.

The targeting of Christians by criminal organizations is generally motivated by a combination of two elements. Firstly, people involved in organized crime view Christians who openly oppose their activities as a threat, especially when Christians get involved in social programs or in politics.

Secondly, criminal organizations know that the Christian faith is not compatible with their ideals. They fear Christians will influence members of the community or even members of their own organizations to oppose activities. All denominations of Christianity can become victims of organized crime, though it affects mostly the more outspoken Christians who fulfill leadership positions. Let me mention a few examples on Mexico.

In many states of Mexico violence is pervasive but affects actively practicing Christians to a high degree. Churches and other Christian institutions are often seen as revenue centers by drug cartels. The extortion of priests, pastors, but also Christian business owners is commonplace. Attending church services increases the threat of kidnapping and youths are particularly at risk of being recruited into gangs.

Social initiatives are also faced with major threats, especially initiatives that enter the area of influence of criminal organizations. Drug rehabilitation or youth work are a direct threat to the market and influence of drug cartels and therefore increase the vulnerability of Christians engaging in these programs. From personal research on the ground I can confirm that there is widespread and sophisticated surveillance and monitoring by members of drug cartels within churches.

And now turning to Colombia. In many parts of Colombia, similarly to Mexico, organized crime is responsible for demonstrable

threats to certain forms of religious behavior. The second dynamic that restricts religious freedom in the Americas is the presence of hostilities against conversion to Christianity in indigenous areas, especially in Mexico and Colombia. Converts to Christianity are regularly threatened, excluded from access to basic social services, beaten and displaced by tribal leaders, and they are not given sufficient protection by their government.

The third dynamic that restricts religious freedom in the Americas is communism. In Cuba, pressure on Christians continues in the form of harassment, strict surveillance and discrimination including the occasional imprisonment of Christian leaders. Religious practice is monitored and all church services are infiltrated by spies.

In Venezuela, the pressure on Christians is subtle, but any organization which is influential is restricted by the government. For years, the Venezuelan administration has attempted to shut down private Catholic education in favor of public schools. And in Bolivia, through administrative and bureaucratic obstacles, Christians are also restricted in their freedom to exercise their right to worship.

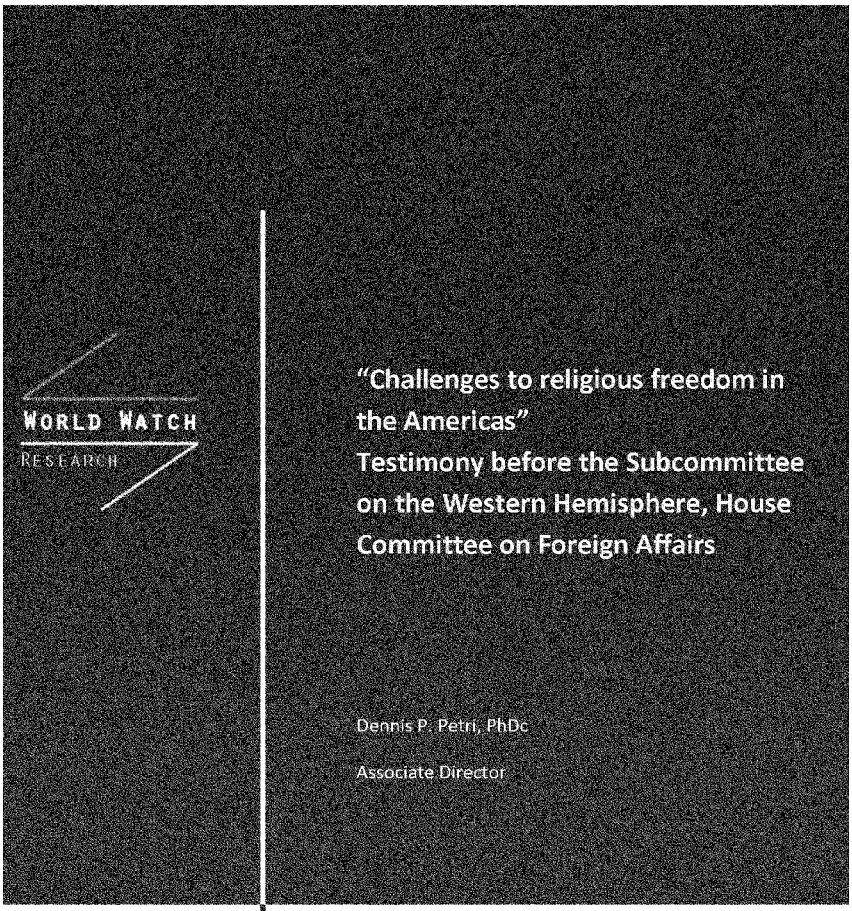
Your excellencies, I recommend the following. First, I recommend that the specific vulnerability of actively practicing Christians is taken into consideration in U.S. foreign policy and by the U.S. Congress in performing its oversight function. The U.S. Government should make the reduction of risks for Christians caused by organized crime an integral part of its foreign policy.

Second, special attention should be given to ratio of structural violence, impunity, and corruption as Mexico and other Latin American states are not always diligent enough in terms of investigating issues related to violations of freedom of religion and expression. Third, the U.S. Government should urge the Colombian Government to include religious freedom in their agenda for ongoing peace talks with the FARC guerillas.

Fourth, the U.S. Government must put pressure on the Colombian Government to counter the abuses in the realm of religious freedom of the constitutional provision that grants autonomy to indigenous territories. Fifth, I also recommend that advantage should be taken of the recent developments in diplomatic relations with Cuba to specifically address the religious freedom situation in that country.

Sixth, finally, the U.S. Government should work together with Latin American states to create a system in which churches and Christian leaders who are victims of extortion feel safe to denounce the threats against them.

[The prepared statement of Mr. Petri follows:]



World Watch Research / Open Doors International

September 17, 2015

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"Challenges to religious freedom in the Americas" Testimony before the Subcommittee on the Western Hemisphere, House Committee on Foreign Affairs September 17, 2015

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1. Introduction

Honorable members of Congress, Ladies and Gentlemen:

My name is Dennis P. Petri. I am the Associate Director of World Watch Research, the research department of Open Doors International. It is an honor and a privilege to testify before this subcommittee and to share about the challenges to religious freedom in the Americas.

In this testimony, after outlining the key points, I will briefly present the work of Open Doors International, followed by a description of the state of legal protection of religious freedom in Latin America and an in-depth discussion of the specific vulnerability of Latin American Christians to suffer human rights abuses. Finally, I will present some conclusions and a set of policy recommendations.

In this testimony, the following key points will be addressed:

- Organized crime is posing a threat to freedom of religion and expression in the Americas;
- In indigenous areas, converts to Christianity are threatened by tribal leaders and they are not given sufficient protection by their governments;
- In communist and post-communist countries, Christians are denied the freedom to exercise their right to worship as well as freedom of expression.
- Latin American states are not always diligent enough in terms of investigating issues related to violations of freedom of religion and expression.

2. The work of Open Doors International

Open Doors International is a faith-based organization that provides humanitarian assistance and advocates for Christians (defined broadly as anyone who self-identifies as such) who are persecuted for their faith. The organization was founded 60 years ago and is involved in about 50 countries worldwide. During the Cold War era, the organization's focus was on the former Soviet Union, but expanded to South East Asia and the Middle East, and more recently, Africa. In Latin America, Open Doors International has field offices in Colombia and Mexico. Research is carried out throughout the whole continent.

Open Doors International has been monitoring the persecution of Christians worldwide since the 1970s. One of the main tools of Open Doors International to track and measure the extent of persecution in the world is the World Watch List (WWL), an annual publication that assesses the top 50 countries in the world where persecution of Christians is most severe.[1]

[1] To obtain a copy of the most recent publication of the World Watch List 2015 and the full methodological framework, please visit www.theanalytical.org.

3. Legal protection of religious freedom in Latin America

Since the start of Latin America's democratization in the 1980's, the legal protection of religious freedom is guaranteed by international treaties and national constitutions. Most Latin American countries are signatories to the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights[2], the Universal Declaration of Human Rights[3] and the American Convention on Human Rights[4], which protect freedom of religion.

As far as national constitutions and state interference are concerned, there are no major concerns related to the legal protection of religious freedom. Data from the Religion and State Project[5] confirms that apart from some forms of preferential treatment given to Catholics and some registration requirements and limits on proselytizing, Latin American states have among the lowest levels of government involvement in religion.

Thus, as far as the legal framework is concerned, it can be concluded that there are no major obstacles to religious freedom in the vast majority of Latin American countries, with the exception of Cuba. From the perspective of human security, the enforcement of religious freedom, however, does pose challenges for some minority groups as will be explained in the next section.

4. The specific vulnerability of Latin American Christians to suffer human rights abuses

An important distinction must be made between nominal Christians and actively practicing Christians. The majority of Latin America's population is nominally Christian but in most Latin American countries less than 50% of all Christians regularly attends church.[6] Generally speaking, actively practicing Christians are a minority.

In the following, I will discuss how this group of actively practicing Christians possesses a specific vulnerability for suffering human rights abuses, i.e. there are demonstrable threats to forms of religious behavior.

Three major categories of threats to the religious expression of Christians in Latin America will be discussed:

- The regulation of religion by organized crime;
- The hostility towards Christian converts in indigenous communities;
- The restrictions on religious expression in communist and post-communist countries.

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[2] See Article 18 of the International Convention on Civil and Political Rights.
[3] See Article 18 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights.
[4] See Article 12 of the American Convention on Human Rights.
[5] The Religion and State Project, http://www.religionandstate.org/. Bar-Ilan University, Ramat Gan, Israel.
[6] Pew Research Center, Nov. 13, 2014, "Religion in Latin America: Widespread Change in a Historically Catholic Region"

4.1 The regulation of religion by organized crime

Organized crime is a very important – if not the most important – source of vulnerability for actively practicing Christians in Latin America. It is characterized by underperforming states in which the rule of law is not guaranteed and corruption is endemic, in combination with the multiplication of various criminal organizations – whether drug cartels, revolutionary insurgencies or paramilitary groups – which operate with impunity.

The main feature of organized crime is the creation of a climate of impunity, anarchy and corruption, in which actively practicing Christians are vulnerable because their behavior – based on the biblical worldview – is contrary to the greed of organized crime. Of course, organized crime affects societies as a whole, and not only Christians. It is nevertheless relevant to mention that Christians possess a specific vulnerability for suffering human rights abuses, especially Christians who actively practice their faith.

The targeting of Christians by criminal organizations is generally motivated by a combination of two elements. Firstly, people involved in organized crime view Christians who openly oppose their activities as a threat, especially when Christians get involved in social programs or in politics. Secondly, they know that the Christian faith is not compatible with their ideals. They fear Christians will influence members of the community or even members of their own organizations to oppose their activities.

All denominations of Christianity can become victims of organized crime, though it affects mostly the more outspoken Christians who play prominent roles in social or public life, or fulfill leadership positions, both at community and national levels.

It is difficult to provide an estimate of the number of Christians that are affected in this way by organized crime, but Christians can be expected to be vulnerable to it in any country where crime levels are high and where the Church is active in society. The cases of Mexico and Colombia will be presented now.

4.1.1 Drug cartels in Mexico

The whole country of Mexico has been plagued by consistent violence from non-state actors and from the rise of transnational networks and gangs related to drug trafficking. The clashes between the Mexican security forces and non-state actors profoundly affect Mexican society in many ways. This violence has become one of the main concerns for Mexican citizens and their government. The effects are clearly visible, distorting the overall functioning of society by creating a culture of fear, impunity and corruption.

Especially in North Mexico, the existence of strong drug cartels such as the Sinaloa Cartel or the Zetas has generated chaos and extreme violence. Particularly Nuevo León and Tamaulipas (North-East), and Michoacán and bordering states (North-West), are so problematic that they are considered by some to be failed states.

Violence is pervasive but affects actively practicing Christians to a high degree. Pressure from organized crime cartels or networks, sometimes with the complicity of corrupt government officials, is experienced by actively practicing Christians in community life and often causes extremely high levels of violence. Extreme violence creates fear and pushes Christians and churches to go into hiding behind their front door.

Throughout the country, drug cartels have implemented a sophisticated "tax" collection system in the territories under their control. It is a very common practice of such criminal organizations to charge churches or businesses for the right to remain open or to be allowed to organize a public meeting[7] – similar to a public license –, to collect a percentage of the proceeds of a business – just like an income tax –, or to charge for protection. These "taxes" are commonly known as *derecho de piso [floor right]* or *venta de protección [protection rackets]*.[8]

This is a recurrent theme in most of the interviews I have conducted in recent years and is by far the most significant threat on church life. It is difficult to assess the extent of these charges because most go unreported (according to government officials, only 10% of the cases are formally brought to court), but most of the people I interviewed indicate that this is a massive phenomenon affecting virtually all churches, while many others appear too afraid to speak about it.

The phenomenon of illegal charges, which is the most common form of extortion in Mexico, is typical of failed states, in which criminal organizations take over traditional roles of the state. Criminal organizations make all kinds of threats, including the kidnapping of family members if the extorted entity refuses to pay. Victims cannot always report the threats, because there is no legal security and because the police itself are corrupt.[9]

Next to extortions, kidnap-for-ransom is the most common threat in Mexico. It frequently affects actively practicing Christians, both in church and business life. As with extortions, kidnap-for-ransom is mainly an income generating activity carried out by criminal organizations.

The scope of the kidnappings is difficult to assess quantitatively, but it can be established that churches are greatly affected by this threat. Kidnapping can happen for commercial reasons, but can also happen to intimidate or as a reprisal for not cooperating with a previous requirement.

Church services are restricted by the generalized context of insecurity and impunity and by the orders of drug cartels that in practice regulate religion and religious expression. The right that is violated in both cases is *freedom of assembly*, which is an intrinsic element of *freedom of religion*.

The generalized context of insecurity in the country implies that meeting in a church is dangerous. Personal research in the field revealed that large gatherings are always at risk of being interrupted and attacked, but especially church meetings which are visible, recurrent and generally easy to enter. I also found that in many areas, church leaders have decided not to organize nighttime church services for security reasons, and in some areas no church services are organized at all. These restrictions are a form of "self-imposed curfew", significantly reducing religious expression in church life.

Orders issued by drug cartels also place restrictions on church services, as I found through interviews I conducted in North-East Mexico. Church services are not allowed in certain areas,

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[7] "Impresentable: Pastores de Michoacán deben pagar a narcos para realizar eventos masivos en sus iglesias", *Noticia Cristiana*, 12/04/2010.
[8] "Pago de "derecho de piso" se extiende en todo el país", *El Universal*, 04/10/2011.
[9] Colombian guerrillas have a similar figure to *derecho de piso* which is known as *vacuna [vaccine]*.

and there are reports of churches that have been closed by orders of drug cartels, generally for not paying *derecho de piso*. Evangelistic activities are also restricted in some areas. Moreover, there are reports of individuals who are prohibited from attending church services or have the obligation to report to the drug cartels whenever they visit a particular church.

Field research in Mexico confirms that risks increase when active religious behavior occurs in a context of organized crime. Attending church meetings puts worshipers at an increased risk of extortions and kidnappings. Churches are seen as revenue centers by organized crime, as they are thought of as having a lot of financial resources. This is only true for the larger churches, but it causes all churches to be especially vulnerable to extortions and kidnap-for-ransom.

Youth are permanently at risk of being recruited into criminal organizations, whether by force or by persuasion. Christian workers who actively reach out to cartel members in order to share about the Christian faith put their lives in great danger. Christian leaders engaging in this kind of activity can expect to receive death threats. Cartel members who convert to Christianity and consequently abandon their cartel risk being killed.

The moral authority of Christian leaders is perceived as being a threat to organized crime. Most interpretations of Christianity seek to promote spiritual and social transformation, which can easily conflict with the interests of drug cartels. Especially the "prophetic voice" of the church as denouncer of injustice makes Christians vulnerable.

