News

Clergy and other worshippers take part in a march demanding peace in San Cristobal de Las Casas, in the southern state of Chiapas, Mexico, Nov. 3, after the Oct. 20 murder of Fr. Marcelo Pérez. (OSV News/Reuters/Gabriela Sanabria)

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The Oct. 20 killing of a priest of Indigenous origin in Chiapas, in the southern part of Mexico, has prompted an unexpected social reaction in the region, challenging the interests of businesses, the Mexican government and drug cartels.

A number of processions and marches gathering thousands of participants have taken place in the city of San Cristóbal de las Casas and in neighboring towns. The attendees not only demand justice in relation to Fr. Marcelo Pérez's case, but also cry for peace in the violence-stricken region — which includes protection of the common home and Indigenous communities.

A member of the Indigenous Maya Tzotsil group, Pérez had been a leader of the local communities' struggle against development and commercial projects that could harm not only the environment but also their very existence.

The prosecutors' office in the city of San Cristóbal de las Casas, has said the priest was shot dead by two gunmen when he was in his van.

Fr. Marcelo Pérez shows a monstrance to a resident of Simojovel, in Mexico's Chiapas state, June 13, 2020. (OSV News/Courtesy of David Agren)

Over the past few years, Chiapas has been an epicenter of economic interest in Mexico. The government implanted in the region — and in a few neighboring states — lines of an inte-oceanic train that connects passengers and goods from the Atlantic to the Pacific. That mega project includes the creation of ports, industrial parks and energy plants, which has drawn interest and companies from several parts of the country.

At the same time, a number of projects focusing on the extraction of minerals in Chiapas have been planned, despite opposition from local residents. Some involve the Canadian company Blackfire Exploration, which owns mines in Chiapas that extract baryte, titanium and magnetite.

In 2006, Blackfire bought the mines and began to extract minerals without consulting the local Indigenous and peasant communities. The resistance to its operations grew fiercer and fiercer, til their most vocal critic, Mariano Abarca, was murdered in 2009. The state government closed the mine after that.

Oblate Fr. Eleazar López, a priest of Zapoteca origin who lives in Juchitán de Zaragoza, about 200 miles east of San Cristóbal, told the National Catholic Reporter that "the region was always seen as a provider of minerals and lumber, since colonial times."

"That's why it has been attracting those projects nowadays — it's a reserve of wealth to look for when the economic system doesn't see other ways to make a profit," López said.

> 'He gave his life for us. We, who lived with him, know and feel that he is a saint. Maybe the church will canonize him someday, but for us he's already St. Marcelo.'
> —Guadalupe Vásquez Luna
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He was friends with Pérez for several years. He emphasized that along with investors and companies came criminal organizations, and many activists say that at times those different agents act together. When an Indigenous community resists a mining project on its lands, armed bands may be called to dissuade the group — and that can be achieved through threats and violence.

Pérez had been facing threats for months. He was working as a vicar in Simojovel, but had to be moved to San Cristóbal de las Casas earlier this year after the seriousness of the threats increased. He told the local press then that a "price had been put on his head."

As his activism to protect the Indigenous and the peasant communities countered the interests of powerful groups, the campaign against him grew more and more aggressive. Pérez was accused, among other things, of being a key member of Los Machetes, a self-defense armed organization created to protect the locals from the drug cartels' actions.

"That was absurd. Everybody knew that Father Marcelo stood for peace in every situation," Guadalupe Vásquez Luna, a Tsotsil woman and a member of the nongovernmental organization Las Abejas de Acteal (The Bees), told NCR.

Vásquez Luna is a survivor of the 1997 Acteal Massacre, when a paramilitary band attacked her town and killed 45 people, many of them women and children. The attack occurred 650 feet from an army barracks, but the troops claimed they heard nothing.

"The Mexican state wanted to show us that it would treat like that any Indigenous community that dared to stand up for its rights," Vásquez Luna added. That incident, she noted, occurred only three years after the notorious Zapatista rebellion, when thousands of members of Indigenous groups formed an armed battalion to face violence from the state and private agents that wanted to control their lands and attempted to dominate cities in Chiapas.

