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## New PBI team in the north of Mexico Trends and patterns of human rights defense in Chihuahua and Coahuila

### Why open a new PBI Mexico team in the north?

- In response to an increase in international accompaniment requests from the civil society, in 2012 PBI conducted an exploratory mission that included visits to various states of the Republic.
- Following this exploratory work, PBI Mexico decided to open a new field team, consisting of international volunteers and based in the city of Chihuahua, to accompany human rights defenders in the states of Chihuahua and Coahuila.
- In this study, Chihuahua and Coahuila were identified as high-risk states for human rights defenders, a conclusion supported by the [recent report](#) released by the United Nations Mexico Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR)<sup>1</sup>.
- Furthermore, according to our extensive research compiled in our publication [A Panorama of the Defense of Human Rights in Mexico](#), the issues with which defenders work in the north are a reflection of the problems throughout the country. Also, both states have an active civil society with the potential to drive social change, and are interested in benefiting from the presence of PBI.

### What are the main documented human rights violations in the region?

- **Excessive use of force:** Human Rights Watch (HRW) identified Chihuahua in the report “Neither Rights Nor Security” as one of the states with the highest number of complaints against police forces and the Army. The report documented high rates of torture, *arraigo* (pre-trial detention), arbitrary detention, enforced disappearances and extra judicial killings by state security forces<sup>2</sup>.
- Organizations such as *Paso del Norte Human Rights Center*, [Cosyddhac](#) and *The Worker’s Ministry* in Ciudad Juárez document abuses and call for the perpetrators in public security forces to be punished while breaching practices are eradicated.
- **Femicide and women’s rights:** The state of Chihuahua has a female homicide rate of 34.73 assassinations for every 100 thousand women, 15 times higher than the world average<sup>3</sup>. In 2009 the Inter-American Court of Human Rights released a conviction for the femicide of 3 women in Chihuahua. Between 2007 and 2010 there was an increase of more than one thousand percent of murders of women, from 51 murders in 2007 to 595 murders in 2010<sup>4</sup>. The National Citizen Femicide Observatory documented 401 missing women in the state between 2010 and June 2011<sup>5</sup>.
- The [Center for the Human Rights of Women](#), the [Round Table Network of Women of Ciudad Juárez](#), [May Our Daughters Return Home](#), *Women for Mexico* and [Justice for Our Daughters](#) are some of the organizations that represent the victims and their families. They demand an end to impunity for the perpetrators and the criminalization of femicide as a felony in all states. In Coahuila the *Integral Development Center for Women* replicates this message.
- **Disappeared:** According to the government of Coahuila, there are around 1600 disappeared persons in

1 The Mexico Office for the High Commissioner for Human Rights of the United Nations (UN-DH), Report on the situation of human rights defenders in Mexico: update and balance, 2013 [http://hchr.org.mx/files/doctos/Informe\\_defensoresDH\\_2013\\_web.pdf](http://hchr.org.mx/files/doctos/Informe_defensoresDH_2013_web.pdf)

2 Human Rights Watch, *Neither Rights Nor Security, Killings, Torture and Disappearances in Mexico’s ‘War on Drugs’* 2011.

3 La Jornada, March 30 2012, *The Favorite Villains*. <http://www.jornada.unam.mx/2012/03/30/opinion/021a1pol>

4 Argenpress March 27 2012, *Mexico: Chihuahua Exceeds 15 times global rate of femicide cases*. <http://www.argenpress.info/2012/03/mexico-superachihuahua-15-veces-tasa.html>

5 Electronic Journalism, *Serious problem of femicide in Chihuahua*. <http://www.periodismoelectronico.com/informacion-historica-notas-chihuahua/2988-grave-problema-de-feminicidios-en-chihuahua.html>

the state<sup>6</sup>. This figure is representative of the pattern of disappearances occurring nationally. Since 2007 the phenomenon has worsened severely<sup>7</sup>. In February 2013 the federal government released figures which demonstrate that there are around 27 thousand disappeared persons in Mexico. 56% of cases of disappearances in Mexico documented by Amnesty International (AI)<sup>8</sup> were forced disappearances, 60% in the case of HRW<sup>9</sup>.

