



Latin America: Organized corruption and crime – Implications for Christians

Author: Rossana Ramirez



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Author: Rossana Ramirez

World Watch Research (WWR), Open Doors International, Netherlands

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Abstract

This report describes the basic characteristics of organized corruption and crime in the Latin American context. The details on the persecution of Christians presented is alarming, particularly since the data is incomplete, which was mainly due to the fact that victims fear reprisals if violent incidents are reported. Violence towards Christians has not only financial motives but also seeks to control Christian teaching where it opposes criminal activities. Focusing on Mexico and Colombia, the following areas of criminal operation receive particular attention: The demanding of protection money, the vulnerability of churches meeting for worship, the "control" of church ministry and the violence carried out against Christian leaders. Due to the corruption of state officials, Christians in many regions feel abandoned by the authorities, thus increasing their vulnerability and putting them at extra risk when the religious motivation behind attacks against them is not considered.

Introduction

World Watch Research has published a number of reports related to the persecution of Christians in Latin America in recent years,¹ however the concept of religious freedom has been largely ignored by Latin American governments, despite the fact that they have the responsibility of being the main guarantors of human rights. It would seem that Christians are considered to be "second-class citizens" when it comes to recognizing them as an especially vulnerable group or bringing criminal charges against those responsible for attacking them. This is particularly evident in the light of the overall Latin American context and its most serious problem, namely organized crime and the networks of corruption that facilitate its operations.

This report presents the general characteristics of this criminal phenomenon in Latin America and its implications for the religious freedom of Christians. The situations in Mexico and Colombia receive particular emphasis as these countries serve as "hotspots" for the presence of criminal groups and corruption networks, which - separately or jointly - act against Christians living in those territories. The appendices give an overview of recent news items on the subject published by World Watch Monitor and World Watch Research.

1. Overview of organized corruption and crime in Latin America

Organized crime and networks of corruption are two of the most serious threats to social and political life and are endemic phenomena in the context of Latin America. Thus, when using the term organized crime, reference is being made to socially organized groups that carry out illicit activities for profit. The term implies an organization of crime,² which has led in many cases to a professionalization of large-scale criminal activities in social, political, economic and governmental sectors of society.

Organized crime displays in many countries a certain sophistication and professionalization. Criminals take captive experts with knowledge about the use of weapons and with the ability to exert coercion on others. Their plans are as detailed as any military strategy and they make sure they have access to the most powerful weapons on the market. However, such organized crime cannot be understood without taking into consideration the influence of corruption networks. This is especially the case in Latin America where there is a high level of corruption. Table 1

¹ Open Doors International / World Watch Research has published the following reports: "Interface of Churches and Organized Crime in Latin America (2012)" available at: <http://opendoorsanalytical.org/wp-content/uploads/2014/10/Interface-of-Churches-and-Organised-Crime-in-Latin-America-2012.pdf> (password: freedom) and "Challenges to religious freedom in the Americas. Testimony before the Subcommittee on the Western Hemisphere, House Committee on Foreign Affairs (2015)" available at: <http://docs.house.gov/meetings/FA/FA07/20150917/103959/HHRG-114-FA07-Bio-PetriD-20150917.pdf>.

² Flores, C. and Gonzales Ruiz S.: Democracy and Organized Crime, in: Organized Crime in Latin America and the Caribbean, Flacso, 2008, Chile, p.60.

shows data from the Corruption Perception Index 2016,³ published by Transparency International. In this table, the higher the ranking, the higher the level of corruption. Any transparency score lower than 50 is an indication of government failure to address the issue.

Table 1: Corruption Perception Index – Countries from Latin America

RANK	SCORE	COUNTRY	RANK	SCORE	COUNTRY
21	71	Uruguay	95	36	Argentina
24	66	Bahamas	95	36	El Salvador
24	66	Chile	101	35	Peru
31	61	Barbados	101	35	Trinidad and Tobago
35	60	St. Lucia	108	34	Guyana
35	60	St. Vincent/Grenadines	113	33	Bolivia
38	59	Dominica	120	31	Dominican Republic
41	58	Costa Rica	120	31	Ecuador
46	56	Grenada	123	30	Honduras
60	47	Cuba	123	30	Mexico
64	45	Suriname	123	30	Paraguay
79	40	Brazil	136	28	Guatemala
83	39	Jamaica	14	26	Nicaragua
87	38	Panama	159	20	Haiti
90	37	Colombia	166	17	Venezuela

Source: Transparency International, 25 January 2017

The scores in Table 1 show that, in spite of the efforts by Latin American governments to investigate, end impunity and to punish those responsible for criminal acts linked to corruption, there is still a high presence of corruption in the region, and governments continue to fail in their attempt to eradicate it.⁴ Corruption thus seems to have taken root in the culture and, as a result, not only the existence of corrupt government officials and politicians has become an accepted fact, but also the presence of corrupting influences, i.e. those attempting to achieve their ends through bribery. There are currently 10 governments in Latin America (Argentina, Brazil, Chile, Colombia, Ecuador, Mexico, Panama, Peru, Dominican Republic and Venezuela) directly involved in the largest corruption scandal of recent times, the Odebrecht case,⁵ in which a construction company bribed public officials to get the bid for a government infrastructure project worth many millions.

Due to the way state institutions in Latin America have developed and their increasing discredit through constant political scandals, an ideal breeding ground for organized crime has emerged. In this context, it is essential to highlight the intrinsic connection between scandals and state institutions, since through corruption the operations of organized crime have been legitimized and favored for propagation within society. This is because the main channels of organized crime

³ Transparency International, Corruption Perceptions Index 2016, 25 January 2017, available at: https://www.transparency.org/news/feature/corruption_perceptions_index_2016#table, last accessed 9 November 2017.

⁴ Ebrard J., Americas: Sometimes bad news is good news, Transparency International, 2017, available at: https://www.transparency.org/news/feature/americas_sometimes_bad_news_is_good_news, last accessed 9 November 2017.

