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## PBI MEXICO – March 2014

## New accompaniment in Coahuila

### Juan Gerardi Human Rights Center

***The Juan Gerardi Human Rights Center defends and promotes human rights in the Laguna region, an area of high-risk for human rights defenders. The organization has faced harassment and attacks as a result of their work. PBI accompaniment officially began in February 2014.***

The Juan Gerardi Human Rights Center (CDHJG) in Torreón, Coahuila works to promote a culture of peace and respect for human rights in the *Comarca Lagunera* (an area that encompasses both Coahuila and Durango). Their work focuses on the migration of Central Americans, the defense of water and the environment, disappearances, and human rights education.

The organization documents cases of disappeared people and provides counseling for the families from FUUNDEC (United Forces for Our Disappeared in Coahuila). It also provides humanitarian support for migrants in transit through Torreón on their way to the United States, documents cases of human rights violations, as well as cases of people who are deported from the United States. Through the “Jesus Torres Fraire” Day Center *A step towards Hope*, Juan Gerardi supports hundreds of migrants every year. In terms of their work to protect the environment, the Center provides visibility to the situation in the region and aims to have an impact on the over-exploitation and contamination of the water resources by businesses in the area.

In addition to these themes, the organization also provides education and raises awareness about human rights. Through their work with the Ecclesial base communities, the Center raises awareness on a local level about promoting and respecting human rights.

The CDHJG is part of several regional networks and organizations including the Lagunero Citizen's Meeting, the Jesuit Service for Migrants and the National Network of Civil Human Rights Organizations “All Rights for All” (*Red TdT*). It also receives support from Caritas, the Ibero-American University and the Saint Judas Tadeo parish and the Santa Cecilia parish in Torreón.

#### La Laguna

The *Comarca Lagunera* is located in the southwestern part of Coahuila and the Western part of Durango. Torreón is the largest city in the region, with a population of more than 600,000 inhabitants. As a result of the “war against drugs” by the Federal Government, the Laguna has faced intense intervention by the military and police forces since 2009.

Since then, the *Comarca Lagunera* has faced high levels of violence since it is a key point of transit of illicit substances and people to the United States. The human rights panorama in the region is marked by violations against the migrant population along with hundreds of cases of disappearances.



*Members of CDHJG participate in an advocacy workshop led by PBI in Torreón, Coahuila.*

Local human rights organizations carry out their work under difficult security conditions. With more than 400 homicides in

2013,<sup>1</sup> the Citizens Council for Public Security and Criminal Justice classified Torreón as one of the 20 most violent cities in the world in 2013.

In addition to this violent context, the Laguna faces a serious problem of over-exploitation and contamination of its water resources. Located in a semi-desert region, the *Comarca Lagunera* is a region that produces cotton, alfalfa, walnut, cattle and goats. These economic activities, in addition to the large production of milk and beer, consume the aquifer reserves in the region. As a result, the water has been contaminated with arsenic, which is a source of health problems for hundreds of people in the local communities. The CDHJG and local civil society have publicly spoken out against the illegal extraction of water by several companies and have taken on a public fight to preserve the local aquifer and to repair damages to the victims of this contamination.

### Threats to their work

Due to their work on disappearances, migration and water, the CDHJG faces a high level of risk.

In February 2012, the Center's office was raided by the Army, the Federal Police and the State Police. The cupboards, furniture and closets, as well as parts of the church were subject to search.

On September 8, 2013, there was another incident in the CDHJG in which two desktop computers with sensitive, confidential information were taken from the office.

<sup>1</sup> Citizens Council for Public Security and Criminal Justice, "Por tercer año consecutivo San Pedro Sula es la ciudad más violenta del mundo" [For the third consecutive year San Pedro Sula is the most violent city in the world], 2014, p. 33. Available in Spanish at <http://bit.ly/QdiNHR>

There has not been any progress in the investigation of these incidents by authorities and the organization has still not received any information about the reason for the raid.

Some months after the raid, the National Attorney General's Office offered the organization precautionary measures. Even though the CDHJG accepted the offer and communicated which measures they would need, the Center has not yet received a response and none of the measures have been implemented. As a result, they requested precautionary measures from the Inter-American Commission on Human Rights. As of March 2014, they were still waiting for a response to their request.

### PBI Accompaniment

The insecurity in the Laguna together with the level of risk associated with the activities of the organization is an obstacle to the work of the Juan Gerardi Human Rights Center.

PBI accompaniment focuses on opening spaces for the CDHJG, mainly through dialogue with local and federal authorities, providing visibility to their work and their risk situation, and the construction of an international support network that supports the Center. PBI's presence is also a symbol of the moral support of the international community for human rights defenders in the Laguna in Coahuila.

The CDHJG works closely with the [Fray Juan de Larios Diocesan Center for Human Rights](#) and the [Saltillo Migrant House](#), two organizations in Coahuila that also began to receive PBI accompaniment in February 2014.

### **For more information about the Juan Gerardi Human Rights Center and the context in Coahuila:**

- [CDHJG's website](#)
- Chapters 2, 3 and 6 of the [A Panorama of the Defense of Human Rights in Mexico](#) published by PBI Mexico