- [United Forces for Our Disappeared in Coahuila \(FUUNDEC\)](#) is an association of dozens of families of victims that demand authorities to provide a comprehensive response to the problem that includes: the search for the disappeared, scientific methods of investigation and identification of bodies, and an end to impunity. They have documented the collusion of public officials, security forces and organized crime in several cases of disappearances. They are backed by the [Fray Juan de Larios Diocese Center for Human Rights](#), based in Saltillo. In Chihuahua the *Committee of Relatives of the Disappeared* and those who face violence against women demand better attention to the disappeared.
- **Migrants:** Chihuahua and Coahuila, as states that border the USA, receive daily hundreds of transmigrants from Central America seeking to reach the neighboring country. Ciudad Juárez and Piedras Negras are key places to migration to the United States and also points of deportation, while Saltillo is a hub for trains coming from the South and heading to the northern border. The Inter-American Human Rights Commission, the National Human Rights Commission and AI have documented kidnappings, extortion, sexual violence, assaults and murders that transmigrants suffer on their way at the hands of organized crime and state agents<sup>10</sup>.
- *The Saltillo Migrant House* provides refuge and comprehensive attention to migrants. The shelter also documents the abuses they suffer. In their recent report, they document cases of torture and make recommendations to the Mexican state on how to eradicate the practice<sup>11</sup>. The *Ciudad Juárez Migrant House*, the *Frontera Digna Migrant House* in Piedras Negras and the *Day Center 'A Passage to Hope'* in Torreón also advocate for the rights of migrants.
- **Defense of Natural Resources / 'business and human rights' (DESCA):** La Laguna is one of the regions of Coahuila most affected by environmental degradation. There is a water shortage and what is left is in dams, while other reserves are contaminated with arsenic, causing a number of illnesses and mutilations among residents<sup>12</sup>. There is also a struggle against the imposition of mining and pollution caused by coal mining in the *zona carbonífera* (Carbon zone), another region of Coahuila<sup>13</sup>.
- In Torreón, the *Juan Gerardi Human Rights Center* and the collective *Laguneros for Peace* protested against the illegal over-exploitation of the local aquifers. In Chihuahua, indigenous communities of the Sierra Tarahumara have suffered the exploitation of their lands by economic interests, reason for which they have received support from the *Commission for Solidarity and Defense of Human Rights (Cosyddhac)*. *El Barzón*, in the state of Chihuahua, denounces the threat that the imposition of megaprojects represents to the rights to a dignified life, demanding that the communities decide in a free and informed way about the future of their lands and resources.
- **Labor rights:** Labor rights violations have been documented in both states. According to *Alianza Cívica*, around 270 mining companies, mostly exploiting coal, operate in Coahuila. The CNDH noted that most of the coal mines do not meet health and safety standards<sup>14</sup>. Serious labor rights violations

6 El Universal, January 14 2012, Moreira estimates 600 thousand disappeared persons in Coahuila. <http://www.eluniversal.com.mx/notas/822713.html>

7 El Siglo de Torreón, August 31 2013, *Despite the fatigue...they continue to search*. <http://www.elsiglodetorreon.com.mx/noticia/908313.pese-al-cansancio-los-siguen-buscando.html>

8 Amnesty International, *Confronting a Nightmare. Disappearances in Mexico*, 2013.

<http://www.amnesty.org/en/library/asset/AMR41/025/2013/es/d7198cc0-93d1-4021-a6b8-b098805ddead/amr410252013en.pdf>

9 Human Rights Watch, *Mexico's Disappeared. The enduring cost of a crisis ignored*, 2013.

[http://www.hrw.org/sites/default/files/reports/mexico0213\\_ForUpload\\_0\\_0\\_0.pdf](http://www.hrw.org/sites/default/files/reports/mexico0213_ForUpload_0_0_0.pdf)

10 National Human Rights Commission, *Special Report on the kidnapping of migrants in Mexico, 2011*.

[http://www.cndh.org.mx/sites/all/fuentes/documentos/informes/especiales/2011\\_secmigraentes\\_0.pdf](http://www.cndh.org.mx/sites/all/fuentes/documentos/informes/especiales/2011_secmigraentes_0.pdf)

Amnesty International, *Invisible victims: migrants on the move in Mexico*, 2010.

