

Mexican bishops' conference acknowledges priests under threat

MEXICO CITY – The Mexican bishops' conference acknowledged that priests have suffered threats of violence, kidnapping and extortion from Mexico's narcotics-trafficking cartels.

The conference also confirmed that a growing number of priests – mostly serving in remote and mountainous areas rife with illegal drug trade activities – have been transferred to other parishes, assigned other types of work or even moved to other parts of the country because of threats. Other priests, meanwhile, have been forced to raise up to \$800 to make weekly extortion payments.

“We have personally felt the variety of problems that affect our homeland, such as the overflowing wave of violence and insecurity that has been ongoing for years and have claimed numerous victims – many of them innocent,” the bishops said in an April 14 statement.

“Many priests live their ministries in a heroic way, amid the fear of threats, poverty, violence, extortion and aggressions,” they said.

The statement was read by three prelates – Auxiliary Bishop Jose Trinidad Gonzalez of Guadalajara, Auxiliary Bishop Rene Rodriguez of Texcoco and Bishop Felipe Arizmendi Esquivel of San Cristobal de las Casas – as the bishops ended their spring planning session in suburban Mexico City.

The violence overflowing parts of Mexico has claimed at least 22,700 lives – a figure recently revised upward by the federal government – since President Felipe Calderon took office in December 2006 and sent the army and federal police to crack down on the cartels.

“In spite of the grand efforts of various government agencies, fear exists and the insecurity destroying the life of so many communities isolates them and exposes them to new expressions of violence,” Bishop Rodriguez told reporters.

The statement marked the first time the bishops acknowledged that the violence attributed to the crackdown on the country's warring cartels has directly affected the church.

The bishops released a pastoral letter on violence in February, but the issue has confounded the church as it has attempted to minister in seemingly lawless regions of Mexico without running afoul of either the government or the cartels.

Equally confounding has been how the church should respond to threats against priests.

Mexico's evangelical community went public April 2, when the Mexico City newspaper Reforma published a report on how cartels and their affiliates have threatened to kidnap evangelical pastors and extorted churches and charity projects through protection rackets. The newspaper sought the opinion of the bishops' spokesman, Father Manuel Corral, who said, "There has not been any information at this time of threats against priests - much less a bishop."

Stories of aggression against priests and the church subsequently surfaced, however.

A parish in the Chihuahua town of El Porvenir, which neighbors Fort Hancock, Texas, was burned down by unidentified assailants on Good Friday. The parish priest, Father Salvador Salgado, denied that he had been threatened, but told Catholic News Service that other priests in the Diocese of Ciudad Juarez had been.

Father Salgado expressed a sense of powerlessness in confronting the violence, which, in his region near Ciudad Juarez, has turned once-peaceful communities into ghost towns as frightened residents flee for Texas and cartel members burn down buildings thought to be affiliated with rivals.

"This is something we can't meddle in because there have been threats against us and because there will be reprisals against us priests," he said.