

Mexico: Priest kidnapped for protecting migrants

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Source: CSW

A Mexican priest was kidnapped on 3 August after blocking an attempt by an organised criminal group to kidnap Cuban migrants from a migrant shelter in north-eastern Mexico.

Father Aarón Méndez Ruiz is the director of the Casa del Migrante AMAR migrant shelter in Nuevo Laredo city in Nuevo Laredo municipality, Tamaulipas state. The facility has around 100 beds for migrants, but often exceeds this number and has been known to accommodate up to around 450 on occasions. Members of the criminal group that abducted Father Méndez Ruiz had attempted to kidnap Cuban migrants from the shelter with the intention of holding them for ransom. Local sources report that the kidnapping of Cubans has become profitable for organised criminal groups because their family members tend to pay ransom money quickly.

In a telephone interview with Spanish international news agency, Agencia EFE, on 9 August 2019 Mr Erbin Ortiz, a shelter worker and assistant to Father Méndez Ruiz stated that the priest had blocked attempts to kidnap the Cubans. Mr Ortiz added that Father Méndez Ruiz was "100% committed" to the shelter and had ensured the security of migrants there since 2009. Father Méndez Ruiz is also known for carrying out charitable work alongside the migrants, such as taking them to deliver food to vulnerable communities in Nuevo Laredo, to paint schools, or to clean local parks.

Despite notifying federal authorities, Mr Ortiz also stated that no communication or ransom demand for Father Méndez Ruiz had been received, and that everyone in the shelter was afraid the criminals would return to kidnap more people.

CSW's Chief Executive Mervyn Thomas said: "We are deeply concerned for the wellbeing of Father Méndez Ruiz and for the welfare of migrants residing at the Casa del Migrante AMAR migrant shelter. We urge the Mexican government to ensure security for civilian populations in areas with a strong influence of criminal groups, and to develop strategies to support religious leaders and other civil society actors who are under threat. CSW also calls for a full investigation into the enforced disappearance of Father Méndez Ruiz and the prosecution of those responsible."

Nuevo Laredo, located on the US-Mexico border, was recently added to the 'Remain in Mexico' program, a policy which requires thousands of migrants to stay in Mexico while they await immigration hearings in the United States. Father Méndez Ruiz is one of many priests running shelters for migrants and asylum seekers in the area.



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Last year, ten religious leaders were killed in Mexico, making 2018 the tenth consecutive year that the country has been ranked one of the most dangerous in the world for Catholic priests. The expansion of violent criminal groups in the country and the pervading climate of impunity surrounding such crimes has led to an increase in violence against religious leaders. Many criminal groups view church leaders, both Catholic and Protestant, and their influence, as a threat to their power. Religious leaders continue to be threatened, kidnapped and killed, and a lack of proper investigation means perpetrators are not brought to justice.

Mr Thomas added: "We urge the international community to engage with the Mexican government on these matters and to recognise the role that many religious leaders play, not only as leaders of their churches, but also as voices for peace, justice and integrity, and as human rights defenders."

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