⁵ Jimenez Barca A., Alessi G. et al. What is the Odebrecht case and how does it affect each Latin American country?, El País, 2017, available at: http://internacional.elpais.com/internacional/2017/04/13/actualidad/1492099171_779545.html. This list of countries does not include the governments of Chile, El Salvador and Antigua and Barbuda since their level of involvement with illicit activities has not yet been determined.

are the links to political and military officials at all levels of the state apparatus, which through their actions or omissions ensure a ‘safe environment’ for criminal activity. As a result, bribery and corruption become the most effective way of directly introducing and manipulating decisions within the government.⁶

Hence, corruption networks generate an atmosphere of impunity and make the prosecution of criminal groups virtually impossible. One result of this is that social violence is encouraged. In the absence of State authority, some groups take justice into their own hands and monopolize the “legitimate” use of force. This rise of criminality in the face of the rule of law makes the failure of political institutions all the more evident.

In some countries, such as Colombia and Mexico, the synergy between organized crime and corruption leads first to the compromising of local police and port and airport customs officials and then secondly, of prosecutors and judges tasked with assessing complaints against criminals.⁷ However, the scope of organized crime goes far beyond the mere bribery of public officials on duty; loop-holes in the democratic system have enabled political processes to be infiltrated successfully to ensure policies are implemented that will favor criminal organizations’ interests.

This context of illegality and impunity encourages the resurgence of social violence and makes it an effective weapon for criminal groups to force submission and exert control. Those who refuse to follow criminal practices are intimidated through violence. The latest World Study on Homicide,⁸ prepared by the UN in 2013, reveals that Latin America is the most violent region in the world and that - in Mexico alone - it was estimated that 6 out of 10 murders were related to organized crime.⁹ The 2017 Armed Conflict Survey¹⁰ also shows Mexico to be the country with the second-highest number of murders in the world.¹¹ Criminal organizations frequently resort to the use of violence (physical and/or psychological) against their own members and competitors, in order to control their internal illegal activities which are usually related to drugs, the sex industry, human trafficking, the theft of vehicles and jewels, or money laundering.¹²

⁶ Organized crime and inequality, pillars of corruption in Latin America, INFOABE, 2013, available at: <http://www.infobae.com/2013/12/03/1528043-crimen-organizado-y-desigualdad-pilares-la-corrupcion-america-latina/>

⁷ McDermott J.: How organized crime and corruption in Latin America intersect, Insight Crime, 2014, available at: <http://es.insightcrime.org/analisis/crimen-organizado-corrupcion-latinoamerica>, last accessed 9 November 2017.

⁸ United Nations Office on Drug and Crime (UNODC), Global Study on Homicide, 2013, available at: http://www.unodc.org/documents/gsh/pdfs/2014_GLOBAL_HOMICIDE_BOOK_web.pdf, last accessed 20 November 2017.

⁹ Angel A., Violence of organized crime causes 6 of every 10 murders, according to study, Political Animal, 2016, available at: <http://www.animalpolitico.com/2016/04/la-violencia-del-crimen-organizado-causa-6-de-cada-10-asesinatos-segun-estudio/>, last accessed 20 November 2017.

¹⁰ International Institute for Strategic Studies (IISS), Armed Conflict Survey, 2017, available at: <http://www.iiss.org/en/publications/acs/by%20year/armed-conflict-survey-2017-8efc>, last accessed 20 November 2017.

¹¹ El Financiero, Mexico is the deadliest conflict zone after Syria, 2017, available at: <http://www.elfinanciero.com.mx/nacional/mexico-es-la-zona-de-conflicto-mas-mortal-despues-de-siria.html>, last accessed 20 November 2017.

¹² Flores C. and Gonzales Ruiz S., op cit., p.68.

In addition, the extreme poverty in many countries in the region makes recruitment easy, especially among adolescents and young adults. Young people are lured with promises of a "secure future with quick and easy money", in which they will not only be able to support their families financially but will also be given a sense of belonging and of being part of something powerful. In this sense, criminal groups "compensate" for the neglect, abandonment and exclusion young people have suffered at the hands of state authorities through the lack of job opportunities and social care provided. The "Maras" or youth gangs of Central America are a good example. Although not always acting as criminal organizations, these groups are the main cause of social violence and membership is popular among young people seeking a regular income.¹³

Organized crime and corruption are therefore factors rooted in contemporary Latin American society. They are not mere passing phenomena; they are here to stay. The weaker the State, the more evident the criminalization of society becomes – including the criminalization of state authorities. In many cases officials are coerced by direct threats - "money or death"¹⁴ – meaning that the money offered should be accepted to avoid being killed.

On the other hand, it should not be forgotten that the main source of income for criminal organizations is drug-trafficking. Due to the enormous amounts of money used in trafficking operations, this must indeed be classed as an industry.¹⁵ However, drugs are not the only source of income,¹⁶ since trafficking groups have expanded their activities to include kidnapping, extortion, arms trafficking, patent trafficking, illegal migration and organ trafficking.

The presence of organized crime and the networks of corruption in Latin America affect both the public and private realm, which are at times interrelated. Regarding the public realm, it is clear that organized crime devalues democracy and increases its vulnerability – often irreversibly.¹⁷ The existence of organized crime directly affects economic development within each state, since significant amounts of resources are used in attempts to eradicate crime and taxes are lost because of illegal activities. Organized crime also affects the political integrity and internal sovereignty of each nation and leads to a weakening of democratic institutions in the whole region. This is especially the case in areas where the presence of the state authorities is more or less non-existent. Criminal leaders exert authority through intimidation in these areas. This intimidation also causes public distrust towards official authorities to grow and serves to increase the lack of legitimacy of political processes.

¹³ International Crisis Group (ICG), *Mafia of the Poor: Gang Violence and Extortion in Central America*, 2017, available at: <https://www.crisisgroup.org/latin-america-caribbean/central-america/62-mafia-poor-gang-violence-and-extortion-central-america>, last accessed 20 November 2017.

