

Mexican groups to governments: Resolve situation of Guatemalan farmers

MEXICO CITY - A coalition of Mexican human rights groups has called on the Mexican and Guatemalan governments to resolve the situation of some 300 farm families who fled a violent eviction in northern Guatemala and now reside in squalor on the Mexican side of the border.

A report issued by the 10 groups Nov. 22 said at least 100 children were among the displaced families residing in a camp without adequate sanitation a few hundred meters from the Guatemalan border in the Mexican municipality of Tenosique. Some of the residents are ill, while many children suffer from diarrhea.

“This is a very desperate situation for the majority of the (displaced people),” Franciscan Father Tomas Gonzalez Castillo, who helps care for the displaced families, said at a Nov. 22 news conference at the Jesuit-run Miguel Agustin Pro Juarez Human Rights Center.

The eviction highlights Guatemala’s problems with security and human rights as parts of the country - especially the northern department of Peten - have been rife with drug-cartel violence and alleged human rights abuses.

The report said the residents of a corn-farming village, Nueva Esperanza, were evicted Aug. 23 by the National Police, Guatemalan army and members of the National Council of Protected Areas; the villagers homes were burned.

The villagers, the report added, supposedly violated a law forbidding the

establishment of settlements in protected areas, even though La Esperanza was founded prior to the law's implementation. Guatemalan officials have publicly alleged the families had connections to the drug trade, but Father Gonzalez rejected those allegations.

Talks involving the families and representatives of the Mexican and Guatemalan governments have been fruitless - and time is running short, advocates said. A new government takes office in Guatemala early next year, meaning talks would have to start again from the beginning, Father Gonzalez said.

The families could apply for asylum, but the authors of the report said the group came to Mexico with the expectation of returning to Guatemala and their properties - even though Mexico has a history of accepting refugees, including some from past conflicts in Guatemala. The families rejected a recent Guatemalan offer of about 7.5 acres of land per household, a fraction of what they farmed previously, Father Gonzalez said.

The report on the Guatemalans' plight - based on a four-day investigation in October - also focused on the situation of Tenosique's human rights advocates. Father Gonzalez was included in that group: He allegedly has been threatened by organized criminal groups, the police and the army for denouncing crimes committed against undocumented Central American migrants.

"The defense of human rights ... has turned into one of the most risky professions in our country," the report said.