There is an incompatibility of worldviews between actively practicing Christians and organized crime, which to a large extent explains the violence suffered by Christians. Religious lifestyles that counter the expectations of organized crime, such as refusals to collaborate with money laundering, increase vulnerability.

Social initiatives are also faced with major threats, especially initiatives that enter the area of influence of criminal organizations. Civic participation, such as drug rehabilitation programs or youth work, is a direct threat to the market and influence of drug cartels, and therefore also increases the vulnerability of Christians engaging in these programs. Drug rehabilitation programs are targeted by criminal organizations because they directly threaten the drug trafficking business. Initiatives that provide meaningful alternatives for young people at risk are also vulnerable to threats.

Speaking out against injustice – whether it is violence, drug consumption, drug trafficking, corruption or organized crime – and above all speaking out publicly, from the pulpit or in another setting, is extremely dangerous and can result in many forms of intimidation by drug cartels, including beatings, attacks on houses of church leaders, or even killings. From personal research on the ground I can confirm that that there is widespread and sophisticated surveillance and monitoring by members of drug cartels within churches, including the content of sermons.

Reporting on organized crime, in journalism or in academia, is a risky business. Generally speaking, outspoken Christians are threatened by organized crime. The organization of prayer services for police and security forces is also extremely risky.

A number of other reports have also stressed the impact of organized crime on Christians. For example, a narrative report by the International Crisis Group on criminal cartels and rule of law in Mexico makes reference to priests, although the report chooses to focus on journalists and human rights defenders (2013, 30). The *International Religious Freedom* report by the US State Department mentions "there was a report priests faced an increase during the year in

extortion attempts, death threats, and intimidation" (2013, 4), but does not discuss the causes and broader context of this report. An address to the US Congress by Jorge Lee Galindo, the Mexican representative of Christian Solidarity Worldwide, a Christian charity, also refers to "narco-persecution."[10] Awareness about the vulnerability of Christian workers in the face of organized crime is also beginning to rise in the broader society. An article in *El Universal*, one of Mexico's leading newspapers, was titled "Organized crime is intolerant with priests."[11]

In the near future, the security situation in Mexico will continue to be dire. National security forces have been incapable of adequately addressing the situation, in part because of the infiltration and co-optation of security and judiciary institutions.[12] The escape from prison of Mexico's fiercest drug lord and leader of the very violent Sinaloa cartel, Joaquín Guzmán, commonly known as "El Chapo", reveals how powerful the drug cartels are, and the extent to which they have infiltrated the country's security system.

4.1.2 Guerrillas and criminal gangs in Colombia

Colombia is a country with multiple realities. Formally, Colombia is a modern democratic country where the rule of law is established and religious freedom is guaranteed. However, large areas of the country are under the control of criminal organizations, drug cartels, revolutionaries and paramilitary groups.

In a context of generalized impunity, all inhabitants of Colombia suffer from the conflict that has lasted for decades, but Christians are specifically vulnerable to such hostilities. Contrary to what President Santos, re-elected in 2014, carries out, the country is not becoming safer. Notwithstanding the current dialogue in Cuba between the Colombian government and FARC, many Christians continue to be targeted because of their individual activities as influential pastors (leaders of public opinion), political leaders, journalists, lawyers, human rights advocates, indigenous rights advocates or environmental protection advocates, and when they do they are seen as a threat to the interests of criminal networks.

In specific areas, revolutionary and anti-revolutionary paramilitary groups – intimately linked to organized crime – operate within a context of impunity, corruption, anarchy, drug wars and structural violence. Within such a context, Christians are a vulnerable group that, because of its mere presence, constitutes a threat to the hegemony of criminal organizations. Christianity represents an alternative way to behave in society, especially for young people, which makes churches a direct competitor of criminal organizations.

Based on figures published by Open Doors International, during 2014 at least five Christians have been killed for their faith in Guaviare, Meta, Antioquia and Córdoba by guerrillas, paramilitaries and other criminal organizations. The latter have also ordered the closure of about twenty churches, sometimes because these churches have criticized their activity or because they are viewed as being accomplices of the government or groups that oppose them. During the conflict, numerous Christians have been displaced from their homes.

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[10] Written Statement by Mr. Jorge Lee Galindo, Director, Impulso 18 to the United States House of Representatives Foreign Affairs Committee Subcommittee on Africa, Global Health, Global Human Rights, and International Organizations. Hearing on the Worldwide Persecution of Christians. Tuesday, February 11, 2014

[11] "El crimen organizado es intolerante con los sacerdotes", *El Universal*, 04/01/2015.

[12] International Crisis Group, *Peña Nieto's Challenge: Criminal Cartels and Rule of Law in Mexico*, Latin America Report N.48, 19 March 2013.

In community life, criminal organizations or guerrillas obstruct Christians in their daily lives, monitoring their activities and impeding anything that goes against their interests. Criminal groups often take over the traditional roles of the state, which in practice means there is no rule of law, and harm inflicted to Christians is left unpunished. In church life, organized crime significantly reduces the freedom of Christians to gather, as church services are constantly monitored and the content of preaching is censored if considered threatening to its hegemony.

4.2. Hostilities against converts to Christianity in indigenous communities

4.2.1 Indigenous communities in Mexico

Open Doors International reports that there is considerable pressure on Christians in indigenous areas in Mexico. In the states of Hidalgo, Chiapas, Guerrero and Oaxaca, local government officials (municipal and state) cooperate with the local laws of *usos y costumbres [uses and customs]*, and ignore the Mexican Constitution. Christians have been fined, jailed or beaten because of their faith. This dynamic manifests itself mainly in indigenous areas and in collective farms (*ejidos*) in the Southern states of the country. These generally oppose Catholic traditionalists and converts to new religious movements, such as Pentecostalism or the Catholic Renewal Movement.

In indigenous communities, converts from traditional religion are often victims of violence or destruction of their homes, and many need to flee. Since 2014, more than 2000 cases of physical abuse have been reported in the Southern states of Mexico. Moreover, around 600 cases have been reported of forced displacements, as is documented by Open Doors International.

4.2.2 Indigenous territories in Colombia

In Colombia, tensions caused by conversion within the indigenous communities can be observed. Converts to Christianity are seen as a threat to the power of local fiefs and indigenous ancestral traditions, and are particularly vulnerable to suffer human rights abuses. Open Doors International reports that converts to Christianity in the Cauca region are regularly denied equal participation in decision-making, and risk being tortured or displaced.

In families, conversion from indigenous traditional beliefs to Christianity is not tolerated as it is seen as a threat to the community's ancestral traditions. For this reason, baptisms and other family-related expressions of Christianity need to carried out in secret. In the community sphere, Christians face all forms of harassment and discrimination, including exclusion from basic social services. Christian schools are hardly tolerated. In the church sphere, freedom of Christians is also very much restricted, as any Christian activity is considered a threat to the political power of indigenous leaders.

As Open Doors International reports, since 2011, more than 150 churches were ordered to be closed. More than 200 cases were recorded of Christians who were forcefully displaced in the departments of Cauca, Huila and Córdoba, and hundreds were threatened to be displaced. Numerous houses and shops of Christians have also been damaged.

4.3 Restrictions on religious expression in communist and post-communist countries

4.3.1 Cuba

Cuba is one of the few remaining communist regimes in the world. Some years ago, the country's aging leader, Fidel Castro, was replaced by his brother Raúl, but the regime stayed essentially the same and expected changes did not take place. Cuba has continued to isolate itself from the rest of the world and function under totalitarian control.

In recent years, a set of internal and external factors – whose scope and impact are not yet fully clear – bear the potential of bringing about a certain degree of political change. The persecution of Christians, more severe in the past, is now slowly changing. While the persecution of Christians in the past included beatings, imprisonment and sometimes murder, now it is generally more subtle. It continues in the form of harassment, strict surveillance and discrimination, including the occasional imprisonment of leaders. Religious practice is monitored and all church services are infiltrated by spies; Christians are threatened and suffer discrimination in school and at work.

As Open Doors International reports, religious groups complain about widespread surveillance and infiltration by state security agents. Pastors and Christians are sometimes put under pressure to stop evangelizing and to limit their activities to their own church premises. Permission to print Christian literature locally is hard to obtain. Bibles, Bible study materials and Sunday school materials are in extremely short supply. Everything is restricted. Existing seminaries and church buildings may be used, but new churches and seminaries cannot be built. Legal procedures to get permission to build are excessively slow. Evangelism is allowed, and even foreigners may request a 'religious visa', but it is not possible to mention the human rights situation and politics.

4.3.2 Venezuela

In Venezuela, the pressure on Christians is subtle and hard to discern. There is a political trend towards a socialist society, with the president crushing the opposition. The Church has been affected by the complex political situation. Tensions between President Nicolás Maduro and the leadership of the Catholic Church have been growing. For years, the Chavez administration has attempted to shut down private education in all its forms in favor of public schools. His goal, observers say, was to use the public school system for the political indoctrination of the youth. The government gives economic incentives to students who attend state schools. Hence, parochial schools, Catholic as well as Evangelical, find themselves working against policies and programs designed to eventually drive them out of business. Maduro has followed in his predecessor's footsteps.

In some cases, Christians with political views critical of the administration have been threatened with physical harm. Some say they know of friends or neighbors who were arrested or who "disappeared" (sometimes kidnapped by Colombian guerrilla groups operating within Venezuelan territory with the tacit approval of the regime) because they have opposed the government's policies.

4.3.3 Bolivia

President Evo Morales assumed office in 2006 with promises of greater religious freedom. The first indigenous citizen to be the democratically elected president of Bolivia, he abolished the historic religious domination of the Roman Catholic Church. Moreover, the Constitution of 2008 established a "secular state" designed to be neutral in matters of faith and conscience. The country's Protestant Christian population, which had long sought church and state separation, initially welcomed the new political order. They assumed a secular state meant the end of religious discrimination.

However, a controversial "Law 351 for Granting of Juridical Personality to Churches and Religious Groups" was passed in March 2013 in Bolivia, causing the country's Evangelical community to worry. The law requires all churches and non-profit organizations to re-register their legal charters with the government. This involves supplying detailed data on membership, financial activity and organizational leadership. The law also stipulates a standardized administrative structure for all "religious organizations" which church groups must adopt. Churches failing to complete the registration within a stipulated two-year period lose their legal right to exist. Protestant church leaders assert that, taken together, the new measures grant the government regulatory power over the internal affairs of churches, which is viewed as a restriction of religious freedom by some Christians.

5. Conclusions

Freedom of religion has many components. The UN Human Rights Committee in its General Comment 22 says freedom of religion, as provided under the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights, is "far-reaching and profound." According to the Committee, the right "encompasses freedom of thought on all matters, personal conviction and the commitment to religion or belief, whether manifested individually or in community with others." The Committee also underlines the importance of freedom of religion by stating "this provision cannot be derogated from, even in time of public emergency." The Committee further underscores "there are no limitations whatsoever on the freedom of thought and conscience or on the freedom to have or adopt a religion or belief of one's choice."

The freedom to manifest religion or belief in worship, with all the supporting practices and teachings, encompasses a broad range of activities, as stated by the Committee: "the practice and teaching of religion or belief includes acts integral to the conduct by religious groups of their basic affairs, such as the freedom to choose their religious leaders, priests and teachers, the freedom to establish seminaries or religious schools and the freedom to prepare and distribute religious texts or publications."

When we compare the above standard with the findings of the testimony presented here, it is clear that the above standard is not met in many parts of Latin America for a variety of reasons. As was explained, there is demonstrable evidence that Christians are vulnerable for suffering human rights abuses.

The fact that organized crime can be considered a source of the vulnerability of actively practicing Christians takes the focus away from a restrictive political interpretation of the obstacles to religious freedom. A central aspect hereof is that little is wrong with the constitutions and legislation of most Latin American countries as far as religious freedom is

concerned. The problem is that these rights are not enforceable in a context of impunity and organized crime, where drug cartels actually regulate religion to a considerable extent.

The observation of actively practicing Christians as a religious minority in terms of vulnerability to suffer human rights abuses is also relevant because it allows highlighting aspects of pressure on religious minorities that are not necessarily related to religious motives, but are deduced from the operations of organized crime.

6. Recommendations

1. The US Government should make the reduction of risks for Christians caused by organized crime an integral part of its foreign policy. Efforts in the fields of state reform, corruption prevention, strengthening of the rule of law and human rights education are essential to Latin American societies as a whole, but specific attention to the vulnerability of actively practicing Christians in the framework of organized crime is required.

2. The US Congress should pay special attention to the position of vulnerable groups in Latin America, particularly that of actively practicing Christians, in its oversight of the US foreign policy.

3. The US Government and the US Congress should recognize the full breadth of religious freedom violations, including the vulnerability of Christians in a context of organized crime (particularly Christians engaged in social work with youths, drug addicts, etc.).

4. Mexico is one the signatories of the United Nations Convention against Corruption. However, the corruption level within the country is significant. Mexico also is the country in the world with the highest number of abductions. The US Government should assist the government of Mexico in tackling corruption at all levels, and the infiltration of organized crime in public institutions by means of corruption must be addressed.

5. The position of Christians is not part of the agenda of the ongoing peace talks between the Colombian government and the FARC. The US Government should urge the Colombian government to include a focus on guarantees for Christians and on reducing their vulnerability to threats from organized crime as part of the peace talks.

6. The autonomy of indigenous territories, guaranteed in the Colombian Constitution, gives indigenous rulers free room to implement authoritarian governments where basic human rights, including those of Christians, are not respected. The US government must denounce this situation and put pressure on the Colombian government to reform this constitutional provision. Even though respect for indigenous traditions and culture is very important in a democratic society, it must not be used as an excuse to tolerate and endorse bad governance and gross human rights violations such as torture or exclusion from basic social services.

7. The US Government and the US Congress should use the recent developments in diplomatic relations with Cuba to strengthen freedom of religion in Cuba.

8. The US Government should work together with Latin American states to create a system in which churches and Christian leaders who are victims of extortion feel safe to denounce threats against them.

Mr. DUNCAN. Thank you, Mr. Petri.

Mr. Coll, you are recognized.

STATEMENT OF MR. RICHARD COLL, FOREIGN POLICY ADVISOR FOR LATIN AMERICA AND GLOBAL TRADE, OFFICE OF INTERNATIONAL JUSTICE AND PEACE, UNITED STATES CONFERENCE OF CATHOLIC BISHOPS

Mr. COLL. Thank you, Congressman. My name is Richard Coll, Foreign Policy Advisor, Latin America and Global Trade for the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops. I would like to thank the Honorable Representative Jeff Duncan, chairman of the subcommittee, and the Honorable Representative Albio Sires, ranking member, for the opportunity to testify today on challenges to religious freedom.

I will be summarizing my written statement submitted for the record of this hearing, and I respectfully request that my statement be added to the record.

The bishops of the United States are deeply disturbed by the terrible human consequences of violence in Latin America and the effects of violence on religious freedom and human rights in the region. Many Catholic bishops, priests, religious and lay workers have been the victims over the years of assassinations, violence, death threats, and hostility often directed at them as a consequence of their work as pastors and defenders of the rights of their people.

The gospel and Catholic social teaching call us to defend poor and marginalized communities and to oppose the persecution that results from a criminal response to this ministry. Catholic social teaching has consistently called for democracy, human rights and robust civil society institutions. In promoting these noble objectives many church leaders and workers have paid a grievous price.

Catholic social teaching is founded on the sanctity of the life and dignity of all persons. All are created in the image and likeness of God. The state and its political structures exist to serve the human person and in particular to foster the common good. All human persons have rights that are of divine origin. It is as a result of these core religious beliefs when acting in solidarity to support the legitimate claims to life and dignity of all peoples in Latin America that many church leaders and workers have become the targets of violence. Let me give you examples.