¹⁴ Canchola A., *Police of the country, between "silver or lead."* *El Universal*, 2017, available at: <http://www.eluniversal.com.mx/articulo/nacion/seguridad/2017/04/24/dossier-policias-del-pais-entre-plata-o-plomo>, last accessed 20 November 2017.

¹⁵ Flores C. and Gonzales Ruiz S., *op. cit.*, p.60.

¹⁶ Maihold G., *Organized Crime and Security in Latin America*, *Foreign Policy Studies*, 2011, available at: <http://www.politicaexterior.com/articulos/politica-exterior/crimen-organizado-y-seguridad-en-america-latina/>, last accessed 20 November 2017.

¹⁷ Solis L.G. and Roijas Aravena F. (Eds.), *Organized Crime in Latin America and the Caribbean*, FLACSO, 2008, Chile, p.10.

The context of unlawfulness and impunity in which criminal groups develop also encourages the emergence of other related phenomena. Besides trafficking and illegal arms sales, it also leads to an increase in extreme poverty and violence, the privatization of security (protection or promises of non-violence in exchange for payment) and a deterioration in the quality of life of citizens (and possibly of their mental and physical health). However, the context of unlawfulness especially encourages the emergence of various forms of aggression which is aimed at those not sharing the criminal groups' way of thinking and at those not collaborating with the groups' illegal activities. Above all, Christian leaders and their church congregations are being targeted. This is the main focus of this report.

2. Implications for Christians

As is clear from the previous section, it is not only whole communities that are affected by organized crime and corruption; individuals are particularly made to suffer. They suffer both directly as victims of organized crime through the deliberate inaction of corrupt officials, and indirectly by being prevented from enjoying a peaceful and violence-free life in their communities.

Even if organized crime affects whole societies, it is possible to identify those groups which are most vulnerable. The Christian community is one such group.¹⁸ Christians become a target for violence and persecution through their faith-based activities. These activities – which include preaching against criminal ways of life – oppose the very basis of mafia existence. Christians know full well that they can therefore become targets. Fear, caused by the atmosphere of illegality, impunity and violence, can therefore inhibit Christians from freely expressing their faith.

Christians and their message of peace, justice and hope are thus seen as a threat to the anarchy imposed by the criminal groups' ideologies and activities.¹⁹ First, Christian engagement in activities aiming to eradicate violence and injustice openly contradict the interests of criminal groups seeking to further their illicit operations through upholding their power over society. Secondly, Christian advocacy and evangelization reach out to both potential supporters of criminal activities and members of criminal groups, together with their families. Thus, Christians are regarded as a disturbing factor, creating disobedience within gangs and causing controversy within the families of criminal leaders.

Non-Catholic Christians suffer particularly high levels of victimization: Members of criminal groups often hold back from attacking adherents to their own family's faith. Since Roman Catholicism is the majority faith in many of the places where organized crime operates, other religious groups are sometimes targeted more often. This is both out of respect for family

¹⁸ Depending on the location, a Christian community can be considered as a single majority group or as a set of religious minorities.

¹⁹ Mejia Berdeja R., *Insecurity and impunity unleashed*, La Silla Rota, 2016, available at: <https://lasillarota.com/opinion/columnas/inseguridad-e-impunidad-desatadas/129055>, last accessed 17 November 2017.

traditions and because minority groups have less local support for speaking out against such attacks.

All of these forms of violence against Christians are not only unjust but also illegal according to internationally binding agreements as set out in the American Declaration of the Rights and Duties of Man and the American Convention on Human Rights. These documents include sections on the protection of the *right to religious freedom and worship*²⁰ and the *right to freedom of conscience and religion*,²¹ both declaring the right of every person to "freely profess a religious belief and to manifest it and practice it in public and in private".

These agreements and their subsequent legal development²² protect the right of all persons to express themselves freely according to their religious convictions, to carry out activities and to gather for meetings and not to be discriminated against for professing a particular religious faith. Unfortunately, in Latin America, the international standards of legal protection of the right to religious freedom are upheld neither by the State (as the main guarantor) nor by private individuals. State authorities are also unlikely to enforce compliance from those who carry out their activities outside legality and enjoy an "immunity" granted by the State itself.

There now follows an analysis of the situation of Christians persecuted by the networks of crime and corruption in Mexico and Colombia. These are both countries where the situation is particularly complex.

²⁰ Organization of American States (OAS), American Declaration of the Rights of Man and Duties of Man, Art. III, available at: <http://www.oas.org/es/cidh/mandato/documentos-basicos/declaracion-americana-derechos-deberes-hombre.pdf>, last accessed 20 November 2017.

²¹ American Convention on Human Rights, Article 12. Available at: <http://www.oas.org/es/cidh/mandato/documentos-basicos/convencion-americana-derechos-humanos.pdf>, last accessed 20 November 2017.

²² See the relevant documents prepared by the Inter-American Commission on Human Rights and / or the Inter-American Court of Human Rights, as organs with jurisdictional functions within the regional system for the protection of human rights. Inter-American Court of Human Rights, Case of "The Last Temptation of Christ" (Olmedo Bustos et al.), Judgment of February 5, 2001, Considering 79. Available at: http://www.corteidh.or.cr/docs/casos/articulos/Seriec_73_esp.pdf; Inter-American Court of Human Rights, Jehovah's Witnesses Case, 2137, Argentina, November 1978. Available at: <http://www.cidh.org/annualrep/78sp/Argentina2137.htm>; Inter-American Court of Human Rights, Case of "Institute for Reeducation of Minors" vs. Paraguay, September 2004, Considering 155. Available at: http://www.corteidh.or.cr/docs/casos/articulos/seriec_112_esp.pdf; Inter-American Court of Human Rights, Report on the Situation of Human Rights in Ecuador, Human rights issues of special relevance to the indigenous inhabitants of the country, Available at: <http://www.cidh.org/countryrep/Ecuador-sp/Capitulo%209.htm#24>; Inter-American Court of Human Rights, Second report on the situation of human rights defenders in the Americas, December 2011, p.70. Available at: <https://www.oas.org/es/cidh/defensores/docs/pdf/defensores2011.pdf>; among others.

