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ENTREVISTAS PBI MEXICO

No. 22/2009 • November 2010

Entrevistas is a publication of PBI Mexico that highlights situations that increase risks to the physical or psychological integrity of Mexican human rights defenders, or that damage the legitimacy of their work. The opinions expressed in this publication do not necessarily reflect the opinions of PBI Mexico.

“The Mexican State should stop criminalising humanitarian assistance”

Father José Alejandro Solalinde Guerra is the coordinator of the south-eastern zone for the Pastoral Dimension for Human Mobility (Dimensión Pastoral para la Movilidad Humana, DPMH) and director of the Hermanos en el Camino Migrant Shelter in Ciudad Ixtepec, in the state of Oaxaca. The shelter provides humanitarian assistance for migrants, as well as legal support for those who have been victims of the kinds of crimes which are commonly perpetrated against migrants, such as kidnapping or robbery. In May this year, the National Migration Institute (Instituto Nacional de Migración, INM) accused the priest and the Honduran Jeimy Celenia Moncada, before the National Attorney General's Office (Procuraduría General de la República, PGR), of the trafficking of minors. Father Solalinde believes that the INM, by accusing him of being a 'pollero' [people smuggler] and child trafficker, was attempting to undermine his moral authority. PBI interviewed Father Solalinde in September 2010.

In your opinion, why have you been a victim of criminalisation?

The most recent defamatory statements against me are because I am really an obstruction to the fulfilment of Plan Mérida¹, at least as the Mexican State understands it. The United States have not asked that migratory flows be controlled by trampling on human rights, but the Mexican State understands it so, especially in regard to migration. That's why I am considered a hindrance.

What response have you received from the authorities?

I have brought this issue up with the President's office, but the only response has been silence, nothing has been done. The highest levels of the INM justified [the behaviour of] their Oaxacan representative, and even suggested to me indirectly that I should offer an apology. In this situation, not only was justification provided for the representative, but César Espinosa, the regional sub-representative of migration in Salina Cruz, was asked to resign because he had actually fulfilled his duties.

¿How risky do you consider both your situation, and that of the shelter?

The situation continues to be risky, except that the threats are no longer so obvious and cruel. Instead, now they are looking



Father Alejandro Solalinde was detained by municipal police in Ciudad Ixtepec, Oaxaca, 10 January 2007
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for ways to undermine my moral authority. As I see it, anything they do to achieve this aim is a real danger. And it will come, not from organised crime, but from people from the Mexican State, the Mexican Government, perhaps directly from Migration or the Governor's office.

On 23 April this year, the Inter-American Commission on Human Rights granted you precautionary measures, in order to protect your life and physical integrity. How are they being implemented?

Our most important request is that the Mexican State should not only publicly recognise the humanitarian work we do, but also stop criminalising humanitarian assistance. On the one

1 The **Merida Initiative** (sometimes called Plan Merida or Plan Mexico) is an international security agreement, established by the United States in accordance with Mexico and other Central American countries, to combat drug trafficking and organised crime. The agreement was accepted by the U.S. Congress and signed into law by former President George Bush on 30 June 2008.

hand, it recognises our work, but on the other it criminalises it, as in the case of the shelter.

What other obstacles do you face as you work to defend human rights?

Organised crime, of course, which has put a price on migrants and does trade in migrants. It continues to see them as merchandise, while we [see them] as people. This explains the fight, the struggle. They tolerate my presence because they know that if I leave the shelter will have to be shut down, and if the shelter is shut they'll have lots of problems. First, it would carry a political cost for those who support the kidnappings, because behind the organised crime are politicians, and politicians from very high levels. Second, they may belong to organised crime, but they aren't armour-plated; they know that a death – in this case, my death – would make [their] situation very uncomfortable, and lead to a very strong reaction at a national and international level.