In Latin America the exercise of religious freedom has been challenged by state and society throughout the region. In some countries as has already been noted, such as Cuba and Venezuela, the free exercise of religion has been suppressed with religious believers imprisoned and persecuted for their beliefs. In other countries religious freedom is given wider respect but continues to be challenged by political leaders and groups who seek to drive religious believers or actors out of public life or to limit the role of religious belief and public debate. These include restrictions on participation of religious groups in political discussions, and it includes laws which fail to extend conscience and religious exemptions to individuals. A great example is the case of Article 130 of the Mexican Constitution which prohibits religious organizations from challenging or criticizing the laws of the state.

In many countries in Latin America the challenges to the church and to organized religion, as also has been noted, come not only from the government but from the operation of criminal, guerilla, and paramilitary actors engaged in violence against their fellow citizens. In defending the right to life and dignity of its innocent and tormented people, the Church's bishops, priests, and religious lay workers have often become the victims of retaliatory violence at the hand of these criminal groups.

According to a report by Fides, the international service of the Pontifical Mission Societies, 22 pastors and care workers—19 priests, one religious sister, and two lay persons—were killed worldwide in 2013, almost double the number killed the year before. For the fifth consecutive year, Latin America had the highest number of such deaths in 2013. In the Americas, 15 priests were killed—seven in Colombia, four in Mexico, one each in Brazil, Venezuela, Panama and Haiti. By 2014, the number of priests killed in Mexico increased to nine, making that country as has been noted the most dangerous nation in the world to be a Catholic priest.

In solidarity visits to Cuba and Venezuela as well as to Colombia, Peru, El Salvador, Guatemala, Honduras and Mexico, USCCB delegations have witnessed firsthand the remarkable spirituality and courageous actions of many church leaders, priests, religious and lay workers. In Peru, this threat of violence has extended to Archbishop Pedro Barreto in connection with his work defending the poor from the violence caused by unregulated mining operations in his archdiocese.

Bishop Alvaro Ramazzini of Guatemala likewise has received numerous threats on his life for his work in support of indigenous communities. Bishop Raul Vera of Mexico has courageously identified the criminal elements, be they narcotics traffickers, gang members, or local government officials that murdered innocent Mexican citizens in numerous slayings.

In Honduras, a large number of priests and religious spoke to us about the violence they had witnessed or experienced personally as a result of defending the rights of local communities to protest against dangerous mining operations. Comparable threats have been received concerning religious leaders and workers in the Central American region who have spoken in support of their afflicted people.

In this way these brave individuals mirror the profound and powerful example of Archbishop Oscar Romero who was recently beatified in a moving ceremony in El Salvador. He gave his life in 1980 defending the rights of the Salvadoran people to peace, freedom and dignity, and many church leaders and followers have followed in his footsteps.

To quote from a letter from Bishop Richard Pates to Secretary of State John Kerry, "My brother bishops in Central America have urged us to encourage alternatives to the militarization of U.S. assistance and to instead emphasize economic opportunity. The United States must recognize our own contributions to the crisis which exists in the region, and support more effective programs that reduce drug usage here at home. The regulation of gun exports, coupled with criminal justice reforms that foster rehabilita-

tion rather than retribution, need to implemented by our states and our Federal Government."

Congressmen, your roles as representatives of this great nation brings great responsibilities. The decision to support justice for the peoples of Latin America is of crucial importance to these efforts at addressing the root causes of this crisis. All must act in a way that respects the dignity of all human persons and enables the proper participation of all Latin American citizens reducing conflict and division. As members of this esteemed Congress you can play a vital and lifesaving role in solidarity with the Catholic Church and the people of this region. This can be accomplished by effectuating budgetary decisions that support peaceful development, economic growth and the rule of law, and by addressing the grave problems of human, narcotics and weapons trafficking over our borders.

Thank you for providing crucial moral leadership to assist the people of Latin America in creating viable and prosperous societies. In this way, human rights and the strengthening of robust civil societies will be secured, which will lead to more just and equitable development reflecting the common patrimony of all God's children. The USCCB stands ready to work with you and with the Church in Latin America in bringing such hopeful prospects to a fruitful resolution. Thank you again.

[The prepared statement of Mr. Coll follows:]

Written Testimony Submitted for the Record

On Challenges to Religious Freedom in the Americas

to the

Subcommittee on the Western Hemisphere
United States House of Representatives

Given By

Richard Coll,
Foreign Policy Advisor, Latin America and Global Trade
United States Conference of Catholic Bishops

September 17, 2015

WRITTEN TESTIMONY FOR THE RECORD

ON CHALLENGES TO RELIGIOUS FREEDOM IN THE AMERICAS

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UNITED STATES HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES

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RICHARD COLL,

FOREIGN POLICY ADVISOR, LATIN AMERICA AND GLOBAL TRADE

UNITED STATES CONFERENCE OF CATHOLIC BISHOPS

SEPTEMBER 17, 2015

I am Richard Coll, Foreign Policy Advisor, Latin America and Global Trade, for the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops (USCCB). I would like to thank the Honorable Representative Jeff Duncan, Chairman of the Subcommittee, and the Honorable Representative Albio Sires, Ranking Member, for the opportunity to testify today on challenges to religious freedom in the Americas. The USCCB does not advocate on behalf of bishops as political leaders nor as security experts. The bishops speak as teachers and pastors who are deeply disturbed by the terrible human consequences of violence in Latin America, and the effects of violence on religious freedom and human rights in the region. Many Catholic bishops, priests, religious and lay workers have been the victims over the years of assassinations, violence, death threats and hostility, often directed at them as a consequence of their work as pastors and defenders of the rights of their people. The Gospel and Catholic Social Teaching call us to defend poor and marginalized communities and to oppose the persecution that results from a criminal response to this ministry of courageous advocates for our faith. Catholic Social Teaching has consistently called for democracy, human rights and robust civil society institutions. Together these elements help build equitable and sustainable economic development. In promoting these noble objectives, many Church leaders and workers have paid a grievous price.

Catholic Social Teaching is founded on the sanctity of the life and dignity of all persons. All are created in the image and likeness of God. Indeed, this has been a central teaching of the Catholic Church since its foundation, rooted in the Book of Genesis (1:27). In the modern era, Pope Leo XIII clearly outlined these principles in his celebrated 1891 encyclical, *Rerum Novarum*. In subsequent decades, Saint Pope John XXIII, Blessed Pope Paul VI, Saint Pope John Paul II, Pope Benedict XVI and now Pope Francis have echoed, reaffirmed and built upon these

principles. The State, and its political structures, exist to serve the human person and in particular to foster the common good, those conditions needed for human flourishing. All human persons have rights that are of divine origin. Saint Pope John XXIII was the first Pope to articulate these rights systematically: "Man has the right to live. He has the right to bodily integrity and to the means necessary for the proper development of life, particularly food, clothing, shelter, medical care, rest, and, finally, the necessary social services" (*Pacem in Terris*, 11). In addition, persons have cultural, religious, economic, social and political rights (*Pacem in Terris*, 12-27). Private property is an important, but relative right, that serves the common good of all members of society. (*Compendium of the Social Doctrine of the Church*, 177). It is as a result of these core religious beliefs, when acting in solidarity to support the legitimate claims to life and dignity of all peoples in Latin America, that many Church leaders and workers become the targets of violence.

Pope Francis, in his encyclical *Laudato Si*, asserted that to function correctly, the global economy, as well as individual nations, need ethics that are people-centered. (*Laudato Si*, 156-158).To reform a particular political culture and economy so that it will be more just, stable and equitable, the Pontifical Council for Justice and Peace has similarly called for a new framework of international law and global ethics. Both Pope Francis and the Pontifical Council argue that the primacy of the spiritual and the ethical in both political and economic spheres needs to be restored. Such an approach will nourish markets and political institutions that are at the service of the person and capable of responding to the needs of the common good. (*Towards reforming the international financial and monetary system in the context of global public authority*, 37-42).

To achieve these goals, the Church has long held the view that political action by an informed laity would be necessary. Saint Pope John XXIII, in his 1963 encyclical *Pacem in Terris*, observed that the world was heading towards ever greater unification or globalization. The development of a global economy demands the creation of a system of oversight for the universal common good of humanity in each country, while recognizing the primacy of human rights and democracy in the effectuation of such oversight. (*Pacem in Terris,* 130-145).

In Latin America, the exercise of religious freedom has been challenged by State and society throughout the region. In some countries, such as Cuba and Venezuela, the free exercise of religion has been suppressed with religious believers and leaders imprisoned and persecuted for their beliefs. In other countries, religious freedom is given wider respect but continues to be challenged by political leaders and groups who seek to drive religious believers or actors out of public life or to limit the role of religious belief in public debate. These restrictions on religious belief manifest themselves in outward persecution, intimidation and violence on one hand or on the other in the form of restrictions on participation of religious groups in political discussions, and laws which fail to extend conscience and religious exemptions for individuals.

In other countries, the laws in effect provide for strict secularization of society, and limit severely the ability of the Church to engage the government on matters of social importance. For example, Article 130 of the Mexican Constitution states:

> Ministers may not associate among themselves for political purposes or preach in favor of or against any political candidate, party, or association. Neither may they oppose the laws of the country or its institutions, nor insult patriotic symbols in any form in public meetings, religious acts of the cult or religious propaganda, or religious publications.

In many countries in Latin America, the challenges to the Church and to organized religion come not only from the government, but from the operation of criminal, guerrilla and paramilitary actors engaged in violence against their fellow citizens. In Colombia, a long-standing insurgency by the FARC guerilla movement has resulted in over forty years of open warfare between government security forces, paramilitary units, narcotics traffickers and the FARC fighters. Fleeing this violence, many Colombian citizens turned to the Catholic Church for safety. In defending the right to life and dignity of its innocent and tormented people, the Church's bishops, priests, religious and lay workers have often become the victims of retaliatory violence at the hands of these criminal groups.

According to a report by Fides, the information service of the Pontifical Mission Societies, 22 pastoral care workers (19 priests, one religious sister and two lay persons) were killed worldwide in 2013, almost double the number killed the year before. For the fifth consecutive year, Latin America had the highest number of such deaths. In 2013 in the Americas, 15 priests were killed (seven in Colombia; four in Mexico; one each in Brazil, Venezuela, Panama and Haiti). By 2014, the number of priests killed in Mexico increased to nine, making that country the most dangerous nation in the world to be a Catholic priest.

Throughout its many years of engagement with communities on the ground throughout the Americas, the USCCB, through its member bishops and staff, has had the opportunity to travel throughout the region on solidarity visits with local bishops and communities. In solidarity visits to Cuba and Venezuela, as well as to Colombia, Peru, El Salvador, Guatemala, Honduras and Mexico, the USCCB delegation witnessed firsthand the remarkable spirituality and courageous actions of many Church leaders, priests, religious and lay workers. They have described threats against them or their colleagues, resulting in tragic instances of grave physical injuries or deaths at the hands of assailants. This violence was a direct result of the religious commitment such brave leaders manifested in standing with their brothers and sisters of the region, in attempting to vindicate their human and political rights, as required by their religious tradition.

In Peru, this threat of violence has extended to Archbishop Pedro Barreto, who came to the United States in 2012 to testify before another House Foreign Affairs Subcommittee on the death threats he had received for championing the health and environmental well-being of his flock threatened by a poorly regulated mining operations in the Archdiocese of La Oroya. Bishop Alvaro Ramazzini of Guatemala likewise received numerous threats on his life for his work in support of indigenous communities in that nation in their challenge to illegal and exploitative development and extractives activities. Bishop Raúl Vera of Mexico served as a witness and courageously identified the criminal elements, be they narcotics traffickers, gang

members or local government officials that murdered innocent Mexican citizens in numerous perverse slayings. In Honduras, a large number of priests and religious spoke to us about the violence they had witnessed or experienced personally as a result of defending the rights of communities to protest against injurious and dangerous mining operations. Comparable threats have been received concerning religious leaders and workers in the Central American region who have spoken in support of their afflicted people. In this way, these brave individuals mirror the profound and powerful example of Archbishop Oscar Romero, who was recently beatified in a moving ceremony in El Salvador. He gave his life in 1980 defending the rights of the Salvadoran people to peace, freedom and dignity.

Pope Francis, in speaking to priests during his recent visit to Ecuador, where the Church faces challenges of addressing poverty and excessive inequality, spoke movingly in these words, "Perseverance in mission is not about going from house to house, looking for a place where we will be more comfortably welcomed. It means casting our lot with Jesus to the end.... To persevere even though we are rejected, despite the darkness and growing uncertainty and dangers – this is what we are called to do, in the knowledge that we are not alone, that God's Holy People walks with us. ... So let us walk together, helping one another, as we humbly implore the gift of perseverance in God's service." His words were particularly consoling, in light of concerns raised by government policies on extractives and mining operations in environmentally fragile areas. The Holy Father reflected the Church's efforts to be a mediator in these events despite the risks to its safety.

As Bishop Richard Pates observed in a letter, dated July 24, 2014, to Secretary of State John Kerry upon his return from Central America last year: "[w]e all can agree on the causes in question: violence, gang activity, narcotics, weapons and human trafficking, inadequate institutions of law enforcement and corruption/impunity, poverty, as well as unequal and inadequate economic development. These factors mutually reinforce one another...these links have implications for the proper allocation of funding pursuant to the Mérida Initiative: It is the conviction of the Church in the region and our Committees that expenditures should be concentrated on efforts that aim to protect human rights, strengthen civil society and expand the levels of humanitarian and development assistance. An overemphasis on military assistance can be counterproductive.... While there is a role for security assistance, we also urge that an increased proportion of budgetary expenditures attributable to U.S. international aid be allocated to support the fostering of human rights, a just and humane civil society, and broad-based economic development."

During solidarity visits to the region, USCCB representatives have heard support for this point of view from many officials in the U.S. embassies and missions that were visited. The needs for improved education, job training, law enforcement and infrastructure were common threads in each country. The root causes of violence must be addressed with actions such as investing in education, infrastructure, rule of law and job creation. Only then will a long-term resolution of the current problems be achieved.

Ultimately the USCCB wishes to express concern for the threats to religious freedom posed by state-sponsored actions and by criminally directed violence, and to propose possible solutions. In some countries, like Cuba and Venezuela, direct bilateral negotiations with those governments, aimed at enhancing the political and civil rights of the religious faithful and of civil society at large, will be the most effective way to combat the intrusions of the State. The USCCB believes that the recent rapprochement, fostered by Pope Francis, between the United States and Cuba represents a new opportunity for engagement which advances greater respect for human rights, including religious freedom.

In many other parts of Latin America, the ultimate answer to the problems explored in this testimony is to focus on the "root causes" for the violence: poverty; excessive inequality; trafficking in drugs, weapons and humans; inadequate and/or ineffective institutions of government; and impunity, corruption and inadequate application of the rule of law. These problems lead inexorably to the resultant political, economic and social instability that manifests itself in violence, insecurity and attacks on religious freedom and human rights.

To again quote from Bishop Pates' letter to Secretary Kerry: "My brother bishops in Central America have urged us to encourage alternatives to militarization of U.S. assistance and instead emphasize economic opportunity. The United States must recognize our own contributions to this crisis, and support more effective programs that reduce drug usage here at home. Similarly, the regulation of gun exports, coupled with criminal justice reforms that foster rehabilitation rather than retribution, need to be implemented by our states and our federal government."

Your roles as representatives of this great nation brings with it great responsibilities. The decision of some of your colleagues to support justice for the peoples of Latin America is of crucial importance to these efforts at addressing the "root causes" of this current crisis. All must act in a way that respects the dignity of all human persons, enables the proper participation of all Latin American citizens, and reduces conflict and division. As members of this esteemed Congress, you can play a vital and life-saving role, in solidarity with the Catholic Church and the people of this region. This can be accomplished by effectuating budgetary decisions that support peaceful development, economic growth and the rule of law, and by addressing the grave problems of human, narcotics and weapons trafficking over our borders, so that lives are saved.