3. Mexico

In Mexico, the illegal commercial activities of criminal networks play a significant role in the economic life of the country; some authorities have become so dependent on the profits of drug trafficking that these states are referred to as "narco-states".²³ In these regions, criminal groups have far exceeded the government's response capacity.

Corruption in all government spheres²⁴ and the growing loss of legitimacy of the president²⁵ has served to increase the power of criminal organizations and their control over society, thus leading to violence. This is the result of the absence of rule of law to protect citizens and translates into high levels of violence resulting from the "struggle" a) between the State and criminal groups; b) between criminal groups and civil society and c) between individual criminal groups settling accounts.

It is estimated that in the period between December 2012 (the beginning of the current presidential term) and November 2015 alone, there were 78,109 deaths in Mexico as a result of organized crime.²⁶ Some of the most powerful drug cartels in the world, such as the Gulf Cartel, Pacific Cartel, Tijuana (or Arellano Felix) Cartel, New Generation Juarez Cartel, Sinaloa Cartel and the Zetas Cartel, operate in Mexico. According to official information,²⁷ the presence of these criminal groups affects 60% of the country (geographically) and it is estimated that at least one criminal group operates in Aguascalientes, Baja California, Baja California Sur, Chihuahua, Coahuila, Colima, Durango, Estado de Mexico, Guanajuato, Guerrero, Jalisco, Michoacan, Nayarit, Queretaro Sinaloa, Quintana Roo, Sonora, Morelos, Tabasco, Tamaulipas and Veracruz.

Because of this influence - and also due to the upsurge in violence - many citizens have been forced to leave their homes and move to less violent parts of the country (in search of security for their families or safety from criminal threats). According to statistics provided by the National Human Rights Commission in Mexico²⁸ for the period 2001-2016, 35,433 victims of internal

²³ Gil J., Mexico is already a 'narco-state', has an unconventional war, Proceso, 2016, available at: <http://www.proceso.com.mx/463066/nos-hemos-convertido-en-corresponsales-de-guerra-en-nuestro-propio-pais-jose-gil>, last accessed 20 November 2017.

²⁴ Savio I., Corruption - main cause of the empowerment of organized crime in Mexico: Inacipe, Proceso, 2017, available at: <http://www.proceso.com.mx/487742/la-corrupcion-principal-causa-del-empoderamiento-del-crimen-organizado-en-mexico-inacipe>, last accessed 20 November 2017.

²⁵ Aguilar Valenzuela R., EPN - the loss of credibility and legitimacy, El Economista, 2016, available at: <http://eleconomista.com.mx/columnas/columna-especial-politica/2016/10/10/epn-perdida-credibilidad-legitimidad>, last accessed 20 November 2017.

²⁶ Zeta S., The dead of Peña Nieto - the figures that the Mexican Government strives to make up, Vanguardia.mx, 2016, available at: <http://www.vanguardia.com.mx/articulo/los-muertos-de-pena-nieto-las-cifras-que-el-gobierno-mexicano-se-esfuerza-en-maquillar>, last accessed 21 November 2017.

²⁷ Angel A., Radiography of the narco: cartels of the Pacific and Jalisco, dominate - Templars and Zetas Retreat, Political Animal, 2016, available at: <http://www.animalpolitico.com/2016/07/asi-se-reparten-carteles-de-la-droga-en-mexico/>, last accessed 21 November 2017.

²⁸ Ureste M., Numbers, communities and causes of internal forced displacement in Mexico, Animal Policy, 2016, available at: <http://www.animalpolitico.com/2016/05/las-cifras-las-comunidades-y-las-causas-del-desplazamiento-forzado-interno-en-mexico/>, last accessed 21 November 2017.

forced displacement were reported. This is a worrying figure considering that most cases are not reported and the real figure will be much higher.

As already stated, since Christians and church leaders are a recurring target for violence, the vulnerability of religious groups (especially religious minorities) is caused by the dominance of criminal organizations. This is the situation despite Mexico being a predominantly Christian population (with cultural and historical roots in the Roman Catholic Church²⁹). There are different forms of such faith-based persecution; four are listed here and will be dealt with in separate sub-sections:

- The payment of protection money
- The vulnerability of churches meeting for worship
- The "control" of church ministry
- Violence against Christian leaders

3.1. The payment of protection money

As has been discussed in previous reports,³⁰ many Christian groups in Mexico are affected by this phenomenon. Money is demanded by criminals groups in exchange for the right to continue carrying out religious activities in a specific place.³¹ If the Christians refuse, they or their relatives may be victims of extortion or physical violence. This is the most frequent form of religious persecution against Christians in Mexico, in addition to being one of the most serious violations of their right to religious freedom. Sources reveal that this practice extends to all regions where organized crime operates and that it affects Christian minorities in particular. The possibility of denouncing and punishing the criminals involved is minimal or non-existent since they operate in complicity with local officials. This also discourages victims from reporting incidents as they are likely to face reprisals if their accusations are made known.

Demands for payment by drug-trafficking cartels are usually addressed to Christian leaders. These groups assume that the heads of local churches can collect money from all church members or allocate part of the tithing to pay for protection.³² However, if such demands are refused, there may be death-threats, killings and psychological tactics employed to keep the Christians and their families living in constant fear.

²⁹ Lipka M., A snapshot of Catholics in Mexico - Pope Francis' next stop, Pew Research Center, 2016, available at: <http://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2016/02/10/a-snapshot-of-catholics-in-mexico-pope-francis-next-stop/>, last accessed 21 November 2017.

³⁰ Petri D., Report on Freedom of Religion in Latin America, Open Doors, Netherlands, 2015, available at: <http://plataformac.org/download/religiousfreedom/Petri-Informe-sobre-la-libertad-de-religion-en-America-Latina.pdf>, last accessed 21 November 2017.

