

Colombia Rebels close 300 evangelical churches, kill 25 pastors in six months; Evangelical churches work and pray for peace

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Over 25 evangelical pastors have been killed and up to 300 churches closed in the past six months as Colombia's violence escalates, according to Rev. Hector Pardo, pastor of Bogota's Tabernaculo del Fe (Faith Tabernacle). The majority of the murdered pastors were from the Assembly of God churches.

The increasing violence is a result of Colombia's 40-year-old civil war between leftist guerrilla groups and the government that has left 35,000 people dead in the last decade alone.

"Some of the pastors have been targeted because they are Christians," said Pastor Pardo in an extensive telephone interview with LAM News Service. Pardo is an influential pastor in the capitol, Bogota, and a member of the General Council of Latin America Mission. He said that others were murdered because of their perceived alliance with one or another of Colombia's warring parties.

"The latest two who were killed were accused of being allied with the paramilitaries (right-wing groups opposed to the guerillas)," Pardo said. The pastor denied that the men were supporters of any faction and said that the guerrilla's charge was "just an excuse to kill them".

Pardo said that some pastors have found themselves caught in the middle by their Christian principles. "One pastor was asked by guerrillas from the National Liberation Army (ELN) to deposit their money in his own personal bank account," he said. "Perhaps that money was from the guerrilla's drug trade or kidnapping, but the pastor refused saying that it was against his Christian principles. The guerrillas gave him 20 days to leave the area, but he stayed saying that he was there to serve the Lord and the people. On the 21st day, the guerrillas called and said they wanted to meet him. He went and never returned."

Pastor Pardo expressed concern about the systematic closing of evangelical churches in Colombia. He said that the majority of those closed were in a demilitarized zone in the southern part of the country where Colombia's President Andres Pastrana withdrew government troops in November. The withdrawal of the soldiers was intended to create good will and pave the way for talks with the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC), the country's oldest and largest insurgent group.

In response to the closings, Pardo says he has written directly to the commander of the FARC troops in the demilitarized zone asking why the churches were closed. "We

believe that our ministry is for all of the people, guerrillas, government troops, common people, government officials, poor, rich, people on the left, people on the right,” he said. Pardo has also asked the commander for an explanation of who killed the pastors and why.

Pardo said that he has also been in talks with ELN commanders and government officials attempting to bring the two sides together. Efforts at peace negotiations between the Pastrana government and FARC officials have largely been viewed as a failure and violence has risen in recent months.

Over 1,350 kidnappings have been reported so far this year in Colombia. In an effort to force the government into talks, the ELN hijacked a small commercial airliner and kidnapped the 54 crew and passengers in April. The ELN also seized more than 130 worshipers from a church mass in the southwestern city of Cali in late May. Some captives from both of those incidents are still being held. In addition, large-scale attacks reaching to the outskirts of Bogota have shaken the country in the past month.

Meanwhile, public revulsion to the continual violence is fueling a growing call for peace. More than 1.5 million Colombians have joined a nationwide series of demonstrations against kidnapping and the civil war. Evangelicals have joined the protests, forming a “Permanent Assembly of Civil Society for Peace” which held a large meeting in Cali in July. Lilia Solano-Gongora, a Latin America Mission missionary, said that 2,000 people attended from around the country, “asking for peace and justice and calling for a cease fire.”

When asked if his public stance for peace might jeopardize his safety, Pastor Pardo said, “I have confidence, I am at peace with the Lord.” Pardo said that he has joined other evangelical leaders in establishing a nationwide prayer chain, a “circle of prayer” that will pray for peace in his troubled country. Pardo has also asked President Pastrana to declare a nationwide day of prayer.

“Peace is impossible at this time in Colombia,” he said. “To stop the fighting will take either a miracle or the intervention of the Lord. We are asking Christians around the world to join us in prayer for peace and that the Lord will be glorified,” he said.

The Latin America Mission currently has approximately 205 missionaries in 13 countries and is seeking to place 300 new missionaries in Latin America in the next three years. The U.S. headquarters can be reached at Latin America Mission, Box 52-7900, Miami Springs, FL 33152, by e-mail at info@lam.org, or by calling 1-800-275-8410. The mission’s web site may be found at <http://www.lam.org>.

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