Thank you for providing crucial moral leadership to assist the people of Latin America in creating viable and prosperous societies. In this way, human rights and the strengthening of robust civil societies will be secured, which will lead to more just and equitable development reflecting the common patrimony of all God's children. The USCCB stands ready to work with you and the Church in Latin America in bringing such hopeful prospects to a fruitful realization.

Mr. DUNCAN. I want to thank the witnesses. They have just called votes so we are going to recess, probably for about 30 minutes. There are three votes, and we will come back. Hopefully Mr. Luna will be here. We will take his testimony and then we will get into the question session of this. So if you will bear with us, we will stand in recess.

[Recess.]

Mr. DUNCAN. Okay, we will reconvene the hearing. I appreciate you all's patience and we will recognize Mr. Luna for an opening statement for 5 minutes.

STATEMENT OF MR. RICARDO LUNA, GLOBAL VICE PRESIDENT, CONFRATERNIDAD EVANGÉLICA LATINA

Mr. LUNA. Thank you, sir. I value what you are doing here. The fact that you are focusing on religious liberty in Latin America is very important for Latin America and for religious liberty as well as what Rabbi David Epstein does in Latin America and all over the world in his role as ambassador. And I think—I have been involved with the State Department, their report on religious rights, human rights, and these three offer a great service to the continent, so thank you.

I briefly want to share on behalf of CONEL. CONEL is Spanish for Confraternidad Evangelica Latina, Latin World Evangelical Alliance. We used to be Latin American, called CONELA, Latin America, but Latin identity is now global. To get what this means is that in the United States if you have heard of NHCLC, Samuel Rodriguez, they are CONEL in the United States, U.S. Hispanics, about 40,000 churches represented.

We serve a community of approximately 500,000 churches in Latin America. Those we have certified. We, actually, as of 2010, we think the number is actually closer to 700,000, but we say 500,000 certified, the missional community we serve. Our board members for our unity are the regional leaders representing approximately 80 percent of the churches in Latin America, a local church anywhere from 20 and 30 members to large churches of a thousand to 2,000. Various countries have churches of 7,000 to 100,000. Yes, one local church that meets in homes and then in the stadium on the weekend.

So this is the church in Latin America where 21 nations, 15 island nations, in addition, about 500 million people, so the issue of religious liberty is very important. And I think I am more connected to the local church in terms of especially the evangelical church, but also in our relations with our Catholic brothers and others whom we meet both at a regional or at a local level.

There is just three very small things that I want to point out in this opportunity to be here. One is the situation of religious liberty du jour, de facto, and policy opportunities. Du jour, I think our colleagues have spoken well to that. There is a lot of documentation including your own staff, I am assuming.

Du jour, most countries in Latin America have adopted the U.N. Declaration of Human Rights. Article 18 is part of everybody's agenda and so it is present. And if the world could be safe for religious liberty because we have constitution and laws, then we would

not even need to have a hearing about what issues and challenges we face, but obviously it is not.

You have heard from our colleagues, I think, about Mexico. To give you one idea, in Mexico, every time there is an expulsion in San Juan Chamula or anywhere in the Mexican state 18 laws are broken. Every time there is one expulsion. This is from a human rights lawyer that has been working there for decades. So 30,000 people in one community, over 90,000 people have been evicted and that is 180,000 laws broken.

So sometimes it is not the fact that we have laws, it is the enforcement of laws that is the great challenge, so that is why I would like to focus on de facto. De facto is the reality on the ground. In this reality on the ground I have personally been involved in, in the last 35 years. Being involved on the ground, I have been in Cuba where I have been kicked out for being part of the CIA, because everything that is not controlled by the state becomes that.

Nevertheless, I acknowledge these are changing times. There is improvements in many areas, but in Colombia that means being involved in conflict areas at a very local level, getting to know the actors through the Colombian Peace Talks, as my friend Ms. Stangl here, with left-wing guerrillas, the right-wing paramilitaries and finding out again from the base communities. Everywhere I have been there is a local church of these 500,000 churches. The du jour situation is one, but the de facto, what does it look like on the ground is important.

And it is important to highlight the two types of oppositions that we have had historically and currently. One is revolutionary extremists. They are not only in the Middle East. In Latin America we have been dealing with them for over 50 years, 60 years and more depending on the country. And revolution extremists put the Church in the middle of conflict and the Church is caught in a crossfire we say.

And as the Church is caught in a crossfire, as you have heard we have expulsions, we have deaths, we have 1.5 million refugees in a place like Colombia. We have 120 Catholic priests, over 250 evangelical pastors killed because they are caught in a crossfire. Because in a situation like conflict people say you are either with me or against me, and some people to revolutionaries of the left and other counter revolutionaries, if you will, of the right, they both put the Church in that position.

And in this setting it has been wonderful to be able to document with the State Department cases. We have had histories of cases documented yearly that put this, as we say what happens to one in a local place in the middle of nowhere happens to all of us, and I think it is very beneficial. Du jour and de facto, two realities.

But I want to affirm, and as I was looking over the goals you have for this committee, in two very brief recommendations. The first recommendation of where religious liberty is going needs to have one more word added to the "religious" which is religious "equality." In Latin America, the values that we have as Latins—God, family—places many of our communities, like the ones represented here from our Catholic Church, from human rights NGOs,

and on this side and that, places us together to focus on two areas of religious equality.

One, I think that we would focus on religious equality where we can express our religious liberty that we have our values. For instance, what that means specifically is that in areas of same-sex marriage, in areas of abortion, evangelicals, Catholics, NGOs, and Latin culture in general has declared itself very publicly. There is a study of 12 nations in Latin America, 45 globally, attitudes and behaviors of youth where 82 percent of the youth in Latin America declared themselves to be part of what can be called traditional, by other definition biblical, family.

So religious equality issues tied to religious liberty, we need to be able to express this. Because there is now U.N. policy, sometimes U.S. policy that tells us we have to accept the United States' or United Nations' view of this versus our own. So this issue of religious liberty and religious equality there is a great concern and a generational concern that we are able to express this and be respected in our religious liberty to believe and to organize ourselves as such.

We believe it is very important with our Catholic brothers to stand, I think, with great respect for the law, great respect for people in democracy to each require their own actions, understanding that, but we want to express these values. I think the issue of religious equality is an issue also of what governments will do with the growing evangelical church. In 1900, 1 percent of Latin America was evangelical. Today, depending on the country, 5 percent lowest to 50 percent, maybe 15 percent as you look as an average in Latin America.

So what do you do when as a state—this is a question for state, it is not a question of a church to church, of the state—what do you do when the official Church has, receives grants for education, receives million-dollar grants to exist as an organization, has the opportunity to import, has the opportunity to be legal, to be tax exempt, and the growing evangelical churches don't?

This really brings up the issue, which is very important for the 500,000 churches in Latin America, of religious equality. What does religious equality look like? There is a great example in the case of Chile. Chile is the only country that has passed a religious equality law. To do so, evangelical leaders that wanted to find solutions, not blame, Catholic leaders, as a matter of fact the two top lawyers were a Catholic lawyer and an evangelical lawyer, got together to look at it as a state issue of how to make religious liberty and religious equality, what does it need to look like in the twenty-first century.

And in the case of Chile they passed the only religious equality law in Latin America. This means that evangelicals have access to the chaplaincy in prisons as well as in the military. It means they could exist legally in the same way. And this question is not only for the evangelical church but for all minority religions. The changing face requires.

And if there is one recommendation that I would love the committee to consider is, how do we do that and how do we do that in brotherhood and how can we partner for that? And toward that

end count on us, CONEL, as a group that would very much like to be part of a solution of anybody working this issue.

The other issue, very briefly, we focus on children. Children are at the forefront of expressing or of living every problem that has to do with sexual trafficking, every problem that has to do with gangs—82,000 just in two countries of Latin America, 82,000 gang members. In El Salvador, 17,000 gang members stopped the functioning of the country for 1 day. So when children are victims of these gang members, where narco-trafficking which went beyond Colombia and the Andean countries and northern Mexico as we all know, and the children become what they call the "mules," the messengers and the transporters, the children are placed in a very precarious situation.

This very precarious situation has actually caused Latin America to live an immigration crisis in every country through refugees, 1.5 million, two million, a hundred thousand, different countries. And as we live these situations, we are looking, can we agree on the rights of children? And with this I finish, what is the recommendation.

I have a meeting next month in Chiapas, Mexico where three Central American Presidents, where people involved in refugee and children-at-risk, children as victims of sexual trafficking, 57 million that have to work as children, we are coming to, we want to adopt principles that would allow us to recommend, to promote, to work for in every country. I will just read to you what they are and then I will finish with that.

Principles toward children, this is my wrap-up, four points. One, principles that respect the God-given dignity of every person, protects the unity of the immediate family, respects, and especially the children, respects the rule of law and guarantees secure national borders. Our idea is that we want to ask Latin countries to respect these four issues, and insofar as religious liberty and human rights focus on children and the church's response to them. If there is a way that through the work of your committee and of the United States Government we could find a common place to do that, that would be very welcome. Thank you so much for your time.

[Mr. Luna did not submit a prepared statement until after the hearing. It has been inserted into the appendix.]

Mr. DUNCAN. I want to thank the panelists for their opening statements. We will now move into the question portion of the hearing. Mr. Luna, I will start with you. And in your opinion, where other than the United States, and we can have an argument about religious liberty in the United States which I think we ought to talk about as well, but where can one go to feel like they can worship freely in the Western Hemisphere? What countries lead in the realm of religious freedom? We know the bad actors, right, so we talk about Cuba and we can talk about Nicaragua. What are some of the good actors?

Mr. LUNA. Chile is very strong. As I say, if there is a leader both du jour, de facto in the Latin continent it is Chile.

Mr. DUNCAN. For all religions or just more Catholicism or——

Mr. LUNA. For all religions. There is a movement among evangelical leaders to not think of, of course to represent our communities which are evangelical, but to look at the issue of religious lib-

erty and equality as for all religions. And we form part of committees at a national level that are of all the different religions so that the same law could apply to the religions.

Mr. DUNCAN. So Chile is one, who is another?

Mr. LUNA. Chile is one. All the other ones I would say we have challenges in, which is why we need to——

Mr. DUNCAN. Paraguay, Uruguay, any Caribbean country? Suriname, Guyana, any of that? Brazil? I am asking, I don't know.

Mr. LUNA. Yes, Brazil has had a strong tradition of religious respect. I think all countries have two realities. One where they are models and they are living models, especially in the cities and in certain sectors, but they also have the challenge, which is why I think we need to focus on religious liberty and equality for the new challenges.

Mr. DUNCAN. Let me ask other panelists if you will chime in. Who do you see as the good actors?

Ms. STANGL. I do think actually Brazil that you mentioned is one of the leading lights in the region. There has just been an effort to submit for consideration a new bill on religious freedom in Brazil. They already had a very good framework, but they wanted to make sure it was the best it could be and they want it to be a model for the rest of Latin America.

There is something of a battle in some of the countries of militant secularism, and as Mr. Luna and as Mr. Coll said, kind of banishing, trying to banish religious speech from the public sphere. You do see that to an extent in Brazil, but I would say as far as worship on a Sunday morning or Friday at mosque or Saturday at the synagogue, Brazil is probably one of the leaders as well as Chile.

Mr. DUNCAN. All right, Mr. Petri?

Mr. PETRI. Well, I think as I said, as far as national legislation is concerned there is really not that much wrong with Latin American countries. And, really, in my testimony what I tried to convey is that we should broaden the scope of religious freedom. Not only look at it from the legal perspective, and again I don't think there are that many problems in Latin America. Of course the good students really are Brazil, Chile, Costa Rica, which is the country that is my home, but I think from a legal perspective there is not that much that is wrong.

But from the human security perspective there is a lot more that is going on, and that is something that is very often is——

Mr. DUNCAN. Let me get Mr. Coll on the record.

Mr. PETRI. Sure.

Mr. COLL. Thank you, Mr. Chairman. And I would just like to follow up on Mr. Petri's very wise observation that I would like to offer up the church in Colombia and Colombia generally as being an example of how religious freedom operates in a way that vindicates the rights of the common people. The church in Colombia particularly under the leadership of Cardinal Salazar has as you know been very instrumental in helping to negotiate a settlement with the FARC, and through its Pastoral Social has also been very active in trying to develop a form of social services and social outreach to impoverished people. We were in Bogota just a year or so ago and it is really wonderful to see the work that happens there.

I would offer up Colombia as a great example of how effective religious freedom can affect the facts and the root causes on the ground.

Mr. DUNCAN. Well, I thank you all for that. Violence has been talked about a lot. I think the ranking member mentioned and probably will mention again the video of someone being pulled out of a church, a White Lady being pulled out of the church—Ladies in White, rather—by a priest. Violence, how it leads to persecution.

I guess I am asking, is this more a government sponsored violence? We heard about gang violence and the cartel and other things, but do you see, what is the balance there between a criminal element violence and government sponsored violence across the region? I would just focus in on Cuba, but across the region is it more government sponsored? Is it more criminal elements? Ms. Stangl?

Ms. STANGL. I think it is a very complex mix. I think in most countries it would be criminal groups, however with exceptions in Cuba and in Mexico. And Cuba you see kind of government paramilitary groups that come in in plainclothes pretending to be civilians who also attack the Ladies in White in trying to prevent them attending Mass. And that is definitely, although they are not wearing government uniforms, a government orchestrated campaign of violence.

In Mexico, on the very local level in certain regions, there is a campaign of violence carried out by local officials. They are not top government officials but local, maybe a mayor, the local town council. And that is often met with impunity which gives the impression that the higher-up government either doesn't care enough or endorses that kind of violence. But in the other countries it would be much more criminal, non-government actors.

Mr. DUNCAN. What—again, this, really not what I want to ask. Let's ask this. Have you seen evidence of the State Department or local embassy officials engaging with governments in the region on these issues to encourage governments to revise their regulations or their laws of making church registration more difficult or for religious groups?

So we have got governments that are requiring churches to register, we talked about that in your statements and mine. Do you see the U.S. engaging those governments in saying, look, church registration is counterproductive to religious freedom? How do you see our State Department acting on this? Mr. Petri, you look like you want to answer.

Mr. PETRI. I think the Obama administration has really not paid that much attention to religious freedom apart from the annual publications.

Mr. DUNCAN. Well, they haven't paid much attention to this region in general, but——

Mr. PETRI. Yes, of course. But apart from the annual publication of the International Religious Freedom report, there is just not that much that has happened in the field of religious freedom in the Americas.

And I also think that is an important point I want to make. I think as was said earlier, the full scope of religious freedom is not taken into account by the International Religious Freedom report

of the State Department, because what you see in Latin America—and I think Cuba is really an exception because their persecution is mostly state sponsored.

But if you look at the other countries, persecution is not based that much on religious identity or on church attendance but more on behavior, so it is your religious convictions that make you vulnerable to suffer human rights abuses. But identity as such, just the fact that you own a Bible or that you go to church, is not enough to be persecuted. That is not the dynamic. That is why religious freedom violations are often misunderstood in Latin America.

And that is really what I want you to take away from this, that that is actually one very important I mentioned and that is very present in Latin America and it should be taken into account.

Mr. DUNCAN. All right, my time is up. I am going to yield to the ranking member, and we will come around for the second round of questions.

Mr. SIRES. Thank you, Mr. Chairman. We usually have people from the State Department here, and I am one of those individuals that think that democracy is in trouble in Central and South America. I think we are going the other way.

I was just wondering if suppression of religion goes along with that, that we are going the wrong way in all of these countries.

Mr. LUNA. One of the things—oh, excuse me——

Mr. SIRES. Go ahead.

