Since October 2010, PBI has provided accompaniment to the “Bartolomé Carrasco Briseño” Regional Human Rights Centre (Barca-DH) in the state of Oaxaca. Barca-DH’s members have been victims of smear campaigns and serious attacks because of their work in defence of human rights. PBI focuses its accompaniment on Minerva Martínez Lázaro, Barca-DH’s coordinator, Padre Wilfrido Mayrén Peláez (better known as Padre Uvi) and Padre Martín Octavio García Ortiz.

The “Bartolomé Carrasco Briseño” Regional Human Rights Centre (Centro Regional de Derechos Humanos “Bartolomé Carrasco Briseño”, A.C., Barca-DH) is a non-governmental human rights organisation. It was formed in 1992 by Catholic grassroots communities in Oaxaca. Barca-DH was established in response to the murders and other violent acts suffered by the state’s population, which were never brought to trial and remain in impunity. Since the very beginning, Barca-DH’s members have experienced harassment, surveillance, smear campaigns, direct attacks and the fabrication of crimes, as they work to promote, defend and give training on human rights.

Barca-DH leads an international campaign for the freedom of Álvaro Sebastián Ramírez, a prisoner from Oaxaca’s Loxicha region, and encourages human rights projects in the state’s Southern Sierra and Central Highlands. In addition, Barca-DH and the Centre for Human Rights and Supervision of Indigenous Peoples (Centro de Derechos Humanos y Asesoría a los Pueblos Indígenas, CEDHAPI) – also accompanied by PBI – requested precautionary measures from the Inter-American Commission of Human Rights (IACHR) given the multiple human rights abuses committed against the population of the Autonomous Municipality of San Juan Copala, Oaxaca. The measures were granted to the municipality’s 135 internally displaced people on 7 October 2010.

Through its projects, Barca-DH seeks “to contribute to the validity of human rights in Oaxacan communities, so that they may live in justice and with dignity”. Barca advises on community proposals and carries out advocacy work, legal defence and information distribution. Barca-DH’s work is based on a respect for the many identities of the Oaxacan peoples and a strong gender perspective.

Barca-DH’s coordinator, Minerva Martínez Lázaro, faces numerous risks because of her responsibilities within the organisation, her work on paradigmatic cases together with Padre Martín and Padre Uvi, and her involvement in the Oaxacan Collective in Defence of Territories 1.

1 The Oaxacan Collective in Defence of Territories (Colectivo Oaxaqueño en Defensa de los Territorios) was formed in 2009 as a pluralist space for civil, social and community organisations which conduct activities to strengthen the resistance of, and aid with the development of proposals by, communities and
Padre Uvi: a thorn in the side of human rights violators

Padre Uvi was one of Barca-DH's founders in 1992, when he was the parish priest of Santo Domingo Teojomulco. He is now also the coordinator of the Peace and Justice Committee (Comisión de Justicia y Paz), legal representative of the Catholic Archdiocese of Antequera-Oaxaca, and – together with Padre Martín – parish priest in the church of Santo Tomás Xochimilco. Padre Uvi's work as a human rights defender and peace-builder in various conflict situations has been recognised in Oaxaca, in Mexico, and internationally. Because of these activities, he has been a victim of harassment, defamation and attacks over the last 12 years.

In 1998, following his role as mediator in an agrarian conflict between the communities of Teojomulco and San Lorenzo Texmelucán, he was shot at but escaped unharmed. In 2006, a year of great social conflict in Oaxaca, Padre Uvi participated in the Mediation Committee (Comisión de Intermediación) between the Oaxaca Government and the Section XXII teachers' union. As a result, many media outlets linked him to the militant Popular Assembly of the Peoples of Oaxaca (Asamblea Popular de los Pueblos de Oaxaca, APPO) and even to guerrilla groups. He also received death threats towards the end of that year. In 2009 he reported receiving threats by phone, subsequent to his intervention in the Marcelino Coache case. Mr Coache, a trade-union leader, reported that he had been apprehended by unknown individuals in 2009 and tortured for more than 10 hours. Mr Coache had also been detained by police in December 2006 during the social conflict in Oaxaca. Months later, in May 2007, he was released due to the lack of evidence against him.

Padre Uvi is currently one of the intermediaries at the round table in San Juan Copala, whose work was initiated in September 2010 in order to establish dialogue between MULT and MULTI – the Movement for Triqui Unity and Struggle (Movimiento de Unificación y Lucha Triqui), and the Independent Movement for Triqui Unity and Struggle (Movimiento de Unificación y Lucha Triqui Independiente) respectively – and to bring a peaceful resolution to the violent conflicts affecting the region. Authorities have publicly discredited this work, and he has also been victim of a widespread media smear campaign. This has included serious accusations of fomenting violence in the Triqui conflict.

Padre Martin: attacked and unjustly imprisoned

Padre Martin Octavio is a human rights defender who has promoted the rights of Oaxaca’s poorest communities. He has supported those who protest in defence of their territories, natural resources and the environment. Likewise, Padre Martin has stood against the imposition of “development projects” that violate a community’s right to prior consultation.

Since arriving in San José del Progreso, the father has focused his support on the community which is fighting against the gold and silver-mining concessions granted to the Cuzcatlán company. As a consequence, Padre Martin’s work and name have been defamed and attacked by certain media outlets in an attempt to undermine his credibility as a human rights defender. Padre Martin reports that this fostered a climate of hostility, which in turn led to acts of aggression against him on 19 June 2010. A few days later, he was detained under arraigo (pre-trial detention without charges) and accused of a double homicide during confrontations in San José del Progreso. On 30 June, the arraigo was lifted and Padre Martin was released. No charges have been laid against him, but no steps have been taken to compensate for the harm done to him and he cannot yet return to San José del Progreso.

All of these incidents exemplify the continual criminalisation of human rights defenders and their work in the state of Oaxaca.

For further information on BARCA-DH, Padre Uvi and Padre Martin, see:

* BARCA-DH’s web page [in Spanish]; www.barcadh.org
* Call to action: Alto a los ataques en contra de Padre Uvi [Stop the attacks on Padre Uvi], Coreco, July 2010; http://coreco.org.mx/wordpress/?p=1083

For further information on BARCA-DH, Padre Uvi and Padre Martin, see:

* BARCA-DH’s web page [in Spanish]; www.barcadh.org
* Call to action: Alto a los ataques en contra de Padre Uvi [Stop the attacks on Padre Uvi], Coreco, July 2010; http://coreco.org.mx/wordpress/?p=1083