Southern Mexico: Religious Liberty forum spotlights local challenges to freedom of belief

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The July 16 forum -- preceded by a meeting with some 600 church pastors and laypeople from three regions in Southern Mexico -- drew religious liberty experts and local government officials, raising awareness of challenges to religious liberty in Chiapas.

World church Public Affairs and Religious Liberty Director John Graz, who spoke at the event, thanked Mexican officials for their ongoing efforts to protect freedom of conscience, noting that in some countries such a festival would be forbidden.

While Mexico's national constitution makes provisions for religious liberty, local religious customs and traditions often usurp the law in Chiapas.

Although they garner little attention from the international community, recent cases of violence directed toward Protestants in the region, among them Adventists, intensify the need to protect the region's tenuous religious liberty, Graz said.

"When these people join the church, there is a contradiction between their new Protestant values and their ethnic culture," Graz said. "They are seen as betraying their heritage."

New Protestant converts declining to participate in monthly festivals of religious saints can face arrest. Others are required to perform community service if they don't contribute funds to Catholic events.

Although not clearly categorized as religious intolerance, the recent cases of Adventist families expelled from their communities in the Highlands of Chiapas and an Adventist family gunned down on the way to church last month in Huixtan, Chiapas, are especially troubling.

Adventist religious liberty experts have followed the situation in Chiapas for years, Graz said, noting that thousands of Protestants have been affected since the mid-1990s. "Mexico is a democratic society, but these challenges prove that religious freedom is fragile and at risk everywhere if we are not aware and vigilant," he said.

Abraham Madero, director of religious ministers at the Secretary of Government in Mexico City, told festival attendees that the country is "a step away from the full recognition of religious liberty." While Mexico recognized basic religious liberty in 1992, recent restructuring of the country's human rights legislation offers an "open door" to expand religious liberties outlined in the constitution.

"Religious liberty is one of the fundamental human rights," said Enrique Ramirez, undersecretary of religious affairs for the State of Chiapas. Recently, local government in the region passed a law to "prevent and eliminate" religious discrimination. Ramirez said...