Mr. LUNA [continuing]. Mr. Sires, is that it is more sophisticated now. At one point, see, in Cuba it was very clear, atheism, and religion is—in today's world it is a fine for something you are doing. It is a church in Caracas, Venezuela, a very prominent church was going to be taken over because they didn't fulfill certain local ordinances. So I think now because of human rights people are very careful not to say I am going after you because of religion.

But what is behind there is that like in these types of attacks that are—it is through mobs which are done by the government. The situation in Cuba is, I would say, has some parallels in Venezuela, for instance, in this respect.

So there is definitely an opposition to church, but it is more sophisticated, and how to do that. And I think we can report this. In my contact with local embassies and placing it in the national report has been very key, but as far as how to promote something different I have not seen evidence of that.

Mr. SIRES. Mr. Coll, do you see it go as the wrong way?

Mr. COLL. Well, I think that in some countries there are certainly increased challenges, and I think those challenges as we have heard already this afternoon come from two different angles. One is the governmental policy that can challenge, whether it is in the case of the Cuba or in the case of a Mexico where there has been historically over hundreds of years efforts at secularization and where, frankly, the Catholic Church has been under extreme duress—the Cristero Wars in the 1920s—the victim of a great amount of violence in Mexico.

I also think that as we also heard, in many countries—Colombia, Peru, other parts of Latin America, certainly in Central America—the challenges come from the issues of poverty, narcotics trafficking, arms trafficking, political violence, gang warfare, and to

address those we won't be able to address them through legislative solutions or even political solutions. Rather, we need solid economic and developmental causes to be addressed.

In that regard, for instance, I had an opportunity to meet with Cardinal Salazar, whom I mentioned, who was such a supporter of the FARC negotiations. And I asked him, how can we as a church in the United States support you in Colombia in reaching a peaceful resolution of these issues? And he said, you can cut down on the drug demand from the United States because your insatiable demand for drugs from the United States is killing our people.

And then I would just finally add that we as a conference have been a long supporter of the Frank Wolf International Religious Freedom Act of 2015. We believe that enactment of that bill would be very helpful in terms of enhancing political diplomacy in the preservation of religious freedom and in vindicating greater education for State Department officials to recognize the importance of religious freedom.

Mr. PETRI. Yes. Well, Mr. Sires, I think I agree with you that there are challenges to democracies in Latin America. I think Latin America, the democratization——

Mr. SIRES. Go hand in hand.

Mr. PETRI. Of course. The democratization 30 years ago that started in Latin America led to electoral democracies, but quality of democracy there is still a lot of work to be done especially in the field of service delivery in all social aspects. And one of those elements is of course religious freedom, the protection and enforcement of religious freedom.

So it is all very nice on paper, but the enforcement of religious rights is a major challenge, and together with that the corruption infiltration of security and justice systems is also a big issue in some of the countries in Latin America. So yes, I agree with you that they both need to go hand in hand.

Mr. SIRES. Ms. Stangl?

Ms. STANGL. Yes, to your question on Central America if we are going backwards, I was in El Salvador last weekend at a conference on violence in Latin America and how it is affecting religious freedom. And what we have seen in El Salvador and the countries surrounding it is that the levels of violence and the government response in some cases is so extreme that the impotence of society is also very bad.

One very prominent denominational leader, Pastor Mario Vega, earlier this year was named on a web page supposedly run by kind of government death squads, named and threatened because of his speaking out about some of these policies and defending the churches. He said to me, in a country like El Salvador we have such high levels of criminal gangs and activities it is impossible as a pastor or a priest not to have some contact with them.

At children's events 90 percent of the children are children of gang members, and so you are living every day in your ministry with that dynamic. At the same time illicit association is now considered a crime by the government. And so a pastor who is trying to work with these communities trying to transform these communities, or a priest, can also be in danger unfortunately from the

government side of being of accused of illicit association. So it is definitely going backwards in that sense.

Mr. SIRES. Thank you.

Mr. DUNCAN. I thank the gentleman, and now the Chair will go to Mr. Donovan.

Mr. DONOVAN. Thank you, Mr. Chairman. Is there any particular place in Latin America or in the Western Hemisphere where it is more egregious, the interference of religious freedom, is there any one area where it is more egregious than the others? To anyone, if you are aware of.

Ms. STANGL. For CSW there are different types of religious freedom violations, but our three priority countries and the countries we consider to be the worst at the moment are Cuba, Mexico and Colombia.

Mr. PETRI. Yes, for Open Doors those are the same three priority countries as well. And there is many offense that are occurring at the same time in different countries and to different extent, but those two countries are the highest priority as far as religious freedom is concerned.

Mr. DONOVAN. Well, when you think about Cuba, where the administration has just resumed relationship with Cuba without any demands on improvements of human rights in Cuban Government, have we seen any places where there has been improvement at all?

Ms. STANGL. You are correct in Cuba. We have seen zero improvements in religious freedom since these negotiations began, unfortunately. As far as improvements in other countries, we have seen some improvements in Colombia as a result, I think, of the peace talks and some government efforts there. And there are positive noises coming from Mexico very much due, I think, to pressure from the chairman of this committee and other Members of Congress who have raised this issue consistently and strongly with the Mexican Government.

Mr. PETRI. There are improvements, but at the same time there are also deteriorations on different fields at the same time. So I think, as also mentioned, I think we should really, or you should take advantage of the dialogue that is now starting with Cuba to really address religious freedom in that country.

And some things, and just looking at Mexico or Colombia some things have improved, especially relationship between churches are much better than any of the past legislation has improved, but then organized crime is really putting, as I said, actively practicing Christians under threat in these countries more and more. So as things go better other things go worse.

Mr. DONOVAN. Well, my understanding from one of the witness's testimony that some of it is governmental intolerance of religious freedom and some of it is guerilla intolerance that is, I don't know if it is supported by government or ignored by governments. Besides the hearings that we have here, what could the United States Government do to help?

Mr. COLL. I would just also like to add to the list of countries, we should focus on Venezuela. From the Catholic perspective, a country that is one in which the Catholic Church is the victim of a tremendous amount of political and other pressure, and where one can only hope that political developments will evolve in a way

over the next couple of years to restore that country to a fuller expression of religious freedom.

In terms of recommendations, I will just mention again that from our perspective the Frank Wolf International Religious Freedom Act of 2015 would be a great step forward in terms of enabling the State Department and other political actors within our government to vindicate more effectively religious freedom around the world.

Mr. LUNA. The focus having been on documentation, as I said, was a great contribution, but the word here was mentioned "enforcement." So I affirm the support of this act because it moves us along, but the idea of enforcement, I think, is the direction that we could move to.

And I also add from the evangelical perspective Venezuela as well. Criminal elements are always handled by people of power and authority. The guy that you hire or the mob you hire is there at somebody's hiring, so we have seen a great increase of that. And in the midst of that we have seen great growth in the Church. A recent newspaper article from the government said that one out of every five Venezuelans is now an evangelical and it is a difficult position for them to be in.

Mr. PETRI. I think all the efforts that are being done currently to strengthen the states should actively integrate the perspective of religious freedom much more than is the case now. That is, I think, my main recommendation, understanding the full scope of religious freedom violations in Latin America.

And then as I said, take advantage of the current dialogue with Cuba to address religious freedom. Also take advantage of the current dialogue between the Colombian Government and the FARC guerillas and try to urge Colombia to put religious freedom on their agenda as well, just taking advantage of the current context.

And there was another recommendation I made, I think, is that the U.S. Government should work together with Latin American states to create a system in which Christian leaders feel free to denounce threats that they are victims of threats against them, because that is also something. If they cannot do that in their own country because there is corruption, because there is impunity, because they are often too afraid to denounce and to report what they are facing there should be an alternate system for the case to get out.

Mr. DONOVAN. Do any of you think that economic pressure will help the governments realize that they have to do something about the oppression of religious freedom in their countries? One of the fears, always, of our country putting economic pressure on another country is that the government doesn't suffer, the people suffer. And so whatever pressures we put on, whether we stop trade or we stop sending resources there, it is actually the people who we are trying to help are the ones who actually get harmed.

Does anybody believe that some economic pressure on any of these countries would make them turn around and realize that losing American support economically isn't worth what they are doing in their country?

Mr. COLL. Speaking from our perspective at the U.S. Conference, we would strongly advise against the position of sanctions or economic pressures for two reasons. First of all, we do not believe that

historically economic sanctions have been effective. Secondly, we believe at the root cause of many of these difficulties, the violence, the political economic instability, the trafficking issues, resides a tremendous economic challenge that those societies must face. We believe that proper economic development, integral economic development is the path forward for these countries, and to impose sanctions on them that would cripple them in the development of their economies would be counterproductive and, we think, lead to worsening conditions.

Mr. LUNA. And just the idea of not sanctions but incentives, economic incentives for those that deal with these issues is important, but I think there is one realization that must be made. One thing is dealing with the government, the other thing is dealing with government officials. Official government policy may be right, but government officials, just to give you one very brief example.

In Chiapas, President Salinas De Gortari at that time went to Chiapas to deal with the consejos, these landlords that kicked out 30,000 people. Those community leaders are called consejos. When he went, because of economic incentive that if we passed the Free Trade Agreement it would be good for Mexico from his end, people in the States thought it would be good for here and everybody was in agreement.

And he went down and he says, hey, you guys really need to watch it here. Talked to a few of the presidents, local presidents, community presidents. He says, it will be really good if you guys could like tone it down and respect the laws—because they have their own laws that they implement. And this is what the community leader told the President. Mr. President, you go preside in Mexico City but I am the president here.

So if there is an incentive, in this case both sides on incentive with Free Trade Agreement and the president is motivated and his administration is motivated, it is the local official level, and how do you help them, through documentation and some way of enforcement, help those local people that are facing these situations even when the government says that they are on your side but sometimes are powerless?

So how to do incentives and how to help those people that are actually facing where if they come out of the shadow they are going to, it is going to be a death threat. I mean, it is that simple. Their kids are going to be taken. Their kids are going to be shot. Especially in Central America, you mentioned this happens all the time, so how to help that situation, I think, is a challenge.

Mr. PETRI. Yes, I would also advise against economic sanctions. Instead, I would really focus on helping the states to reform their institutions and to rebuild and strengthen their democratic institutions, security system, justice system, but adopting an integrated approach that really pays attention to the enforcement of religious rights. I think that is the priority. Not economic sanctions, but focusing on helping states to become more effective at guaranteeing the enforcement of religious rights.

Mr. DONOVAN. Whereas, opposed to sanctions, as the gentleman said, incentives is still economic pressure.

I don't think I have any more time, Mr. Chairman, but if I do I yield it.

Mr. DUNCAN. I thank the gentleman. You hit on one of the points I was going to bring up in my second round, is that as I said in my opening statement, the ability to worship and exercise one's faith without attack, censure or bribery or government reprisals is one of the most important metrics of freedom in any country. And I appreciate you all talking about the impacts from religious freedom on economics and what not.

So shifting gears a little bit, let me ask you this. In Mexico we have got the law of uses and customs. How can the Mexican Government better monitor the implementation of the law of uses and customs to ensure it is practiced in accordance with human rights guarantees in state and Federal law? Ms. Stangl?

Ms. STANGL. The Mexican Government already has very good mechanisms to monitor these cases and they are aware of the cases. The issue again, as was mentioned before, is implementation, rule of law and impunity. There are excellent state human rights commissions that monitor and actively work on these issues. There is a great national human rights commission that also does very good work. The problem is, although these are kind of quasi-government bodies, the government itself never implements what they do, what they recommend in the cases they are working on.

So I think the breakdown there is not so much the monitoring but enforcing the law. People who commit crimes for religious reasons don't get an exemption just because they put a banner of religion over the top. Everyone should be held to account in the court of law. And helping Mexico strengthen its justice system, I think, would be a big step forward on that.

Mr. DUNCAN. We have talked a lot about Bolivia and Ecuador and Mexico and Colombia and Venezuela. I am meeting with some folks from Haiti in a little while and then the Prime Minister a little bit after that. So when I think about the hemisphere, I know that we talked about the Americas. The title of the hearing is about the Americas. In general, we seem to be very southernly focused here on Central America, Latin America in general.

What about the Caribbean? What about Haiti and the Dominican Republic? What about Bermuda or Canada? Those aren't mentioned in these discussions. How do you feel about religious freedom? Going into my meeting with Haiti, how is that perceived in Haiti? What is the impact of religious freedom, or is there oppression of any sort in Haiti or the DR or any of the Caribbean nations that I need to be aware of? And I ask all of you that. Mr. Luna?

Mr. LUNA. Reflecting on your question, one more country to add to move in the right direction is Peru as well. They have also faced conflict. They have done a lot of work in moving in the right direction.

In the case of Caribbean, I think Dominican Republic is a case for strong relationship state-church on behalf of religious liberty and human rights. There is a strong presence and a strong desire in both groups. And in the case of Haiti, this is from a local church contact, the issues that they mostly focus on are development into such.

There was a time when any political party in the struggles that Haiti has had can make anyone an enemy. And if you chose not to be corrupt or if you chose not to help a certain party do what

it asked, you to do because you are in the neighborhood, it became a death threat and an eviction. But especially after the earthquake we have seen at least that communities, because of a maybe shared common need, have come together more and worked more intentionally toward being problem solvers than problem makers, from a local church level perspective.

Mr. DUNCAN. Mr. Petri?

Mr. PETRI. Yes, well, actually compared with the Caribbean, I think Colombia is a very extreme case as far as the issue of religious freedom in indigenous territories is concerned. And Colombia has, I think, in the whole continent the most far-reaching, gives the most, the highest degree, highest level of autonomy to indigenous communities. And in practice this gives indigenous rulers free room to implement authoritarian governments and where basic human rights, including those of religious minorities or converts out of traditional indigenous beliefs, are not respected.

I think this is something that must be denounced and it is a constitutional provision that is, I think, really dangerous. I am convinced that respect for indigenous traditions and culture is very important in any democratic society, especially in those countries where there is a strong and historical presence of indigenous groups, but it must not be used as an excuse to tolerate and endorse bad governance and gross human rights violations such as, and those are the cases we are talking about, as torture or exclusion from basic social services.

This is also happening in Mexico, but the legislation is all right except that it is not always being enforced. But in Colombia the legislation actually does not, I mean the constitution does not give to the central states the authority to actually enter indigenous territories when faced with human rights violations like this.

Mr. DUNCAN. Mr. Coll, real quickly.

Mr. COLL. Yes, thank you, Mr. Chairman. I am very grateful for the opportunity to offer some thoughts on Haiti and the Dominican Republic which are countries that are of great importance to us.

Haiti, a great example again of root causes, tremendous poverty as we know, breakdown in the rule of law, breakdown in the administration of justice. A tremendous need to monitor aid carefully so that it ends up in appropriate projects that will build up civil society there and thereby, among other things, vindicate religious freedom.

Dominican Republic, as you know there has been a very difficult situation there over the last couple of years given a supreme court decision that the high court of the Dominican Republic issued which threatens viability of certain residents of the Dominican Republic, many of whom are of Haitian origin, to continue to stay there. The government has been, I think, attempting to rectify that situation by passing new legal provisions that would provide a course for validating residency on an ongoing basis.

As Ms. Stangl very eloquently pointed out in a different context, the laws may be fine but we need to make sure that they are administered effectively and that appropriate resources are devoted so that all petitioners have the opportunity to vindicate their rights.

So I would just respectfully request, and I am sure it will come up in your conversations with the Haitian Prime Minister as well given the fact that many of these affected residents are originally of Haitian origin, that enough resources be allocated in order to make sure that the legal remedies, which the government is now passing to protect these residents, actually work on the ground to permit these residents to make claims to continue to stay in the Dominican Republic. Thank you.

Mr. DUNCAN. Thank you. I yield to the ranking member.

Mr. SIRES. Thank you, Mr. Chairman. I will make an observation, then I have a question. To me when Pope Paul visited Cuba I thought some changes would follow. Now you have another Pope visiting Cuba next week. I just think that they somehow legitimize the governments when you have such a high ranking, or the highest ranking member of the Catholic Church go into these islands where those so much oppression of religion, and I don't know how they will see that.