³¹ Open Doors Analytical, Mexico: Bishop forced to pay money for use of Cathedral (June 2017), 2017, available at: <http://theanalytical.org/mexico-bishop-forced-to-pay-protection-money-for-use-of-cathedral/>, last accessed 21 November 2017 (password: freedom).

³² World Watch Monitor, Christians easy target in Mexico's lawless borderlands, 2017, available at: <https://www.worldwatchmonitor.org/2017/04/christians-easy-targets-in-mexicos-lawless-borderlands/>, last accessed 21 November 2017.

3.2. The vulnerability of churches meeting for worship

As a result of the situation already indicated in Section 3 above and due to the high levels of violence in the country, it is extremely dangerous for Christians to gather freely for worship in churches in many areas.³³ A congregation gathered for worship is an easy target for criminals to threaten them with violence or to specify some kind of punishment for not having "collaborated" with them, or to intimidate other church members about the (negative) consequences for not following directives issued by the local criminal leader. The fear of possible violent action being carried out by a criminal group sometimes causes a "self-imposed curfew" to be made,³⁴ with civilians only walking freely on the streets between certain hours because the police cannot guarantee their safety.³⁵ In such cases, church activities outside the "curfew" are cancelled to avoid possible attacks.

3.3. The "control" of church ministry

The motives for criminal actions against Mexican Christians are not only financial but also ideological. As explained in the preceding paragraphs, Christians and their leaders are seen as a threat to criminal groups through their preaching of peace, justice and hope and their opposition to violence that characterizes such criminal groups, who are aware of the social and spiritual transformation that Christian life implies. For this reason, pastors and priests are threatened when they try to evangelize criminals or potential members of criminal groups, especially young people. Even social initiatives such as rehabilitation centers for drug addicts are perceived as a menace if they interfere directly or indirectly with these criminal organizations. This perceived threat is particularly evident where churches welcome relatives or people close to the local criminal leader's family or where converts to Christianity have abandoned the criminal group. In such cases, the churches are warned (through threats of violence) not to admit them and, if they refuse, the violence is intensified. It can be particularly difficult for the leaders of criminal groups where their partners are sympathetic to the Christian faith. Family conflicts often occur over education for their children and about trying to get family members to stay away from a criminal way of life.

Criminal groups also limit the freedom of expression of Christian leaders³⁶ since they threaten them if the content of their sermons and teaching - even in the context of a church service - question or criticize the group's illegal activities or encourage parishioners to denounce both them and the corrupt officials who grant impunity. The restrictions on the content of sermons also goes so far as to restrict a Christian leader's freedom of expression aimed against the

³³ La Parada Digital, Christian parish pilgrims attacked and pastor abducted, 2015, available at: <https://laparadadigital.com/noticias-de-chihuahua-mexico.cfm?n=60089>, last accessed 21 November 2017.

³⁴ Petri D., op. cit.

³⁵ El Debate, Curfew in Reynosa for heavy shootings, 2017, available at: <https://www.debate.com.mx/mexico/Toque-de-queda-en-Reynosa-por-fuertes-balaceras--20170422-0192.html>, last accessed 21 November 2017.

³⁶ Ecclesia Digital, Father Alejandro Sodalinde: the priest who defies the drug traffickers, Ecclesia Digital, 2017, available at: <http://www.revistaecclesia.com/padre-alejandro-sodalinde-el-sacerdote-que-desafia-a-los-narcotraficantes153235-2/>, last accessed 21 November 2017.

pseudo-religious practices followed by certain criminal groups such as Santeria.³⁷ This is a demonic cult in which “saints” (not recognized by the Catholic Church) are called upon to give criminal prosperity and protection. The rejection of this practice by Christians is also seen as being a reason for exerting violence against them.

3.4. Violence against Christian leaders

Given the situation described above, threats often materialize against the leaders of affected Christian groups. These may then become victims of kidnapping,³⁸ beating,³⁹ torture,⁴⁰ or even murder, all in the absence of legal protection. As a result, Mexico has become known as the most dangerous place in Latin America for working as a Roman Catholic priest.⁴¹ Although the violence against Catholic priests receives most media attention, this is only due to the dominance of the Catholic Church in Mexico. In fact, such violence occurs more frequently among less prominent denominations and churches but such attacks are hardly ever given media coverage. In the first six months of 2016, the number of killings and kidnappings of Christian leaders intensified.⁴² Altogether, from the beginning of the administration of the President Peña Nieto in 2013 up until May 2018, the number of attacks against church leaders rose to 24 (known) attacks against Roman Catholic priests,⁴³ of which nearly 80% went unpunished due either to the local authorities ignoring religious attacks or to the authorities’ complicity with criminal groups.⁴⁴

The hostility Christians in Mexico face because of their faith is embedded in a non-religious environment in which active faith in Christ is punished. Persecution incidents are hardly ever registered due to corrupt officials supporting criminal groups - where a complaint or accusation is possible, the authorities simply ignore it or make it look ridiculous. As a result, such incidents

³⁷ Arcega O., Book reveals connection of drug with Santeria and witchcraft, Zenit, 2010, available at: <https://es.zenit.org/articles/un-libro-revela-la-conexion-de-la-droga-con-santeria-y-brujeria/>, last accessed 21 November 2017.

³⁸ Emol, Evangelical kidnapped pastor found dead and buried in Mexico, Emol, 2008, available at: <http://www.emol.com/noticias/internacional/2008/08/12/317237/hallan-muerto-y-enterrado-a-pastor-evangelico-secuestrado-en-mexico.html>, last accessed 21 November 2017.

³⁹ Gudino A., Priest beaten to steal his truck in Saltillo, Excelsior, 2017, available at: <http://www.excelsior.com.mx/nacional/2017/01/29/1142929>, last accessed 21 November 2017.

