News




Indigenous women pass riot police standing guard on the city square of San Juan Chamula, Mexico, in late July. (CNS/EPA/Rene Arauxo)



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Mexico City — December 15, 2017
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Clergy in southern Chiapas reiterated warnings of an escalating humanitarian crisis as a land dispute has driven some 5,000 indigenous Tzotzil from their communities and into the mountains to survive in cold and squalid conditions.

At least nine people among the displaced population have died. Fr. Marcelo Pérez, a priest attending to the displaced Tzotzil, said the dead include a newborn baby, two children age 2 or younger and several seniors over age 70.

"What Christmas will those from Chalchihuitán experience if they are dying?" Pérez said in a Dec. 14 WhatsApp message.

"Enough with the deaths in Chalchihuitán," the municipality where the deaths where the displacements occurred. "They are children of God. They are humans. They have a right to live."

The conflict in Chiapas stems from a 1973 decision by Mexico's Agrarian Reform Secretariat, when it established the boundaries between the Chiapas municipalities of Chenalhó and Chalchihuitán.

Displeasure with the decision in Chenalhó has caused conflict for decades. The most recent dispute escalated in November, when villagers from Chalchihuitán said they were run off their land at gunpoint.

Caritas in the San Cristóbal de Las Casas Diocese has called for supplies of food, medicine and shelter, but its efforts have been hampered by roadblocks set up by armed groups in Chenalhó.

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"The humanitarian crisis grows with each day due to shortages ... provoked by the blockades of the three entrances to the municipality of Chalchihuitán and adding to the effects of rain, the cold and displacement conditions of numerous families, the vast majority from the municipality of Chalchihuitán," said a Dec. 12 statement signed by retired Bishop Felipe Arizmendi Esquivel of San Cristóbal de Las Casas, and Dominican Fr. Gonzalo Ituarte Verduzco, diocesan vicar for justice and peace.

"An armed group acting with impunity has caused a state of siege in the municipality of Chalchihuitán, and we do not understand why the state and federal authorities have allowed it," the statement said.

The diocesan statement called for all levels of government to find "an integral solution, given that on this occasion the conflict has been aggravated more than on any other occasion in memory by the increasing participation of armed groups."

On Dec. 13, an agrarian tribunal ruled on the dispute over 740 acres of land, but this time in favor of the Chenalhó claimants; it said the 1973 decision benefiting Chalchihuitán was made in error. The federal and state governments subsequently offered compensation to 300 homeowners.