So I am hoping that this visit will make a change, but I am not very hopeful because they have had roundups, people have been thrown in jail, the most active ones are to be kept away. So to me this visit is more about legitimizing this whole thing that has been going on with Cuba in the last 3 months, over the last year, more than anything else, and the Church doesn't seem to see that. Because I didn't see any changes when Pope Paul went to Cuba.

And the question that I have, we are talking about obviously all different types of religion and we also have the Jewish community in South and in Central America. How would you characterize the anti-Semitism trends in Latin America in recent years? Because I know that Buenos Aires has about 200 Jews, Sao Paulo has about 80,000 to 100,000, and some of the other areas. Ms. Stangl?

Ms. STANGL. Unfortunately, I think there have been significant increases in anti-Semitism particularly seen in Venezuela, but also in countries like Argentina. A lot of it is rhetoric, sometimes things like graffiti, not actual physical attacks but creating an environment of hostility. And many of the governments of those countries, in the case of Venezuela, has actually soaked that and encouraged that in some ways, where other governments have stood back and done nothing which allows this environment to continue to grow. I would say it is something definitely the committee to watch.

The Jewish population has played a very important role historically in many of these countries and will continue to do so, I believe. But I think it is, looking at the general climate of the world and what is happening in Europe specifically, I would hate to see that kind of thing exported and grow and increase in Latin America as well.

Mr. LUNA. We can affirm that as democracy has weakened in many areas of Latin America there is a definite rise in anti-Semitism. Venezuela being one, Argentina continued, Ecuador. I mean, we can go country by country.

We at CONEL/NHCLC started, in response started a coalition, Hispanic Jewish coalition, got organized just a couple of months ago. We were meeting with members of the Israeli Government, Jewish community here and leaders in Latin America.

One of the ways that can be strengthened is that every nation has, just like you have a Committee on Foreign Affairs here, they have a committee that deals with the state of Israel. In some of these places there is people of conviction that want to do everything they can to make sure that they deal with issues of anti-Semitism; that they don't just let acts of anti-Semitism in conversation, in art, drawing, many which are rising forth.

So we believe that one of the contributions that the Christian community can make is to both use the word "denounce," but also "announce." Build, do some positive contributions that can strengthen our relationship with the Jewish community. When you don't know a community it is easy to be opposed, but we believe very strongly that these steps need to be taken which is why we have created this coalition.

Mr. PETRI. Yes, you are very right to raise the issue of anti-Semitism. I think apart from the cases of Argentina and Venezuela which are really, well, mostly Venezuela but also Argentina, the most serious cases or examples of growing anti-Semitism, other countries of Latin America have also seen isolated incidents and is something that should be followed and monitored very closely.

Mr. COLL. Thank you. I would like to address the issue of anti-Semitism because it is a very important one, but I would like to just start out with a few comments on Cuba because I think that the two issues are in a way related.

First of all, I want to express my deep respect and compassion with the views that you have articulated. I myself come from a family that originated in Spain and I know what it is like to suffer the divisions that come from a civil war or other political upheaval, and the terrible pain that comes from having families be divided over political issues. And I have deep respect for my friends in the Cuban American community who, like you, Mr. Ranking Member, believe the way you do out of tremendous good faith and a desire to see what is best for the Cuban people.

Just by means of explanation, as you already know I take comfort from knowing that it is not just the testimony of three Popes now, John Paul II, Benedict XVI, and now Pope Francis, but the Catholic Church in Cuba itself, which I had the privilege of visiting a couple of years ago at the time of Pope Benedict's visit, that is very strongly supportive of this new opening and this rapprochement as a way of preserving the rights of the Cuban people and hopefully opening the doors for greater development.

That is a hope, but it is a hope that frankly is based on our gospel values. And we as a Church embrace this objective not just because we think it is right, but because we think we are committed to do so by the words of our Savior Jesus who told us to love our enemies and to engage in dialogue and to forgive those who have harmed us.

So I would offer that in deep respect and with awareness that your sense of the issues come from a greater commitment to the good of the Cuban people just by means of explanation of how we have come up with a different tactical approach. We share your aversion to the way in which the Cuban Government operates, and we hope and pray that this opening will vindicate the rights of the Cuban people in the future.

How is this related to anti-Semitism? It seems to me that part of the problem that exists, as Mr. Petri and others have pointed out, Mr. Luna, is that communities in Latin America and elsewhere have been ghettoized, have been separated from one another. They have not experienced the truth of their respective religions.

Dialogue is a great avenue toward overcoming those separations. We see the blessed relationship that exists between Pope Francis and a number of leaders of the Argentine Jewish community and how that dialogue, that relationship, that friendship has hopefully started the path toward the mitigation of anti-Semitism in Argentina, and we see that dialogue, that communication with hope toward opening up other areas of dialogue so that anti-Semitism and all other forms of hatred and division will be eliminated. Thank you.

Mr. SIRES. I will just finish by saying that the way Venezuela is going is just a satellite of Cuba.

Mr. COLL. Yes.

Mr. SIRES. This is exactly what they do. After they took control in 1959, they went after the church to destroy the church and they were very successful, or any other religion. And I think you are seeing the 33,000 proxies that are in Venezuela from Cuba going about it the same way. Venezuela was a religious, the people, was go to church and now they are afraid to go to church. They are afraid to express their religion.

Mr. COLL. Yes.

Mr. SIRES. So what we are seeing is the Cubanization of Venezuela.

Mr. COLL. I definitely share your concern, Mr. Ranking Member. I was in Venezuela 3 years ago meeting with the local church there and very much support the view, the concern you have about trying to support their work so they don't end up with the same tragic consequences as in Cuba.

Mr. SIRES. Can I just add something else? I am sorry. This is fascinating to me because I saw the Church in Poland.

Mr. COLL. Yes.

Mr. SIRES. How active it was.

Mr. COLL. Yes. Yes.

Mr. SIRES. And basically moving that country forward.

Mr. COLL. Yes.

Mr. SIRES. We don't see that movement in Latin America. We don't see that movement in Central America.

Mr. COLL. Yes, yes. That is a great point, Mr. Ranking Member, and I think there are a lot of historical reasons for that. There is a different, frankly in Cuba there is a different relationship between the Cuban Catholic Church and the local colonial powers and then subsequently the local Cuban Government that took over once the Spanish left.

I think your point is very well taken that institutionally the Polish Catholic Church for its own historical reasons and the experiences of World War II, et cetera, was in a much more effective position to be able to take up the challenges of supporting the political process than is the case and was recently the case in Cuba.

As a result, I think the Cuban Catholic Church has felt that its efforts to vindicate human rights and to move the path of develop-

ment toward the establishment of an authentic civil society has to be effectuated through other means different from the path of the Church in Poland. And, frankly, I think that is one of the endorsements that Pope John Paul II himself gave to the Church in Cuba for that choice.

Mr. SIRES. Thank you, Mr. Chairman, for your indulgence.

Mr. DUNCAN. Absolutely. Thanks for the insight. I was sitting here thinking about Communism in general, what we saw with Mao and Stalin and they do away with the Church, do away with that right to peacefully assemble and gather and talk and worship somebody other than the government entity, the state, as is was known.

I think in Cuba, I think Castro is probably more Catholic than maybe Stalin or Mao were any religion. That is why I think the Catholic Church maybe hung around a little longer. And that is just my perception, but I think you are exactly right in Venezuela. The elimination of religion in general helps solidify the state as the religion, and I think we see that over and over in a common pattern within socialism. So I want to thank the witnesses. This has been fascinating.

I go back to the anti-Semitic activities. I will say this about Uruguay. I think the way they have handled the terrorist bombing against the Jewish cultural center or the embassy there recently is probably indicative of they are not as anti-Semitic as maybe other countries, and I applaud them for that is the reason I wanted to bring that out, in their efforts to find out about that bombing.

So we will conclude, and pursuant to committee rule 7, the members of the subcommittee will be permitted to submit written statements to be included in the official record, and without objection the hearing record will remain open for five business days allowing statements, questions and extraneous materials for the record, subject to the length limitation in the rules. Also if we have any additional questions we will submit those to you and ask you to respond back and that will be made part of the record. So without any other business we will stand adjourned.

[Whereupon, at 4:28 p.m., the subcommittee adjourned.]

APPENDIX

Material Submitted for the Record

SUBCOMMITTEE HEARING NOTICE
COMMITTEE ON FOREIGN AFFAIRS
U.S. HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES
WASHINGTON, DC 20515-6128

Subcommittee on the Western Hemisphere
Jeff Duncan (R-SC), Chairman

TO: MEMBERS OF THE COMMITTEE ON FOREIGN AFFAIRS

You are respectfully requested to attend an OPEN hearing of the Committee on Foreign Affairs, to be held by the Subcommittee on the Western Hemisphere in Room 2200 of the Rayburn House Office Building (and available live on the Committee website at http://www.ForeignAffairs.house.gov):

DATE: Thursday, September 17, 2015

TIME: 2:00 p.m.

SUBJECT: Challenges to Religious Freedom in the Americas

WITNESSES: Ms. Anna-Lee Stangl
Senior Advocacy Office for the Americas
Christian Solidarity Worldwide – UK

Mr. Ricardo Luna
Global Vice President
Confraternidad Evangélica Latina

Mr. Dennis P. Petri
Research Coordinator for Latin America
Associate Director
World Watch Research
Open Doors International

Mr. Richard Coll
Foreign Policy Advisor for Latin America and Global Trade
Office of International Justice and Peace
United States Conference of Catholic Bishops

By Direction of the Chairman

The Committee on Foreign Affairs seeks to make its facilities accessible to persons with disabilities. If you are in need of special accommodations, please call 202/225-5021 at least four business days in advance of the event, whenever practicable. Questions with regard to special accommodations in general (including availability of Committee materials in alternative formats and assistive listening devices) may be directed to the Committee.

COMMITTEE ON FOREIGN AFFAIRS

MINUTES OF SUBCOMMITTEE ON *The Western Hemisphere* HEARING

Day *Thursday* Date *September 17, 2015* Room *2200*

Starting Time *2:00 p.m.* Ending Time *4:28 p.m.*

Recesses ____ (*2:32pm* to *3:29pm*) (____ to ____) (____ to ____) (____ to ____) (____ to ____) (____ to ____)

Presiding Member(s)

Chairman Jeff Duncan

Check all of the following that apply:

Open Session [✓]
Executive (closed) Session [ ]
Televised [ ]

Electronically Recorded (taped) [✓]
Stenographic Record [✓]

TITLE OF HEARING:

"Challenges to Religious Freedom in the Americas"

SUBCOMMITTEE MEMBERS PRESENT:

Reps. Duncan, Sires, Donovan

NON-SUBCOMMITTEE MEMBERS PRESENT: *(Mark with an * if they are not members of full committee.)*

HEARING WITNESSES: Same as meeting notice attached? Yes [✓] **No** [ ]
(If "no", please list below and include title, agency, department, or organization.)

STATEMENTS FOR THE RECORD: *(List any statements submitted for the record.)*

Rep. Lowenthal

TIME SCHEDULED TO RECONVENE ____
or
TIME ADJOURNED *4:28 p.m.*

Subcommittee Staff Director

ConEl: Serving over 500,000 churches that serve their communities in the Latin world. Richard Luna is the global vice president of ConEl and the representative for UN affairs.
nhclc.com, conela.org
ConEl NHCLC: Represents over 40,000 Spanish churches in the United States. Presided by Samuel Rodriguez.

House Committee on Foreign Affairs. September 17, 2015. Challenges to Religious Freedom in the Americas

I am grateful for this opportunity to testify regarding religious freedom in Latin America. I want to thank each member of this committee including Chairman Edward Royce and ranking member Eliot Engel. We also recognize ambassador at large Rabbi David Saperstein; as well as the contribution of the State Department, especially in regards to its annual reports on human rights and religious liberty. Each makes an important contribution that responds to the challenges of religious freedom in the Americas.
It is important to examine this very important subject, affecting the life and faith of over 500 million Latinos from 21 nations and over 15 island nations that comprise the Latin American continent. I ask your consideration in the following three focus areas:

I. De Jure: The constitutional and legal framework for religious freedom.

II. De Facto: The reality on the ground, often in violation of constitutional intent, and corresponding legislative efforts to guarantee religious liberty to the citizens of the 21 nations, and over 15 island nations, that represents the Latin American continent.

III. Policy opportunities: We can promote religious liberty in partnerships that can contribute to innovative solutions to glocal (local, global) problems, if we focus on these issues.
a. Religious Equality
b. Children caught in the crossfire of violence and degradation of their God given dignity.
c. Respect for religious worldview.

I. DeJure: Judicial Guarantee of Religious Liberty

I will make this brief. All Latin American nations are signatories to the UN Declaration of human rights where religious freedom is specifically expressed in Article 18:

"Everyone has the right to freedom of thought, conscience and religion; this right includes freedom to change his religion or belief, and freedom, either alone or in community with others and in public or private, to manifest his religion or belief in teaching, practice, worship and observance."(1)

In one way or the constitution and laws of Latin countries adhere on paper to Article 18. The following countries are in historic transitions and should be monitored in this area.

Bolivia: The 2009 Political Constitution of the Plurinational State of Bolivia declares: (3)

Article 4: a"The state respects and guarantees the liberty of religion and spiritual beliefs, in accordance with the respective worldviews. The state is independent of religion."

Article 30: The accepted worldview shared with Bolivian native americans is expressly before the "Spanish colonial invasion."

Article 98, paragraph 2: "The state considers the existence of indigenous culture of peasant origins a great strength.....Artilce 100:... "this patrimony forms part of the expression and identity of the state."

There is an apparent separation of church and state. We can all agree on historic wrongs committed to the indigenous peoples of Latin America.

Yet the new tolerance and inclusion is dangerously opposed to Christian influence. The state is independent of religion but not native religion.

Cuba: Constitutional Provisions and Legislation Relating To Religion (3)

The Cuban Constitution of 1976 reformed the status of religious freedom establishing:

Art 54. The socialist state, that bases its activity and educates the people in the scientific materialistic conception of the universe, recognizes and guarantees the freedom of conscience, the individual right to profess any religious belief and practice, within the confines of the law, the religion of his preference.

In recent years, the government has eased somewhat the harsher aspects of its repression of religious freedom. In 1991 it allowed religious adherents to join the Communist Party. On July 1992, it amended the Constitution to prohibit religious discrimination and removed references to "scientific materialism", i.e., atheism, as the basis for the Cuban State. Note article 55.

Art 55 The State, that recognizes, respects, and guarantees the freedom of conscience and religion, also recognizes, respect, and guarantees the freedom of every citizen to change religious beliefs or not to have any, and to profess, within the confines of the law, the religious worship of his/her preference. The law regulates the relationship of the State with religious institutions

Mexico: The Political Constitution of the Mexican United States written in 1988 states the following concerning religious liberty: (2)

Article 24. Every person is free to profess the religious beliefs that pleases him/her and to practice the respective ceremonies, devotions or worship acts in the temples or in his/her particular home, whenever they do not constitute a crime or fault punished by law.

Venezuela: The constitution consecrates religious liberty, so long as religions does not infringe on "morality, decency and public order." This focus of public order can and has been used to challenge religious liberty in the country. (4)

Constitutions and laws are foundational for every society. If this guaranteed religious liberty, then Latin America would be a model of religious liberty in the world. It is not.

II. DeFacto: On the Ground Violations of Religious Liberty

Sources of religious persecution and intolerance in Latin America include the following: (5)

1. Religious extremists: Latin America was colonized with the Sword and the Word. This is a reason the resurgence of indigenous movements is so strong. It is also the reason why there is a historic mistrust between the evangelical and historic church. For decades, the new expression of evangelical faith was opposed in the following manner;
- No access to legal documents since only catholic baptisms were recognized as official birth documents.
-No recognized marriage outside of the official church.
-No access to funeral homes and cemeteries.
-Stoning of evangelical leaders, along with their home and church premises.
-Mobilization of local mobs against evangelical believers.