⁴⁰ Lopez Marina D., Priest kidnapped, tortured and found alive in Mexico, asked for this, Aciprensa, 2016, available at: <https://www.aciprensa.com/noticias/esto-pide-el-sacerdote-secuestrado-torturado-y-hallado-vivo-en-mexico-19433/>, last accessed 21 November 2017.

⁴¹ Rivera A., Mexico - the most dangerous country in LA for priests: report, El Universal, 2016, available at: <http://www.eluniversal.com.mx/articulo/nacion/sociedad/2016/12/20/mexico-el-pais-mas-peligroso-para-sacerdotes-informe>, last accessed 21 November 2017.

⁴² Borderland Beat, Dozens of Catholic Priests murdered under Calderon-EPN administration, 2016, available at: <http://www.borderlandbeat.com/2016/09/dozens-of-catholic-priests-murdered.html>, last accessed 21 November 2017.

⁴³ Huffington Post, 2018: The worst year for the priesthood so far in the sexennium: 24 priests killed, available at: <https://www.huffingtonpost.com.mx/2018/04/27/2018-el-peor-ano-para-el-sacerdocio-en-lo-que-va-del-sexenio-24-sacerdote-asesinados-a-23421571/>, last accessed 7 May 2018.

⁴⁴ Zocalo, Church reproaches inaction before murders of priests, 2018, available at: http://www.zocalo.com.mx/new_site/articulo/reprocha-iglesia-inaccion-ante-asesinatos-de-curas, last accessed 7 May 2018.

are neither assessed nor acted upon as being a serious violation of human rights (including religious freedom, freedom of expression, freedom of movement, property rights, the right to life and physical integrity), nor does the financial or power-hungry motivation behind the attacks receive mention. Hence, even at the journalistic level, it is common to find reports of attacks on Christian leaders as if they were simply a "settlement" between drug traffickers or a political conflict, where any church leaders or Christians involved are basically described as being mere collateral damage. If the attacks were treated as offenses based on religious grounds, protection for churches would be much more effective.⁴⁵

4. Colombia

Colombia is the world's largest producer of the coca leaf⁴⁶ and the processed product known as cocaine. Drug-trafficking has practically become the basis of the national economy.⁴⁷ The detrimental effects of the presence of organized crime - especially in the form of drug-trafficking and the corruption networks that cover it - are even higher in Colombia than in Mexico. The situation is exacerbated by the fact that drug-trafficking and criminal gangs (often referred to as "Bacrim") are not the only elements that motivate social violence and anarchy in the country. Together with paramilitary groups financed by the government, both the private sector and the State contribute to the increase of chaos in Colombia and the constant lack of protection for ordinary citizens.

Given the national scope of this problem and the multiplicity of actors involved (criminal gangs, drug-traffickers, paramilitary groups and State authorities), the fight against organized crime cannot be focused on a few specific locations, but covers the whole national territory. This reduces the areas available in which citizens can live in peace and increases instances where the role of the police is in the hands of the army, paramilitary forces, drug-traffickers or guerrilla groups controlling the region. Even with the signing of the Peace Agreement in September 2016 between the main Colombian guerrilla group (the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia - FARC) and the Colombian government,⁴⁸ progress in the implementation of this agreement is minimal due to the lack of government will, the slow disarmament of the FARC and the increase of privileges for the political participation of FARC members in the next electoral process. Thus,

⁴⁵ See: Open Doors Analytical, Mexico: No protection for church leaders helping society, July 2017, available at: <http://theanalytical.org/mexico-no-protection-for-church-leaders-helping-society/>, last accessed 21 November 2017 (password: freedom).

⁴⁶ CNN Espanol, Colombia is the main source of cocaine for the United States, according to the DEA, 2016, available at: <http://cnnespanol.cnn.com/2016/12/07/colombia-es-la-principal-fuente-de-cocaina-para-estados-unidos-segun-la-dea/>, last accessed 21 November 2017.

⁴⁷ McDermott J., Is Colombia again the World's Top Cocaine Producer?, Insight Crime, 2015, available at: http://www.insightcrime.org/news-analysis/colombia-again-world-top-cocaine-producer?utm_source=Master+List&utm_campaign=ed3094ec7f-05_08_20155_6_2015&utm_medium=email&utm_term=0_e90c5425f9-ed3094ec7f-206748865, last accessed 21 November 2017.

⁴⁸ Information related to the Peace Agreement and its implementation process is available at: http://www.acuerdodepaz.gov.co/sites/all/themes/nexus/files/24_08_2016acuerdofinalfinalfinal-1472094587.pdf, last accessed 21 November 2017.

even with an official peace agreement in place, the situation in Colombia is far from being truly peaceful and free of violence. Even if the FARC gives up control of 70% of the coca business, it still has other illegal economic activities, such as smuggling, extortion, hired assassins and illegal mining - with reported revenues of up to half a trillion US dollars a year.⁴⁹

Even assuming all FARC operations ceased, we must not forget that, although it was the main Colombian guerrilla group, it was not the only one. The National Liberation Army (ELN)⁵⁰ - along with other criminal groups - is being reorganized with the help of FARC dissidents, i.e. members of FARC who have rejected the signing of the Peace Agreement. Smaller criminal organizations are being absorbed into this process which has led to the formation of the "Bacrim" (the new organizational form of criminal gangs). In this context, attacks by any of these actors can be perpetrated in any part of the country at any time, and it is precisely this characteristic that is different to the situation in Mexico, where criminal groups are more or less restricted to regions in the north. In Colombia, it is the whole country struggling to survive the threat of organized crime.

Although the attacks on Christians in Colombia have a greater intensity, scope, frequency and more types of aggressors are involved,⁵¹ they do not differ in essence from the forms that were described above for Mexico. Thus, in the Colombian context, the following forms of faith-based persecution also occur:

- The payment of protection money
- The vulnerability of churches meeting for worship
- The "control" of church ministry
- Violence against Christian leaders

Table 2 shows the number of incidents of organized crime based on religious persecution in Colombia for the periods 2010-2014 and 2015-2016. It is worth mentioning that the combined total of 656 attacks reflects only the cases known and registered by Open Doors. Many cases will not have been reported out of fear of criminal reprisals.