That's why they fight against me in other ways – not confronting me directly, only indirectly. They know that when migrants arrive at the shelter, I have to tell them that they'll be kidnapped, I have to inform them, I have to tell them the route, the places where they might be kidnapped. They simply tell the groups of migrants who come here to not come to the shelter, that they shouldn't even listen to me. Sometimes it's futile that I speak to them, that I stop them; they don't pay attention to me. They've already discovered that no matter how much I speak to people, migrants keep coming and the poor don't have money for the bus. So they don't fight with me anymore, even though I warn migrants of the risk of kidnapping. They know that many

migrants will keep travelling, and only a few will escape by going on other routes by bus.

Why do you feel this commitment [to migrants]?

My only reason is my love for Jesus Christ. I believe in Him as a great person, He is the inspiration of my life. He has taught me that the life of a human being is worth so much that it is worth giving one's own life, as He did. He has taught me to love human beings, to love people. He has taught me to see them without prejudice. I love migrants, and I serve them because they are vulnerable, they are people who need our love.

What is the significance of international organisations – such as Amnesty International and others – in your work?

The Mexican government cares little or nothing for what might be said in Mexico. But comments made from outside are very damaging, and can impact on its international image. For this reason, what NGOs have done is to protect us by denouncing this situation or running campaigns – like that of Amnesty International, which mobilised many to write hundreds or thousands of letters to Mexico's highest level bureaucrats. It has been very significant for myself, the shelter, and the migrants to be defended by three United Nations [Special] Rapporteurs, the International Organization for Migration, Peace Brigades International, Amnesty International, the Organization of American States, and other organisations that have made statements in our favour both within and outside of Mexico. This has all given us some degree of credibility, it has helped us enormously. These people are more effective than our guardian angel, and more effective than bodyguards to protect my life.

IMPORTANTE: Since this interview was conducted, Father Solalinde and his colleague José Alberto Donis from the *Hermanos en el Camino* Migrant Shelter have received death threats and experienced physical violence. These acts of aggression demonstrate the increasing danger to shelter staff, and PBI would like to express its serious concern for the safety of Father Solalinde and his colleagues. More information on these incidents can be found in Amnesty International's [Urgent Action of 16 November 2010](#).

The ***Hermanos en el Camino* Migrant Shelter** (Capilla-Albergue "Hermanos en el Camino") is run by of the Dimensión Pastoral de Movilidad Humana (DPMH), which is part of the Diocese of Tehuantepec. It provides support (food, rest, psychological support) to Central and South American migrants who are crossing Mexico. Because of the violence directed against migrants, the Migrant Shelter also provides legal advice and support. According to the DPMH, some 30-50% of migrants (depending on the region) will have suffered some kind of physical and psychological torture. Organised crime acts as part of a network which attacks and kidnaps migrants in Chiapas and the Isthmus region (between Unión Hidalgo, Juchitán, Tehuantepec and Ixtepec. The pastoral workers in the DPMH's migrant shelters attempt to report violations against migrants to the appropriate authorities, but they complain that the response is inadequate. As a result of their work, Shelter staff have been threatened and harassed.

For further information on migrants in Mexico, and the work of Father Padre Alejandro Solalinde:

- *Sixth Report on the Human Rights Situation of Migrants in Transit through Mexico* [in Spanish only, [Sexto Informe Sobre la Situación de los Derechos Humanos de las Personas Migrantes en Tránsito por México](#)], Belén Posada del Migrante; Humanidad Sin Fronteras, A.C.; Frontera con Justicia, A.C., June 2010.
- Report: [Invisible Victims: Migrants on the Move in Mexico](#), AMR 41/014/2010, Amnesty International, 27 April 2010.
- Cyberactivism: [Act now for Father Solalinde, Mexico](#), Amnesty International, 11 November 2010.
- [Report of the Special Rapporteur on the human rights of migrants, Jorge Bustamante; Mission to Mexico \(9-15 March 2008\)](#), United Nations, 24 March 2009.

Father Solalinde's work is addressed in the documentary Los Invisibles, recently launched by Amnesty International and directed by Gael García Bernal and Marc Silver. It can be viewed at www.youtube.com/invisiblesfilms.