In addition, religious extremists from native religions have bee intolerant of evangelicals as follows:

In the town of San Juan Chamula, with a population of approximately 100,00 people, evangelicals were targeted for persecution as follows:
-Threats
- Assassinations. They became the first martyrs of the new Christian church.
-Rape. Dozens of cases.
- Expulsion. Over 30,000 in San Juan Chamula alone.
-Forced participation of festivals where drunkenness disorder are present. The financing of such festivals can leave a family indebted for genrations.

Even though Chamula, in the Chiapas state of Mexico is the most violent example, this type of reality is lived in many rural communities in Mexico and other Latin nations.

2. Revolutionary Extremists

When Christians are caught in the crossfire of a civil conflict in any nation, they suffer due to their religious convictions.

In such a setting, for the crime of not joining revolutionary movements (of left or right) due to their faith, Christians experience:

- Threats
- Deaths
- Expulsion
- Closed churches.
- Declaration of church activities as illegal

Faith communities in various countries, including Nicaragua, El Salvador and Guatemala have experienced being "caught in the crossfire."

Perhaps the greatest current example is Colombia.
In this country, 'christians caught in the crossfire" have been victims of the following:

- Over 2.3 million refugees evicted from their birth lands due to war, expulsion or death threats.
- Over 150 catholic priests, and 270 evangelical pastors killed for their expression of non violent death.
-

III. Policy Opportunities

We can promote religious liberty in partnerships that can contribute to innovative solutions to glocal (local, global) problems, if we focus on these two issues.

a. **Religious Equality**: With a notable exception of Chile, most Latin countries have a signed concordat with the state of the Vatican. Since Catholicism became the majority religion, most constitutions recognize a historic identity with the Catholic Church even when there is a separation of church and state.
   With the growth of the evangelical church, depending on the country from 5% to 50%, there arose a historic opposition and persecution from the state church towards this new expression of the Christian faith. The legacy today is that even when we have religious liberty, there is no religious equality: Consider the following benefits to the official church, that with the notable exception o Chile, are not available to evangelicals, or other expressions of faith.
   1. Subsidy of the episcopal conference up to 10 million dollars yearly.
   2. Chaplaincy in prisons and the military.
   3. Legal status for their organizations and buildings.
   4. Tax free status.
   5. Ability to import.
   6. Subsidies for education and social work.
   7.

RECOMMENDATION 1: We respect the historic legacy of the official church, but as the evangelical church grows, it is time to help countries make a transition towards religious equality in their judicial and daily lives. This applies to the evangelical churches but also to other religious minorities.

• **Children's Rights**:

There are areas where Catholics, Evangelicals and governments disagree or converge. But we can all agree that faith and children unite us.
Consider the challenges to the most vulnerable of us. The children.
According to the Interamerican Institute for Children, the most vulnerable of us face the following o a daily basis:

- Narcotrafficking: Children are used as mules in this underworld.
- Gang (Mara) violence: It is estimated that 82,000 children and youth are involved in these deadly gangs. The ones that are not are targets for expulsion or death.
- Over 5.7 million children work under abusive conditions instead of getting and education.
- Sexual trafickiang and exploitation: Over 770,000 children and youth are victims of Aids and alndestine abortions.
- Refugees and migrants: Every country is facing a migrant problem as children and their families make difficult choices in looking to escape the violence and hopelessness in their local communities.

There are two ways evangelicals in Latin America express their faith;

- Eternal values: The right to life since conception and historic biblical marriage are values of Catholics, Evangelicals and cultural Latinos. Our religious liberty allows us to express these values in our continent. We should not be pressured to accept foreign values to those of our own.
- Social transformation: In Latin America, religious liberty is increasingly connected to social impact. We need to focus on solving problems for children and their families.

Note that religious rights are recognized in various declarations or conventions of the Organization of American States (O.A.S.) such as:

- American Declaration of the Rights and Duties of Man (1948)
- American Convention of Human Rights (1969)
- Additional Protocol to the American Convention on Human Rights in the Area of Economic, Social and Cultural Rights (1988)

Recommendation 2: Promote and support a regional immigration policy that includes the folowing:

- **Respects the God-given dignity of every person**
- **Protects the unity of the immediate family**
- **Respects the rule of law**
- **Guarantees secure national borders**

Respectfully submitted
Richard Luna

Addendum 1: Universal Declaration of Human Rights

The Universal Declaration of Human Rights was adopted and proclaimed by the United Nations General Assembly on 10 December 1948.

Preamble

- (...) Whereas disregard and contempt for human rights have resulted in barbarous acts which have outraged the conscience of mankind, and the advent of a world in which human beings shall enjoy freedom of speech and belief and freedom from fear and want has been proclaimed as the highest aspiration of the common people, (...)

Article 2.1

Everyone is entitled to all the rights and freedoms set forth in this Declaration, without distinction of any kind, such as race, colour, sex, language, religion, political or other opinion, national or social origin, property, birth or other status.

Article 18

Everyone has the right to freedom of thought, conscience and religion; this right includes freedom to change his religion or belief, and freedom, either alone or in community with others and in public or private, to manifest his religion or belief in teaching, practice, worship and observance.

Religious rights are recognized in various declarations or conventions of the Organization of American States (O.A.S.) such as:

- American Declaration of the Rights and Duties of Man (1948)
- American Convention of Human Rights (1969)
- Additional Protocol to the American Convention on Human Rights in the Area of Economic, Social and Cultural Rights (1988)

American Declaration of the Rights and Duties of Man

The American Declaration of the Rights and Duties of Man was adopted by the Ninth International Conference of American States of the Organization of American States in Bogota, Columbia, on 2 May 1948. (1a)

CHAPTER ONE - Rights
Article III. Right to religious freedom and worship
Every person has the right freely to profess a religious faith, and to manifest and practice it both in public and in private.
Article XXII. Right of association
Every person has the right to associate with others to promote, exercise and protect his legitimate interests of a political, economic, religious, social, cultural, professional, labor union or other nature.

Additional Protocol to the American Convention on Human Rights in the Area of Economic, Social and Cultural Rights
The Additional Protocol to the American Convention on Human Rights in the Area of Economic, Social and Cultural Rights was signed by member states of the Organization of American States in San José, Costa Rica, on 17 November 1988.
Article 3 Obligation of nondiscrimination
- The State Parties to this Protocol undertake to guarantee the exercise of the rights set forth herein without discrimination of any kind for reasons related to race, color, sex, language, religion, political or other opinions, national or social origin, economic status, birth or any other social condition.

Article 13 Right to Education (1A)
2. The States Parties to this Protocol agree that education should be directed towards the full development of the human personality and human dignity and should strengthen respect for human rights, ideological pluralism, fundamental freedoms, justice and peace. They further agree that education ought to enable everyone to participate effectively in a democratic and pluralistic society and achieve a decent existence and should foster understanding, tolerance and friendship among all nations and all racial, ethnic or religious groups and promote activities for the maintenance of peace.

Source: O.A.S. Treaty Series No. 69 (1988), Basic Documents Pertaining to Human Rights in the Inter-American System, OEA/Ser.L.V/II.82 doc.6 rev.1 at 67 (1992). The full text version of the Additional Protocol can be found in English at the Internet site of the Organization of American States.

Addendum II. Religious Liberty (2)

MEXICO

A Brief Historical and Legal Description of Religious Liberty

Mexico became independent of Spain in 1821 and joined the United Nations in 1945. Mexico is a federal republic. President Ernesto Zedillo is the leader of the Institutional Revolutionary Party (PRI). The PRI has won every election since 1929. Despite the efforts of the latest, (Salinas) administration to have better control over human Rights violations, the security forces and police committed serious violations in 1993. The violations range from extrajudicial Billings to the limitation of the right of assembly of workers. Because the Government fails to punish violators, these abuses have occurred frequently.

From 1917 to 1991, Mexico´s Constitution discriminated against the Roman Catholic Church. This was due to the fact that the Catholic did not support the Revolution of 1917. There was anticlerical sentiment in the government of that era. The 1917 Constitution prohibited religious instruction in schools (Article 3), prohibited religious instruction outsider of churches (Article 24), and withheld legal recognition from churches, denied clergy members political Rights and regulated religious political activity (article 130).

After much petitioning and protesting, the Catholics demand fro increased religious liberty were met by the Mexican Government. In September 1992, the Mexican Government announced diplomatic relations with the Holy See.
Roman Catholicism is the traditional religión in Mexico and 97% of the population profess that faith. Protestants constitute 3% of the Mexican population. The government allows freedom of religión, enabling religious entities to own property and to operate private schools. However, the Government limits free exercise of religión by permitting religious organizations to acquire legal status only after opereted in Mexico for five years. Religious entities are restricted from owning businesses and communicating through the media. Clergy members can run for a political office only alter being separated form their religious involvement.

In July 1992, after more than six month of debate, the Mexican government published a new law on Religious Associations and Public Worship, which went into effect July 16. The new law did no endorse any specific religion, but considered them all "equal before the law". It also permitted church ownership of property designated for religious purposes, the right to hold religious events outside of church structures with apropiate permits, and to publish freely. However, that law did no revoke a long-standing ban on religious broadcasts.

Addendum 2: Constitutional Provisions and Legislation Relating To Religion

The Political Constitution of the Mexican United States written in 1988 states the following concerning religious liberty:

Article 24. Every person is free to profess the religious beliefs that pleases him/her and to practice the respective ceremonies, devotions or worship acts in the temples or in his/her particular home, whenever they do not constitute a crime or fault punished by law.

The Constitutions guarantee, free Choice of religion, Discrimination against persons because of their Choice of religion is illegal.
A Law of Religious Associations and Public Worship was passed on July15, 1992. This new reform would recognize all religious groups.

CUBA

The Republic of Cuba was established in 1902, became a charter member of he United Nations (UN) in 1945 and a member of the Organization of American States (OAS) in 1948. Cuba consists of 14 provinces and the special municipality of Isla de la Juventud (Isle of Youth). The Cuban population is comprised of mainly three groups, with approximately 66 percent white and mainly of Spanish descent, 22 percent of mixed racial Heritage and 12 percent Black. Almost all are native-born. Professed Roman Catholics have declined from more than 70 percent to about 33 percent of the population since 1957, the beginning of Castro´s regime. Only one percent are Protestants, with Pentecostalism the predominant tradition, and about 50 percent of Cubans consider themselves non religious

Cuba is currently governed under a constitution adopted in 1976, as subsequently amended. The constitution defines the country as a socialist state in which all power belongs to the working people.

Constitutional Provisions and Legislation Relating To Religion

The Cuban Constitution reformed the status of religious freedom establishing:

Art 55 The State, that recognizes, respects, and guarantees the freedom of conscience and religion, also recognizes, respect, and guarantees the freedom of every citizen to change religious beliefs or not to have any, and to profess, within the confines of the law, the religious worship of his/her preference. The law regulates the relationship of the State with religious institutions

The article on religión in the previous Constitution stated:

Art 54. The socialist state, that bases its activity and educates the people in the scientific materialistic conception of the universe, recognizes and guarantees the freedom of conscience, the individual right to profess any religious belief and practice, within the confines of the law, the religion of his preference.

In recent years, the government has eased somewhat the harsher aspects of its repression of religious freedom. In 1991 it allowed religious adherents to join the Communist Party. On July 1992, it amended the Constitution to prohibit religious discrimination and removed references to "scientific materialism", i.e., atheism, as the basis for the Cuban State. While the Protestant Ecumenical Council praised such actions, the Catholic church replied by letters with concern over the gap between the Government´s rhetoric and actions. In late 1993, the Government harshly criticized the Catholic bishops´ pastoral letter calling for national reconciliation and dialogue.

Despite legal changes, religious persecution continues. The State prohibits members of the armed forces from allowing anyone in their household to observe religious practices. It exempts elderly relatives only if their religious beliefs do not influence other family members and are not "damaging to the revolution".

The government requires churches and other religious groups to register with the provincial registry of associations of the city of Havana and to obtain official recognition. The government prohibits construction of new churches, and official recognition of all religious holidays ended in 1961. At that time, the government prohibited nearly all religious processions outsider church grounds and denied churches access to mass media. Despite obstacles set up by the government, church attendance has grown in recent years.

Recent Reported Cases of Religious Intolerance

On August 11, 1995, Ricardo Luna, Director of Open Doors Latin America (a Protestant International ministry dedicated to the defense of persecuted Christians), and a Bellow missionary was called to an "immigration meeting" by Cuban authorities in Havana and were threatened with imprisonment because of the "counter-revolutionary activities". After questioning Luna and the other missionary, Cuban authorities expelled them, threatening them with imprisonment if they, or other personnel from Open Dorros, arrived in Cuba again.

Addendum 3: Towards Common Latin World
Immigration Principles and Practice
evangelicalimmigrationtable.com (7)

In the Untied States, our national immigration laws have created a moral, economic and political crisis in the Americas. Initiatives to remedy this crisis have led to polarization and name calling in which opponents have misrepresented each other's positions as open borders and amnesty versus deportations of millions. This false choice has led to an unacceptable political stalemate at the federal level at a tragic human cost. We urge our nation's leaders to work together with the American people to pass immigration reform that embodies these key principles and that will make our nation proud. As evangelical Christian leaders, we call for a bipartisan solution on immigration that:

- Respects the God-given dignity of every person
- Protects the unity of the immediate family
- Respects the rule of law
- Guarantees secure national borders
- Ensures fairness to taxpayers
- Establishes a path toward legal status and/or citizenship for those who qualify and who wish to become permanent residents

HEADS OF THE EVANGELICAL IMMIGRATION TABLE

- **Leith Anderson**, President, National Association of Evangelicals
- **Stephan Bauman**, President and CEO, World Relief
- **David Beckmann**, President, Bread for the World
- **Noel Castellanos**, CEO, Christian Community Development Association
- **Shirley Hoogstra,** President, Council for Christian Colleges & Universities
- **Russell D. Moore**, President, Southern Baptist Ethics and Religious Liberty Commission
- **Samuel Rodriguez**, President, National Hispanic Christian Leadership Conference
- **Mathew Staver**, Chairman and Founder, Liberty Counsel
- **Richard Stearns**, President, World Vision U.S.
- **Jim Wallis**, President and CEO, Sojourners

HEADS AND FORMER HEADS OF EVANGELICAL DENOMINATIONS

- **Randall A. Bach**, President, Open Bible Churches
- **Gary M. Benedict**, Former President, The Christian and Missionary

Alliance, United States

- **Joel Boot**, Former Executive Director, Christian Reformed Church of North America
- **Ed Boschman**, Executive Director, U.S. Mennonite Brethren
- **Mac Brunson**, Past President, Southern Baptist Convention
- **Eugénio Duarte**, General Superintendent, Church of the Nazarene
- **Robert Duncan**, Archbishop Emeritus, Anglican Church in North America
- **Jim Eschenbrenner**, General Council Secretary, Christian Union
- **Ronnie Floyd**, President, Southern Baptist Convention
- **Jack Graham**, Former President, Southern Baptist Convention
- **David Graves**, General Superintendent, Church of the Nazarene
- **William J. Hamel**, President, Evangelical Free Church of America
- **Bruce Hill**, Bishop, Evangelical Congregational Church
- **Bill Hossler**, President, The Missionary Church
- **Ken Hunn**, Executive Director, The Brethren Church
- **Johnny Hunt**, Former President, Southern Baptist Convention
- **Steven R. Jones**, President, The Missionary Church, Inc.
- **David E. Jeffrey**, National Commander, The Salvation Army
- **David W. Kendall**, Bishop, Free Methodist Church-USA
- **Fred Luter**, Former President, Southern Baptist Convention
- **Jo Anne Lyon**, General Superintendent, The Wesleyan Church
- **James Merritt**, Former President, Southern Baptist Convention
- **Rob McCleland**, Executive Director, North American Baptist Conference
- **Jesse Middendorf**, General Superintendent, Church of the Nazarene
- **Suzii Paynter**, Executive Coordinator, Cooperative Baptist Fellowship
- **Jerry D. Porter**, General Superintendent, Church of the Nazarene
- **Phil Strout**, National Director, Vineyard USA
- **John Stumbo**, President, The Christian and Missionary Alliance, United States
- **Steve Timmermans**, Executive Director, Christian Reformed Church of North America
- **Joseph Tkach**, President and Pastor General, Grace Communion International
- **Stan Toler**, General Superintendent, Church of the Nazarene
- **Berten Waggoner**, Former National Director, Vineyard USA
- **Gary Walter**, President, The Evangelical Covenant Church