Table 2: Number of incidents of faith-based organized crime

Persecutor	2010-2014	2015-2016	TOTAL
FARC	232	22	254
ELN	24	3	27
Other guerrilla groups	256	25	281
Paramilitary groups	80	14	94
TOTAL	592	64	656

Source: Open Doors

⁴⁹ McDermott J., Criminal activities of the FARC and the profits of the guerrilla, Insight Crime, 2013, available at: <http://es.insightcrime.org/investigaciones/actividades-criminales-farc-y-ganancias-de-la-guerrilla>, last accessed 21 November 2017.

⁵⁰ Semana 35, How is the ELN guerrilla different from the FARC?, 2016, available at: <http://www.semana.com/nacion/articulo/diferencias-entre-el-el-n-y-las-farc/467349>, last accessed 21 November 2017.

⁵¹ See: Open Doors Analytical: "[Paramilitary forces take advantage of FARC's withdrawal](#)" (May 2017); "[Wave of threats against Christians](#)" (June 2017); "[31 year old Catholic priest shot dead](#)" (August 2017), password: freedom.

Although the reports of attacks,⁵² kidnappings,⁵³ extortion⁵⁴ and murder⁵⁵ of church leaders are daily news in Colombia, again, the inaction and/or collaboration of the authorities with criminal organizations foils any earnest attempts to bring justice and protection.⁵⁶ This makes Colombia the second most dangerous Latin American country for Roman Catholic priests.⁵⁷

Conclusions

From the above discussion, it is possible to draw the following conclusions:

The description of the Mexican and Colombian contexts illustrates the constant lack of protection to which Christian groups are subjected. The analysis also shows how, in similar situations of social violence and corruption in the Latin American region, violence against Christians is constantly occurring and this shows up the failure of the governments to properly guard its citizens' right to religious freedom. This is also the case in Venezuela,⁵⁸ Argentina,⁵⁹ Honduras,⁶⁰ Guatemala and El Salvador.⁶¹

⁵² Caracol Radio, Priest beaten in Soacha in a new case of intolerance, 2016, available at:

http://caracol.com.co/emisora/2016/09/05/bogota/1473071070_959732.html, last accessed 21 November 2017.

⁵³ El Pais, Frustration of kidnapping of an evangelical pastor in sector The Reformation of Cali, El Pais.com.co, 2013, available at: <http://www.elpais.com.co/judicial/frustran-secuestro-de-un-pastor-evangelico-en-sector-la-reforma-de-cali.html>

⁵⁴ Gonzales K., Two detained for extortion to priest, El Heraldo, 2014, available at:

<https://www.elheraldo.co/judicial/capturan-dos-hombres-que-presuntamente-estaban-exorsionando-un-sacerdote-169090>, last accessed 21 November 2017.

⁵⁵ For examples, see: Aciprensa, Priest murdered in Colombia, 2014, available at:

<https://www.aciprensa.com/noticias/asesinan-a-sacerdote-en-colombia-33735/>; Aciprensa, Priest killed in Colombia during church robbery, 2015, available at: <https://www.aciprensa.com/noticias/asesinan-a-sacerdote-en-colombia-al-intentar-robar-iglesia-55421/>, last accessed 21 November 2017.

⁵⁶ Arias X., Four policemen collaborate with drug-trafficking gang, Publimetro, 2017, available at:

<https://www.publimetro.co/co/bogota/2017/06/13/cuatro-policias-trabajaban-en-la-localidad-de-bosa-vendiendo-droga.html>, last accessed 21 November 2017.

⁵⁷ Jasso C., The two Latin American countries where more priests are murdered, RT, 2017, available at:

<https://actualidad.rt.com/actualidad/238244-paises-america-latina-asesinan-sacerdotes>, last accessed 21 November 2017.

⁵⁸ Open Doors Analytical, Venezuela: Insecurity on the increase. (May 2015), 2015, available at:

<http://theanalytical.org/venezuela-insecurity-on-the-increase/>, last accessed 21 November 2017 (password: freedom).

⁵⁹ Open Doors Analytical, Argentina: Baptist pastor at risk because of social work. (June 2016), Open Doors, 2016, available at: <http://theanalytical.org/argentina-baptist-pastor-at-risk-because-of-social-work/>; and, Argentina: Death threats for Christians opposing drug cartels. (April 2017), Open Doors, 2017, available at:

<http://theanalytical.org/argentina-death-threats-for-christians-opposing-drug-cartels/>, last accessed 21 November 2017 (password: freedom).

⁶⁰ Open Doors Analytical, Honduras: Attempted assassination of pastor. (February 2017), Open Doors, 2017, available at: <http://theanalytical.org/honduras-attempted-assassination-of-pastor/>, last accessed 21 November 2017 (password: freedom).

⁶¹ Open Doors Analytical, Guatemala, Honduras and El Salvador: Christians head negotiation with gangs. (May 2017), Open Doors, 2017, available at: <http://theanalytical.org/guatemala-honduras-and-el-salvador-christians-head-negotiations-with-gangs/>, last accessed 21 November 2017 (password: freedom).

The description of the persecution of Christians presented in this report is alarming and should motivate increased concern, particularly since it is based on incomplete data. The magnitude of what is really happening in Latin America is very often veiled by the victims' fear of reprisals if incidents are reported and accusations made. Christians and church leaders have been left with no protection or assistance from their local authorities, thus increasing their vulnerability and putting them at extra risk when the religious motivation behind attacks against them is not considered. As explained above, violence towards Christians not only has financial motives but also seeks to control Christian teaching where it opposes the actions of criminal groups.

Although in the countries analyzed above the State itself appears unable or unwilling to stop or discourage organized crime, this is not sufficient justification to simply accept such harmful activity. Such "criminal freedom" ultimately affects not only the human rights of the population in general, but also makes specific sectors within society become an easy target for the continued use of violence against them, as is the case for Christian believers and their respective leaders.

