

## PBI MEXICO – September 2013

## New accompaniment in Chihuahua

### Paso del Norte Human Rights Center

***Due to their situation of risk, PBI has received and accepted a new accompaniment request from the Paso del Norte Human Rights Center. The center becomes the first organization to be accompanied by the new PBI team in the north of Mexico.***

The Paso del Norte Human Rights Center, located in Ciudad Juárez, state of Chihuahua, was founded in 2001 to address human rights violations in the region. It is directed by Priest Óscar Enríquez Pérez and its mission is to “integrally promote and defend human rights, with the participation and organization of the people, above all the most abused, building a proactive culture and a respect for life”. The members of the organization began their work amid a context of violence against women, executions, corruption of public security forces and a climate of impunity.

The Center emerged as a space for advice and guidance for the local community about their civil rights. It also sets objectives to promote and defend political, economic, social, cultural and environmental rights in order to create an impact on the cultural and social change in Ciudad Juárez. Today, the organization has two main lines of work: accompanying victims (prioritizing cases of torture and forced disappearances) and advocacy.

Paso Del Norte handles its cases comprehensively. In other words, the organization provides legal advice and psychosocial care for the people who come to the Center seeking support in situations of violation of their rights. Furthermore, Paso Del Norte carries out work in the areas of rights training and local committee organization, which allows for the organization of people in communities to defend their rights. The Center has an interdisciplinary team of psychologists, lawyers, sociologists and social workers.

#### Militarization and human rights in Ciudad Juárez

Since the militarization of Ciudad Juárez began in 2008 as part of the federal government security strategy to combat organized crime, the Center documented many human rights violations committed by the military: arbitrary detention, cases of torture, disappearances, raids and searches, and extrajudicial killings were attributed to security agents. The military were replaced

by the Federal Police in 2010. However according to Father Óscar, “when we saw the young people who we were defending, they all had been beaten, leaving it clear to us that this was a pattern of Police operation”<sup>1</sup>.



*PBI Mexico volunteers from the North Team with members of Paso Del Norte after signing the accompaniment agreement.*

Complaints against the police and military increased but there was no organization taking on the cases. Paso Del Norte decided to fill the void and to accompany the processes of the violations committed by the armed forces and police. Between 2011 and 2012 the organization registered 44 cases of torture, of which it has monitored 20.

Torture has been a central theme for the organization. In March 2013 Paso Del Norte, together with the Autonomous University of Ciudad Juárez, the *Frontera Norte* College and the National Network of Civil Human Rights Organisms “All Rights For Everyone”, organized a forum titled “Torture and human rights in Mexico”<sup>2</sup>, whereby victims and national and international experts discussed the psychosocial

<sup>1</sup> Interview with Padre Óscar Enríquez, Diana Esther Morales and Silvia Méndez from the Paso Del Norte Human Rights Center, May 16 2012.

<sup>2</sup> <https://www.facebook.com/notes/cdh-paso-del-norte/foro-la-tortura-y-los-derechos-humanos-en-m%C3%A9xico/10200212004735447>

consequences of the practice, the causes and the purposes of torture, the international legal framework and the context of impunity that characterizes it.

Besides managing torture cases legally, the organization aims to give visibility to the problem, and demand of the authorities an end to the practice as a method of investigation. The forum was part of the public campaigning and advocacy work that the Center carries out. They also provide special advice and training workshops, for example, on the implementation of the Istanbul Protocol.

Paso Del Norte has accompanied the case of Francisco Javier Pérez Barrón, who was arrested by six hooded members of the Federal Police and taken to the outskirts of the city with no apparent legal reason<sup>3</sup>. In various cases documented by Paso del Norte, there is strong evidence to believe that security forces have planted weapons or drugs and/or used torture to force subjects to plead guilty to a crime they did not commit.

<sup>3</sup> For more information on this case, consult the Alternative Report of the United Nations Committee Against Torture on Chihuahua, the Solidarity and Defense of Human Rights Commission, the Paso del Norte Human Rights Center and the Women's Center of Human Rights, pp. 13-14, Mexico, October 2012.

## Situation of Risk

Due to its work in the defense of human rights, the Center has been the target of harassment and threats by state and federal authorities. On 5 June 2011 the organization was raided by the Federal Police, when 20 police officers entered their offices, reviewed files and damaged the premises. The incident resulted in a recommendation from the National Human Rights Commission (CNDH). The raid came one week after the hearing of the "*coche bomba*" case, an emblematic case which was litigated by Paso Del Norte: in 2010 five people were arrested and "tortured in various ways in order to accept the charges of the explosion of a car bomb, of organized crime and of drug and arms trafficking"<sup>4</sup>.

In 2012 the organization suffered further attacks. In September and October it was monitored and harassed by members of the Attorney General's Office and the Chihuahua State Police<sup>5</sup>. Members of Paso Del Norte comment that their level of risk is high due to the complaints they have filed against members of the security forces.

<sup>4</sup> Paso del Norte HRC, CEDEHM and COSYDDHAC: Alternative Report of the United Nations Committee Against Torture on Chihuahua, Mexico, October 2012.

<sup>5</sup> HRC Paso del Norte: "Stop the harassment of Paso del Norte staff" (UA), November 15 2012.

**For more information on the Paso del Norte Human Rights Center and the context in Chihuahua see:**

- their [Facebook](#) page
- the first chapter of "[A Panorama of the Defense of Human Rights in Mexico](#)" published by PBI Mexico in 2013.