- **J.K. Warrick**, General Superintendent, Church of the Nazarene
- **Bobby Welch**, Former President, Southern Baptist Convention
- **Phil Whipple,** Bishop, United Brethren in Christ
- **Mark Williams,** General Overseer, Church of God (Cleveland, TN)
- **George Wood**, General Superintendent, General Council of the Assemblies of God
- **Bryant Wright**, Former President, Southern Baptist Convention

LEADERS OF EVANGELICAL ORGANIZATIONS

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- **Matthew Ayers**, Executive Director, Dream Centers of Colorado Springs
- **Leroy Barber**, President, Mission Year
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- **Kit Danley**, President, Neighborhood Ministries
- **Jude DelHierro**, Executive Director, Confluence Ministries
- **Mark DeYmaz,** Executive Director, Mosaix Global Network
- **Kevin Ezell**, President, North American Mission Board
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- **Benjamin Homan,** President, John Stott Ministries/Langham Partnership
- **Gregory C.V. Johnson**, President and Founder, Standing Together
- **Richard Land**, President Emeritus, Southern Baptist Ethics and Religious Liberty Commission
- **Jim Liske**, CEO, Prison Fellowship Ministries
- **Douglas Livingston**, President, Camino Global
- **Alejandro Mandes**, Director of Hispanic Ministries, Evangelical Free Church
- **Jim Mellado**, President, Willow Creek Association
- **Jesse Miranda**, Chief Executive Director, National Hispanic Christian Leadership Conference
- **Steve Moore**, President, Missio Nexus
- **Doug Nuenke**, President, Navigators

- **Don Osman**, President, Lead Global
- **Kevin Palau**, President, Luis Palau Association
- **Luis Palau**, Founder and CEO, Luis Palau Association
- **Josue del Risco**, National Coordinator, Church Mobilization Group, North American Mission Board
- **Mike Rolfes,** Executive Director, Renew Chicago
- **Rick Ryan**, Convoy of Hope
- **Jim Sautner**, National Director, Destino
- **Doug Seebeck**, Executive Director, Partners Worldwide
- **Ronald J. Sider**, President, Evangelicals for Social Action
- **Ed Stetzer**, President, Lifeway Research
- **T.V. Thomas**, Chair, Ethnic America Network
- **Arturo Vargas**, Executive Director, National Association of Latino Elected and Appointed Officials
- **Luis Villareal**, Executive Director, Save Our Youth
- **Barbara Williams-Skinner**, Co-Chair, National African American Clergy Network
- **Ken Wytsma**, Founder, The Justice Conference

LEADERS OF EVANGELICAL UNIVERSITIES AND SEMINARIES

- **Danny Akin**, President, Southeastern Baptist Theological Seminary
- **Jason Allen**, President, Midwestern Baptist Theological Seminary
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- **David Dockery**, President, Trinity International University/Trinity Evangelical Divinity School
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- **Erik Hoekstra**, President, Dordt College
- **Dennis Hollinger**, President, Gordon Conwell Theological Seminary
- **John Jackson**, President, William Jessup University
- **Mark Labberton**, President, Fuller Theological Seminary
- **Michael Le Roy**, President, Calvin College
- **Gordon MacDonald**, Chancellor, Denver Seminary

- **Dan Martin**, President, Seattle Pacific University
- **Corlis McGee**, President, Eastern Nazarene College
- **Jul Medenblik,** President, Calvin Theological Seminary
- **Richard J. Mouw,** President, Fuller Theological Seminary
- **Shirley Mullen**, President, Houghton College
- **Paige Patterson**, President, Southwestern Baptist Theological Seminary
- **Philip Ryken**, President, Wheaton College
- **Elizabeth Rudenga**, Interim President, Trinity Christian College
- **Joseph Stowell**, President, Cornerstone University
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PREPARED STATEMENT OF THE HONORABLE ALAN S. LOWENTHAL, A REPRESENTATIVE IN CONGRESS FROM THE STATE OF CALIFORNIA

House Foreign Affairs Committee / Western Hemisphere Subcommittee:

Challenges to Religious Freedom in the Americas

Opening Statement

Thursday, October 15, 2015

Thank you Mr. Chairman, and thank you to the witnesses for joining us today.

I would like to first thank Chairman Duncan for holding this hearing in advance of Pope Francis's visit to Cuba and the United States next week. Although by many accountings, including the US Commission on International Religious Freedom and Pew Research Center, the Americas rank as one of the regions with fewest restrictions on religious freedom. Of course, this does not mean we should stop being vigilant in pointing out instances where religious freedom is violated.

The Catholic Church, to whom the vast majority of people in Latin America belong, has played a key role in protecting religious freedom in many countries. At the same time, statutory recognitions of the Church in several Latin American nations raises questions of fairness and equal treatment for people of all faiths. Members of minority religious groups such as Protestants, Jews, and Muslims have at times faced discrimination and persecution for their faith.

This hearing is about religious freedom in the Americas, and I would also like to mention that I think we would be remiss not to mention religious freedom in our own country. Religious freedom is, of course, enshrined in the First Amendment of our Constitution. But ensuring the freedom to worship and practice as you may choose has been an ongoing effort in the United States since our nation's founding.

Earlier this year I attended the funeral of Reverend Clementa Pinckney in South Carolina. The attack on Emmanuel AME Church in Charleston, which claimed the lives of nine parishioners, including Reverend Pinckney, is a sobering reminder of the history of violence against black churches in the United States. Many people of all faiths, from Jews to Mormons, Catholics to Muslims, have at times faced hatred and persecution in our country for their beliefs.

I hope that we continue striving to lead by example as we shine a light on violations of religious freedom in neighboring countries.

Thank you, and I yield back.

MATERIAL SUBMITTED FOR THE RECORD BY THE HONORABLE JEFF DUNCAN, A REPRESENTATIVE IN CONGRESS FROM THE STATE OF SOUTH CAROLINA, AND CHAIRMAN, SUBCOMMITTEE ON THE WESTERN HEMISPHERE

CONVENCIÓN EVANGELICA BAUTISTA ARGENTINA
Virrey Liniers 42 Ciudad Autónoma de Buenos Aires

Buenos Aires, July 14th 2015

Dear Authorities of the Subcommittee on the Western Hemisphere,

In this letter I send you the information of the first case of religious freedom of our country, Argentina. Please find here the abstract:

Marcelo Nieva, 36 years old, married, is pastor of the Evangelical Baptist Church **Pueblo Grande** in the city of Río Tercero, Córdoba, belonging to the Argentinean Evangelical Baptist Convention and the Association of Evangelical Baptists Churches of the Province of Córdoba, registered under the File no. 672 at the National Register of Cult in the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Nation. The church leads also a women transit-home, where women are contained and is home for vulnerable people, who were victims of domestic violence, sex trafficking, abandonment, drug addicted and others problems.
This seems to have upset certain interests in the city of Rio Tercero, a city where the world's most wanted drug dealer "El Chapo Guzman" lived (click here to see the article).

In the coming days will be met four years of abuse and persecution from the justice, police and local government. Both, pastor and church members have been beaten threatened and persecuted cruelly either passivity or inaction permissiveness of the provincial organisms. The local court has over forty complaints made by the members of the church, such as damage to the property, simple threats, threats with a weapon, injury, abuse of authority. Such denounces have been absolutely neglected by the authorities.
The church, the women transit-home and houses of the members of the church have been violently raided by the police on several occasions due to the claim of "conspiracy and forming a sect" done by one of the creators of the 9891 law (approved and regulated ONLY in Córdoba unconstitutionally), Mr . Hector Navarro. The result of that raid was that there were subtracting 10 Bibles, which have been requested by the attorney, but incredibly the justice refuses to return.

Also local media openly incited to a collective violence, the result of that were two violent demonstrations, where approximately 50 misfits stoned the temple and tried to burn it with church members inside, again with the permissiveness of the local police. This led to the "federalization" of the case, through our lawyer, Dr. Alejandro Zeverin Escribano, who asked to the Judge of the Federal Court, Sanchez Freites from the Tribunal nr. 2, an

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immediate action of the National Gendarmerie or the Argentinean Federal Police for the custody of the temple, members and belongings. There were met 11 months of permanent custody of the Federal Police of Argentina, who are living 24 hours inside of the temple.

On October 2014, Pastor Marcelo Nieva with Dr. Jorge Ferrari, executive Chief of the Argentinean Evangelical Baptist Convention and his lawyer, Dr. Alejandro Zeverin Escribano, met with the
Minister of Government, Dr. Walter Saieg, to inform him about the complicated situation that the evangelical church in the Río Tercero is going through and they specifically asked him for a direct action on the policemen and commissioner of police of the dependence from Rio Tercero involved, calling for the removal of the same for allowing attacks to the Baptist church. Five days after that meeting the Pastor Marcelo Nieva and his collaborator, Daniel Carreño, were shot in plenty daylight in the city of Córdoba in a scary attack that led to the denounce at the Federal Court of attempted of murder. Of the shots fired just one impacted on the vehicle and the bullet was diverted due a plate or stud inside the vehicle, otherwise the path of the shot was headed straight to the neck or head of the pastor or his companion.

Another situation of extremely seriousness is the case of María Belén Aguilera, one of the member of the women transit-home and member of the church Pueblo Grande, who is being held under house arrest by a false allegations WITHOUT CONVICTION and deprived her, of an alleged injunction, of the possession of her daughter, aggravating the situation by putting the baby in the hands of a man accused of sexual abuse, but with politicians and police links, who also has hit church members and has more than 15 complaints against him, without the justice do anything about it. This aberrant situation mobilized the complaint of Judge Marcelo Ramognino for crimes committed in the performance of the judiciary and make a "judicial ambush" against María Belén Aguilera. There was also made a complaint at the PROCUVIN (=Lawyer´s office of institutional violence) and a challenge with cause was made against the magistrate mentioned before.

About a year ago the mayor of the city of Rio Tercero, Mr. Alberto Martino, promoted an initiative that has to do with the Municipal Register of Cult that seek to regulate the activities of evangelical churches. This has mobilized organizations and pastoral councils to object strongly to this illegal and unconstitutional initiative, which demonstrates clearly how is intended to legalize the persecution in the city of Rio Tercero.

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The Argentinean Federation of Evangelical Churches and the Argentinean Evangelical Baptist Convention in their representatives, Dr. Nestor Miguez from FAIE (Argentinean Federation of Evangelical Churches) and Dr. Jorge Ferrari executive Chief of CEBA (Argentinean Evangelical Baptist Convention) held meetings with the Pr. Marcelo Nieva and with the General Lawyer, Dra. Alejandra Gils Carbo, the Secretary of Security, Sergio Berni, the Secretary of Cult of the Nation, until to bring the case to present to the president's office. To this is added that this is a political conflict and in a country such as Argentina so politicized difficult to take concrete action on side of the authorities.

Here are the latest news about our case:

A HISTORICAL RESOLUTION

In March 2015 there was an attempt by the persecutors of our church to remove our case from the scope of the Federal Court, claiming that it returns to the court of the city of Rio Tercero, where more than 40 complaints were neglected by the local justice. Unusually the Federal Judge from the Court of Villa Mary accepted the terms of the defense and resolved, in a few words, to throw the cause out.
Our lawyer, Dr. Alejandro Zeverin, appealed this resolution, which he called "cowardly and ridiculous" from the presiding judge. The result of this appeal was a new oral hearing to determine the reason of the matter, in other words, if our case remained to the Federal Court or if it´s going to the ordinary justice, also he appealed to the Prosecutor who understands the cause, Dr. Maria Miguel Carmona, Villa Maria.
At the hearing held on May 29th 2015, the Federal Court of Appeals of Cordoba resolved in an historic decision, to REVOKE the resolution that tried to bring our case to the orbit of the provincial justice, stating that our cause MUST BE IN THE FEDERAL JUSTICE, recognizing FOR THE FIRST TIME a religious discrimination and the realization of concatenated persecutions acts that the members of the Evangelical Baptist Church Pueblo Grande in Rio Tercero are subjected by them and calling the competent authorities to act as soon as possible because of the seriousness of the facts to stop the harassment and abuses occurred more than three years ago.

Moreover The Federal Appeals Court asks the direct intervention of INADI that is the Institute in Argentina that combats the discrimination, xenophobia and racism.

The plea of our lawyer, Dr. Alejandro Zeverin, was extraordinary, passionate and asked the Federal Court to act without more laps. This was supported in a whole by the General Attorney present at the hearing and voted unanimously by the court.

CONVENCIÓN EVANGELICA BAUTISTA ARGENTINA
Virrey Liniers 42 Ciudad Autónoma de Buenos Aires

We believe this is the beginning of the fulfillment of the good promises that God made us over this years.

ACT OF THANKS AT FEDERAL POLICE STATION OF ARGENTINA AND A NEW COMPLAINT

On Saturday May the 15th 2015, the President of the National Association of Baptist Churches, Pr. Norberto De Seta, and managers of the Baptist Association of Córdoba, congregate before the building of the Delegation of the Federal Police Station of Cordoba, to pray for the policemen that are providing custody at our differents temples, sheltering and protecting our members, guaranteeing them the Freedom of Religion from the Articles 14, 19 and 20 of our National Constitution, under the repeated attacks to our buildings and members done by people linked to drug trafficking. On that occasion it was imposed on the federal authorities our problem, expanding in details, and accompanied by our legal adviser.

Both, federal authorities and the press were surprised that an act of "gratitude" were committed, since they are always to complain and protest, but Dr. Alejandro Zeverin said: To have custody of the Argentinean Federal Police guarding the temple in Rio Tercero is for 11 months, from the legal a success, but from the moral a failure."

The same day that a new complaint was made under these new attacks, threats and intimidation by the Police of the Province, acts of vandalism, graffities and painted were made on the front walls of our temple referring to our church as "a sect". This time these crimes were realized in the presence of the Argentinean Federal Police who were present and provide their evidence to the competent authorities.

In Argentina is still valid the law that comes from the civil-military process that is the "Act of worship (Ley de Culto)", the 21.745 which does not guarantee religious equality, that´s why one of our temples could be pushed as it was in the city of Rio Tercero and only after 4 years of battle we have responses from justice. Our fear is that such situations continue to be replicated in other provinces and we understand that this is a cause that we must win in favor of religious freedom and freedom of conscience.

Please find attached proceedings (in Spanish) so you can understand the genesis of the conflict and its derivations.

CONVENCIÓN EVANGELICA BAUTISTA ARGENTINA
Virrey Liniers 42 Ciudad Autónoma de Buenos Aires

For further information you can also contact our lawyer or the most affected Pastor of religious freedom Pr. Marcelo Nieva in Argentina, here the contact details:

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Pr. Marcelo Nieva

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I´ll will be more than glad to testify on the 29th or 30th at the hearing. This opportunity means very much for us, because the situation in Argentina day by day is more difficult and we feel unheard by the local authorities.

I´ll wait for your prompt response.

Thank you very much in advance.

Best regards,

Dr. Jorge Ferrari
Secretario Ejecutivo
Convención Evangélica
Bautista Argentina