<http://www.amnesty.org/en/library/asset/AMR41/014/2010/en/8459f0ac-03ce-4302-8bd2-3305bdae9cde/amr410142010eng.pdf>

Inter-American Commission on Human Rights, *Preliminary observations of the IACHR's rapporteurship on the rights of migrant workers on its visit to Mexico*, 2011. <http://www.oas.org/en/iachr/migrants/docs/pdf/Mexico2011.pdf>

11 Saltillo Migrant House, Mexico, a place of torture for migrants, 2013.

<http://desaparecidosencoahuila.files.wordpress.com/2013/07/informetorturamigrates2013.pdf>

12 Vanguardia. Weekly edition, August 8 2011, *La Laguna: Survivors of arsenic*.

<http://www.vanguardia.com.mx/lalagunalossobrevivientesdelarsenico-1064277.html>

13 Unimedios, REPORT: In the impunity, environmental damage by mining in Coahuila, 26 November 2012, <http://www.unimediosagencia.com/?p=16627>

14 In November 2011 the National Human Rights Commission (CNDH) published a report on the labor conditions of miners in the Carbon zone of Coahuila. *Special Report on the health and safety conditions in the Carbon zone of Coahuila*.

[http://www.cndh.org.mx/sites/all/fuentes/documentos/informes/especiales/2011\\_informeCoahuila.pdf](http://www.cndh.org.mx/sites/all/fuentes/documentos/informes/especiales/2011_informeCoahuila.pdf)

have been recorded in relation to the *maquilas* that operate in Ciudad Juárez.

- The [Pasta de Conchos Family Organization](#) has represented miners and their families since 2006, when 65 workers lost their lives in the explosion of a coal pit. The pits do not meet minimum safety conditions, and cause the death and maiming of several miners every year<sup>15</sup>. The organization demands recognition and reparation of the damage caused, as well as guarantees of non-repetition. In Ciudad Juárez, the *Worker's Ministry* provides legal representation for *maquila* workers.
- **Freedom of expression:** According to AI and Reporters Without Borders, from 2000 to 2011, 75 journalists were murdered in Mexico. Chihuahua was found to be the second most dangerous state, with 15 homicides. In 2013 there was a wave of attacks against the newspapers *El Siglo de Torreón* and *El Diario de Juárez*. Defamatory statements from authorities against journalists are common.
- *Citizenship Lagunera for Human Rights AC (Ciladhac)* is one of the organizations in the region that is working with this issue, asking the state to protect at-risk journalists.

### What are the risks that human rights defenders in the North of Mexico face?

- Human rights defenders of Chihuahua and Coahuila suffer attacks, threats, harassment, surveillance, physical assaults and criminalization because of their work.
- In only two years, five women activists were killed in the state of Chihuahua and another 12 left the country due to threats against them<sup>16</sup>.
- Both the OHCHR and the National Network of Civil Human Rights Organizations "All Rights for Everyone" (RedTdT) and the Urgent Action for Human Rights Defenders (Acuddeh) place Chihuahua as one of the three most dangerous states in Mexico for the defense of human rights<sup>17</sup>.
- Due to the high level of risk, several organizations and their members are beneficiaries of protective measures granted by the Inter-American Commission on Human Rights. In Chihuahua for example, *May Our Daughters Return Home*, *CEDEHM* (since 2008) and *El Barzón* (since 2012) receive protective measures, while in Coahuila, the *Saltillo Migrant House* (since 2010) and *'Frontera Digna'* (since 2012) are also recipients of these measures.
- Furthermore, civil society representatives believe that the opportunities for participation in the public sphere as well as decision-making is limited by the authorities.
- **Assassinations:** On 16 December 2010 Marisela Escobedo Ortiz was killed by a bullet wound in front of the Government Palace of Chihuahua City<sup>18</sup>. On 6 January 2011, Susan Chávez was brutally murdered in Ciudad Juárez<sup>19</sup>. On 22 October 2012 Ismael Solorio Urrutia and his wife Manuela Solís Contreras, members of *El Barzón* were murdered<sup>20</sup>.
- **Raids and attacks on property:** In Torreón, on 8 September 2013, the *Juan Gerardi Human Rights Center* received its second raid in under two years<sup>21</sup>. In February 2012 the Army and Federal Police had raided their offices<sup>22</sup>. The *Paso del Norte Human Rights Center* was raided by the Federal Police in June 2011. In September and October 2012, it was the target of surveillance and harassment by the state prosecutor and state police of Chihuahua<sup>23</sup>. During attacks which occurred on 15 and 16 February 2011, the homes of Maria Luisa García Andrade and Sara Salazar, of *May Our Daughters Return Home*,