It is necessary to combat the problem of organized corruption and crime as a whole and not through isolated actions alone, since organized crime is embedded in State structures. State authorities require a thorough reform at all levels if they are to fulfill their task of upholding the rule of law and implementing the law in favor of the nation as a whole and not, as now happens, in favor of corrupt officials serving as accomplices in attacking vulnerable sectors of society (i.e. in this report: Christian groups) through their economic and political alliances with criminals.

Appendix 1: Selected World Watch Monitor news articles

- [Three more priests become victims of gang violence in Mexico](#)
26 April 2018
Two priests were killed in separate attacks in their churches in Mexico last week, bringing the number of clergy murdered in the last six years to 23, the Catholic News Agency reported. A third priest, kidnapped earlier this month, was found dead after suffering a suspected heart attack.
- [Two priests murdered in Mexico as gang attacks against religious leaders continue](#)
8 February 2018
In Coahuila state, José Raúl Vera López, went missing and was later found dead. Violence related to organized crime is probably the most significant threat to Latin America's Christians.
- [23 Catholic missionaries killed in 2017](#)
4 January 2018
At least 23 people working for the Catholic Church were killed in 2017, a Vatican agency has reported. For the eighth consecutive year the place where most violent deaths occurred was America, where 11 people lost their lives.
- [Mexico a 'case study in government inaction' as third priest killed this year](#)
12 July 2017
Luis Lopez Villa, 71, was killed by intruders at his San Isidro Labrador parish in Nezahualcóyotl on 5 July. An initial police report said his hands and feet were bound with tape and that he suffered two deep wounds.
- [Christians easy targets in Mexico's lawless borderlands](#)
6 April 2017
The Governor of Mexico's northern state of Chihuahua, Javier Corral, admitted last week that his government does not have the means to tackle organised crime, and that he has asked for federal resources to fight the drug cartels. This came four days after the murder of a local journalist, who had reported extensively on links between organized crime and politicians.
- [Argentinian priest transferred due to drug traffickers' threats](#)
17 March 2017
An Argentinian priest has been transferred from his parish due to repeated threats from drug traffickers. His church had been active in the prevention of drug addiction.
- [Mexico drug cartels charging churches 'taxes' now 'very common'](#)
17 March 2017
A Mexican church leader provides fresh insight into the ways in which Christians in Latin America come under pressure in areas controlled by drug cartels.

Appendix 2: WWR’s “Recent country developments”

Selected articles published by World Watch Research in 2017 and 2018 concerning Organized corruption and crime in Latin American countries (password: freedom):

- [Mexico: No protection for Christian leaders](#)
11 May 2018
According to Regeneracion reporting on 27 April 2018, three Roman Catholic priests were killed in the month of April.
- [Latin America: Widespread vandalism and theft of church property](#)
10 May 2018
Churches in Argentina, Honduras, Mexico and Uruguay have been experiencing a wave of vandalism and theft in recent weeks. The reports include the smashing of statues, looting and throwing of paint bombs.
- [Colombia/El Salvador: Roman Catholic priest continue to be assassinated](#)
23 April 2018
In El Salvador, Periodista Digital reported that a Roman Catholic priest was stopped by three masked men while driving his car. The priest fled but was caught and shot dead. The priest had received death threats from a local criminal gang previously.
- [Brazil and Paraguay: Christians killed by criminal organizations](#)
23 April 2018
In Brazil, Verazinforma reported on 31 January 2018 that a video depicting the decapitation of a 19-year-old Christian girl was released, after she had been reported missing for 22 days.
- [Honduras/Colombia: Christians continue to be targeted by gangs](#)
9 April 2018
According to La Prensa reporting on 11 February 2018, an ex-convict was shot dead in Santa Barbara, Honduras, as he left an Assemblies of God church, which he attended.
- [Mexico: Violence and extortion – the two main threats against Christians](#)
27 March 2018
According to El Siglo de Torreon reporting on 13 February 2018, three churches in Saltillo have recently been victims of extortion by criminal organizations.
- [Mexico: Violence causes church attendance to drop](#)
12 March 2018
The archdiocese of Mexico is implementing a strict “security protocol” in order to safeguard churches, priests and congregations, since the increase of violence is causing attendance at church services and events to drop severely.

- [Brazil/El Salvador/Honduras: When will the assassinations end?](#)
18 November 2017
On 23 October 2017, Proceso Digital reported that a pastor was killed by hired assassins inside the church he served in the Sandoval Sorto neighborhood, in San Pedro de Sula, Honduras.
- [Latin America: Church leaders continue to be targeted](#)
19 October 2017
A Roman Catholic priest working among young people with drug addiction in Argentina has reported that members of a local drug cartel had recently sent him intimidating messages and slit the tires of his car.
- [Mexico: Yet another priest found murdered](#)
29 July 2017
Another Roman Catholic priest has been killed in a church of the municipality of Los Reyes La Paz, in the State of Mexico. He was found with his hands tied and tape over his mouth. 18 priests have been murdered since President Enrique Peña Nieto took office in 2012.
- [Honduras: Attempted assassination of pastor](#)
20 February 2017
Pastor Machado was the apparent target of a drive-by shooting on 15 December 2016. He is part of a government commission aiming to eradicate corruption in the national police force.
- [Mexico: No protection for church leaders helping society](#)
11 July 2017
As Televisa News reported on 10 June 2017, a group of men entered a Catholic priest's house in Tijuana and rammed a screwdriver into the side of his head.
- [Mexico: Knife-attack in Mexico City cathedral](#)
3 June 2017
BBC News reported on May 2017 that a man attacked a Roman Catholic priest with a knife during a service at the Metropolitan Cathedral in Mexico City.
- [Colombia: Paramilitary forces take advantage of FARC's withdrawal](#)
18 May 2017
A Jesuit priest reports how paramilitary groups have taken over control of rural areas in Antioquia following the withdrawal of FARC.

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