South Mexico: Adventist family shot on way to church, 3 dead

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Seventh-day Adventist leaders are still puzzled by the death of three of its members in Huixtan, Chiapas who were gunned down on their way to church by unknown assailants on Saturday, Jun. 25. The victims were Sebastian Garcia, his wife Maria, and their 14-year old son Emilio. They are survived by their five-year old daughter, who suffered a gunshot wound in the attack. The child is still receiving medical treatment in a hospital.

"Until this moment, we are not sure why this happened to this family," said Pastor Adriel Clemente, president of the church in Altos de Chiapas. Church leaders have been in close contact with the local authorities who have yet to conclude their findings on the crime.

The Garcia family attended church in the El Calvario district, neighboring an area where strong conflicts over religious intolerance have been reported.

"We are astonished by these acts," added Clemente. "The El Calvario community has been a calm and friendly one. In the three years that I have been president, I have never received a complaint from pastors or laypersons on the violence or opposition in that area. Garcia and his family were faithful members known to be peaceful in the community. There is no evidence that leads us to believe otherwise," explained Clemente.

According to Pastor Cesar Maya, religious liberty director for South Mexico, the Seventh-day Adventist Church has played an important role in mediating with the authorities regarding abuse or violence cases like this one.

"Together with pastor Clemente, we have helped the authorities see more clearly what the church, the families of the victims, and the police are responsible for in resolving these issues," said Maya. "We have insisted for justice on behalf of the victims, regardless of their faith."

Church leaders in South Mexico are working to seek religious liberty rights in Chiapas and especially in Altos de Chiapas. A series of meetings will be held by Religious Liberty director for the Adventist world church Dr. John Graz during the coming weeks, to boost coexistence and fraternity among peoples in the frame of religious consciousness. Government officials, religious leaders and other organizations will be gathered to discuss and promote the fundamental human right of religious liberty.