15 The Pasta de Conchos Family Organization, the Worker's Ministry and the Center for Study and Worker Action, 5<sup>th</sup> Report 21<sup>st</sup> Century, Martyrdom in the coal mines, 2012. <http://www.redtdt.org.mx/media/descargables/VI%20INF%20PC%2016%20febrero.pdf>

16 Cimic Noticias, September 5 2013, *Violence worsens against human rights defenders in Chihuahua*. <http://www.cimacnoticias.com.mx/node/64193>

17 The Mexico Office for the High Commissioner for Human Rights of the United Nations (UN-DH), Report on the situation of human rights defenders in Mexico: update and balance, 2013 [http://hchr.org.mx/files/doctos/Informe\\_defensoresDH\\_2013\\_web.pdf](http://hchr.org.mx/files/doctos/Informe_defensoresDH_2013_web.pdf)  
National Network of Civil Human Rights Organizations "All Rights for Everyone" (RedTdT), *Accompanying Hope*, 2013  
Urgent Action for Human Rights Defenders (Acuddeh) and the Committee Cerezo, *Report: Defending Human Rights in Mexico: the price of dignity*. [http://acuddeh.org/IMG/pdf/defender\\_los\\_derechos\\_humanos\\_en\\_mexico\\_maquetacio\\_n.pdf](http://acuddeh.org/IMG/pdf/defender_los_derechos_humanos_en_mexico_maquetacio_n.pdf)

18 Human Rights Watch, February 23 2011, Mexico should investigate attacks against human rights defenders in Chihuahua, <http://www.acuddeh.org/spip.php?article1901>

19 CNN Mexico, January 11 2011, *Activist Susana Chávez is assassinated in Ciudad Juárez*, Chihuahua. <http://mexico.cnn.com/nacional/2011/01/11/la-activista-susana-chavez-es-asesinada-en-ciudad-juarez-chihuahua>

20 Sin Embargo, October 23 2012, *Campesinos protest the killing of two activists of El Barzón in Chihuahua, a state crime, they accuse*. <http://www.sinembargo.mx/23-10-2012/408140>

21 El Siglo de Torreón, September 12 2012, *Condemn Raid on 'Juan Gerardi' Center* <http://www.elsiglodetorreon.com.mx/noticia/912823.condenan-allanamiento-del-centro-juan-gerardi.html>

22 Amnesty International Mexico, February 20 2012, *Raid of a Human Rights Center in Torreón* <http://amnistia.org.mx/nuevo/2012/02/20/allanamiento-a-un-centro-de-derechos-humanos-en-torreon/>

23 Urgent Action. An end to the harassment of CDH Paso del Norte personnel. Available at: [http://www.redtdt.org.mx/d\\_acciones/d\\_visual.php?id\\_accion=242](http://www.redtdt.org.mx/d_acciones/d_visual.php?id_accion=242)

were burned<sup>24</sup>.

- **Attacks and harassment:** Since 2009 the *Saltillo Migrant House* and its staff have been subject to violent robbery, surveillance, verbal abuse and intimidation<sup>25</sup>. In 2013 the State Police group GATE threatened to carry out an illegal “forceful” raid<sup>26</sup>. In April 2013 the offices of *Cedehm* were attacked<sup>27</sup>.
- **Defamation:** There have been several acts of defamation by the local authorities<sup>28</sup>. In November 2012 the newspaper *Heraldo de Saltillo* called the *Saltillo Migrant House* a “haven for criminals” and “a cancer Saltillo”, examples of defamatory statements that the respected migrant house has suffered from local media sources<sup>29</sup>.
- **Threats:** On 30 December 2012, Father Pedro Pantoja received a phone call to his personal telephone, answered by another member of the organization, in which an unknown person threatened to attack the workers of the *Saltillo Migrant House*. The defender Norma Ledezma, coordinator of *Justice for Our Daughters*, has at times required armed bodyguards to accompany her due to the death threats she has received<sup>30</sup>.

### How will PBI work in the north of Mexico?

- **PBI's objectives in the north:** to make visible the issues of concern and the risks faced by human rights defenders, and to strengthen support networks and promote the recognition of their work. To provide international accompaniment for their protection, including security consultation, and to work so that the Mexican State fulfills its international obligation to protect human rights defenders.
- **How will we achieve this:** With a field team made up of volunteers of different nationalities. This team will be supported by the Coordinating Office in Mexico City and PBI national groups in 16 countries, each of which report to a range of political, legal and civil society actors on the human rights situation in Mexico in order to obtain reactions in emergency cases.
- **The goal** of this work is to open spaces for human rights defenders so they can achieve more respect for human rights and peace in Mexico.

