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Responses to Information Requests

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Guatemala: Treatment of members of evangelical churches, particularly members of the Pentecostal Church, by the authorities and society (2011-August 2013)

Research Directorate, Immigration and Refugee Board of Canada, Ottawa

1. Overview

According to the US Department of State's *2012 International Religious Freedom Report*, the Evangelical Alliance (Alianza Evangélica), which is identified in this same report as the official umbrella organization for Protestant groups, estimates that 43 percent of the population of Guatemala is protestant (US 20 May 2013, 1). However, the Guatemalan newspaper *La Hora* reports different information, saying that, according to the Evangelical Alliance, approximately 43 percent of the population of Guatemala is evangelical (*La Hora* 19 Jan. 2013). Agence France-Presse (AFP) reports that, according to official statistics, more than half of Guatemala's 15 million citizens have converted to neo-Pentecostalism (AFP 28 Apr. 2013). Meanwhile, *Plaza Pública*, a Guatemalan media site that publishes research and analysis on human rights and democracy (n.d.), indicates that, according to the 2011 National Youth Survey (Encuesta Nacional de Juventud), around 33 percent of Guatemalan youth describe themselves as evangelicals, while around 48 percent identify as Catholics and around 8 percent identify as Christian (12 Feb. 2012).

According to the *2012 International Religious Freedom Report*, there are many independent evangelical groups in the country (US 20 May 2013, 1). *La Hora* reports that, according to the Ministry of Governance (Ministerio de Gobernación), there were 1,960 officially registered churches in the country in 2012 (19 Jan. 2013). The newspaper explains that because the [1985] Constitution guarantees religious freedom, there has been [translation] "an exponential increase" in the number of churches, especially evangelical churches (*La Hora* 19 Jan. 2013). *La Hora* further indicates that, according to a researcher for the Ecumenical Christian Council of Guatemala, there is no coordinating or guiding body for evangelical churches and [translation] "each individual local church has its own voice" (ibid.).

In April 2013, the evangelical church House of God (Casa de Dios) opened a new "megachurch" with a capacity of 11,000 people (AFP 28 Apr. 2013; *Prensa Libre* 27 Apr. 2013). AFP indicates that the church, which it describes as one of the main Pentecostal congregations in Guatemala, is located 21 kilometres east of Guatemala City (28 Apr. 2013). The inauguration ceremony was attended by the President of Guatemala (AFP 28 Apr. 2013; *Prensa Libre* 27 Apr. 2013). The Guatemalan News Agency (Agencia Guatemalteca de Noticias) also reports that others in attendance included the Vice-President, ministers of State, secretaries, deputies, diplomats, and prominent athletes (Guatemala 27 Apr. 2013).

2. Treatment of Evangelicals

The 2012 *International Religious Freedom Report* states that there were no reports of abuses of religious freedom by the government and no reports of societal abuse or discrimination based on religious affiliation, belief, or practice during the year (US 20 May 2013, 3-4). The report notes, however, that the family of the son of a "leading evangelical pastor" was the subject of a "criminal attack, apparently due to the family's religion" and that the family "expressed concern for their safety" as three of the five accused were awaiting trial (ibid., 4). Corroboration for the information provided by the 2012 *International Religious Freedom Report* could not be found among the sources consulted by the Research Directorate within the time constraints of this Response.

Media sources have reported on the following incidents of violence against evangelicals:

- In January 2012, a pastor was shot and killed close to the Mexican border while on his way to a meeting with other ministers (*The Christian Post* 26 Jan. 2012; *Ágora* 15 Feb. 2012). The killing was attributed to the Mexican criminal cartel Los Zetas in a communiqué issued by the pastor's church, the Church of God (Iglesia de Dios) (ibid.), or to "drug traffickers associated with the Zetas" by another source (*The Christian Post* 26 Jan. 2012). *The Christian Post* states that the motive for the killing was unclear (ibid.). However, *Ágora*, a military publication for members of the US Armed Forces and the security sectors of countries associated with the US Northern Command (n.d.), affirms that the Zetas are murdering and [translation] "harassing" religious leaders [in Mexico and Guatemala] (15 Feb. 2012). A researcher in national security at the Autonomous University of Mexico (Universidad Autónoma de México), interviewed by *Ágora*, stated that members of the clergy who speak out against criminal groups will be attacked in retaliation (*Ágora* 15 Feb. 2012).
- In February 2012, an evangelical pastor was intercepted in Guatemala by unidentified individuals while driving from Honduras to Zacapa and beaten, before managing to escape (*Prensa Libre* 17 Feb. 2012; *Radio Emisoras Unidas* 18 Feb. 2012).
- In November 2012 in Santa María Ixhuatán [Santa Rosa department], an evangelical pastor was attacked and killed in his car by men on motorcycles (*Prensa Libre* 1 Nov. 2012; *Nuestro Diario* 2 nov. 2012). The pastor had also previously been kidnapped in the same area (ibid.; *Prensa Libre* 1 Nov. 2012) and a police official was of the opinion that the killing was in retaliation for the police's capture of the kidnapping suspects (ibid.).

The Guatemalan newspaper *Prensa Libre* has also reported on the following incidents:

- In November 2011, an evangelical pastor of the Esmirna church in Jutiapa department was reportedly killed on his property by two men with machetes (*Prensa libre* 3 Nov. 2011). At the time, the authorities indicated that they did not know the motive of the crime (ibid.).
- In May 2012, an evangelical pastor in Escuintla department was reportedly shot and wounded by armed men who then stole his motorcycle (*Prensa libre* 3 May 2012).

Corroboration and information on the motive of these attacks could not be found among the sources consulted by the Research Directorate within the time constraints of this Response. Information on the treatment of members of the Pentecostal Church by the authorities and society could not be found among the sources consulted by the Research Directorate within the time constraints of this Response.

This Response was prepared after researching publicly accessible information currently available to the Research Directorate within time constraints. This Response is not, and does not purport to be, conclusive as to the merit of any particular claim for refugee protection. Please find below the list of sources consulted in researching this Information Request.

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Additional Sources Consulted

Oral sources: Representatives of the following organizations were unable to provide information within the time constraints of this Response: Casa de Dios; Programa Latinoamericano de Estudios Socioreligiosos. Attempts to contact the Iglesia Pentecostal Unida de Guatemala – Oficina nacional were unsuccessful. A representative of Iglesia Pentecostal Unida De Guatemala – Ciudad Capital, Santa Rosa was unable to provide information.

Internet sites, including: Amnesty International; eoi.net; *El Heraldo*; *El Metropolitano*; *El Periódico*; Freedom House; Observatorio de la violencia; Programa Latinoamericano de Estudios Socioreligiosos; Publicogt.com; Siglo21.com.gt; United States – Commission on International Religious Freedom.

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