## RECOMMENDATIONS<sup>31</sup>

### To the Federal Government

- That the President Enrique Peña Nieto and the Secretary of the Interior Ministry Miguel Ángel Osorio Chong recognize, via a public statement, the important role played by human rights defenders and journalists in a democratic Mexico, the situation of risk that they live each day due to their work, and the federal government’s responsibility to protect them through the full implementation of the Protection Mechanism.
- That the Subsecretariat for Legal Affairs and Human Rights of SEGOB works together with the state governments of Chihuahua and Coahuila to expedite the implementation of protective measures granted by the IACHR and the Protection Mechanism for Human Rights Defenders and Journalists.

24 Human Rights Watch, Mexico must investigate attacks against human rights defenders in Chihuahua, 23 February 2011.

<http://www.acuddeh.org/spip.php?article1901> <http://www.acuddeh.org/spip.php?article1901>

25 RedTdT, January 7 2013, *New attacks against the Saltillo Migrant House*

[http://www.redtdt.org.mx/d\\_acciones/d\\_visual.php?id\\_accion=248](http://www.redtdt.org.mx/d_acciones/d_visual.php?id_accion=248)

26 RedTdT August 10 2013, *Gate group threaten with an illegal incursion – Saltillo Migrant House*

[http://www.redtdt.org.mx/d\\_acciones/d\\_visual.php?id\\_accion=248](http://www.redtdt.org.mx/d_acciones/d_visual.php?id_accion=248)

27 We defend Hope, *Attack on the facilities of the Women’s Human Rights Center.*

<http://defendamoslaesperanza.org.mx/agresion-a-las-instalaciones-del-centro-de-derechos-humanos-de-las-mujeres/>

28 *Proceso*, April 3 2012, *Governor of Chihuahua accused of undertaking a ‘lynching’ campaign against moral activists*

<http://www.proceso.com.mx/?p=303227>

Frontline Defenders, October 15 2012, *Mexico: smear campaign against human rights defender Lucha Castro*

<http://www.frontlinedefenders.org/es/node/20196>

29 *El Heraldo de Saltillo*, December 27 2012, *Other Migrants* [http://www.elheraldodesaltillo.mx/acontecer/p2\\_articloid/63935](http://www.elheraldodesaltillo.mx/acontecer/p2_articloid/63935)

30 *Sin Embargo*, January 7 2013, *Migrant advocates denounce death threats from criminal groups in Coahuila.*

<http://www.sinembargo.mx/07-01-2013/483133>

Mexican Commission for the Defense and Promotion of Human Rights (CMDPDH) CSOs reject smear campaign against Norma Ledezma and Justice for Our Daughters. <http://cmdpdh.org/2013/04/organizaciones-de-la-sociedad-civil-rechazan-la-campana-de-desprestigio-en-contra-de-norma-ledezma-y-justicia-para-nuestras-hijas/>

31 For more detailed recommendations on the protection and participation of human rights defenders, see *A Panorama of the Defense of Human Rights in Mexico: Initiatives and Risks of Mexican Civil Society*, PBI, 2013. Available at: <http://www.pbi-mexico.org/field-projects/pbi-mexico/publications/special-reports/?L=0>

**To the State Governments of Chihuahua and Coahuila**

- That Governor César Duarte and Governor Rúben Moreira ensure the effective implementation of the IACHR protective measures and the Protection Mechanism for Human Rights Defenders and Journalists.
- That the highest levels of state governments make public statements recognizing the important work of human rights defenders and the risks they face.

**To the State Human Rights Commissions**

- To carry out activities and actions to recognize the important role of human rights defenders, legitimizing the individual victims of defamations, threats and attacks, and the monitoring of state policies for the protection of defenders.

**To the Diplomatic Corps**

- To visit human rights defenders in their offices, making their visits visible through the media.
- To include the protection of human rights defenders – both around public policy in general and in particular cases - in its dialogue with the federal government and the state governments of Chihuahua and Coahuila.

**PBI considers it urgent that the Mexican Government ensures the safety of human rights defenders in Chihuahua and Coahuila. If defenders do not have enough space and sufficient security guarantees in order to promote social change, the democratic transition in Mexico and the protection of human rights in these states will be severely compromised.**