A woman holds a sign reading, "No To Violence," during a demonstration June 19 in Yajalon, in Mexico's Chiapas state, to demand government authorities guarantee their safe return to their communities, such as the town of Tila, which people have fled due to armed gang violence. (OSV News/Reuters/Jacob Garcia)

Especially over the past couple years, Chiapas has faced a similar scenario. Armed groups have been invading Indigenous towns and forcing people to follow their orders. Threats and killings have become common. Earlier this year, hundreds of Indigenous peasants had to flee their traditional lands and move to Guatemala to save their lives.

The turmoil caused by the dispute for territory between two northern drug cartels has transformed the lives of people who had been living there since time immemorial. It also has impacted the local power structure of each town. The three Chiapas dioceses have denounced the situation on a number of occasions. The Catholic Church had even warned the Mexican government that Chiapas wouldn't be able to hold this year's elections because it was too unsafe.

The church has been a continuous ally of the Indigenous people and the poor in Chiapas for centuries. That alliance was reconfirmed by the late Bishop Samuel Ruiz Garcia, who between 1959 and 2011 (when he died) worked as the local bishop, always prioritizing the poor and the Indigenous groups.

Ruiz promoted the liturgical use of the local Indigenous languages and incentivized the peasant communities' self-organization. For his great efforts to protect the Indigenous peoples, he earned the honorific title of *jtatik*, "our father" in Tseltal, one of the Mayan languages of Chiapas.

An estimated 2 million people in the region use their native Indigenous languages on a daily basis. Pérez, the priest killed Oct. 20, only learned to speak Spanish in his teenage years, during school.

"People would laugh about his difficulties and he became a stutterer," López recalled. After a few years, however, "Pérez not only dominated the Spanish language but also the Western categories of thought," he added.

Since 2007, the Diocese of San Cristobal de las Casas has been working on liturgical adaptations to bring the celebrations closer to the Mayan cultures. The changes, which include the adoption of dances during Mass, were approved by the Vatican earlier this month.

Missionaries like Pérez worked for a theological reflection that could take into account the Indigenous' spiritual perspectives, López said. One of the fundamental principles of the Indigenous thought, he emphasized, is the idea of an existing harmony between human beings and the environment.

"Westerners think we're not part of nature, but we are. That's an ideology that favors the exploitation and the destruction of the common home," he said. Pérez was victimized by the extremes of the Western colonial project, López said.

Vigilantes of "El Machete," an armed group made up mostly of Indigenous people to defend themselves against drug cartels, march in formation after an assembly with indigenous communities near a church in Chiapas, Mexico, July 18, 2021. (CNS/Reuters/Jacob Garcia)

Mexico has become one of the world's most violent countries. Former President Andrés Manuel López Obrador concluded his six-year tenure in September with almost 200,000 homicides. The previous administration, headed by Enrique Peña Nieto (2012-2018), had 150,000 homicides, and that of Felipe Calderón (2006-2012) counted 120,000 homicides.

The sweeping waves of crime at times have directly impacted the clergy. In 2022, for instance, two Jesuit priests, Fr. Javier Campos, 79, and Fr. Joaquín Mora, 80, were murdered in Chihuahua by a local criminal. They worked in an Indigenous community in the mountains, an area said to be on a drug trafficking route to the United States.

The Mexican church launched a broad peace process after those priests' killings,

involving hundreds of nongovernmental organizations, public agents and intellectuals in a national dialogue against violence. Deep sociopolitical transformations were suggested to build peace, and such propositions were shared with presidential candidates earlier this year — including with current President Claudia Sheinbaum.

Part of such effort has been involving at times the direct participation of church members in the mediation of crises. Fr. José Filiberto Velázquez, who heads the Human Rights Center Minerva Bello in Guerrero state — which supports victims of violence and their families — has been one of the priests on the front line.

For instance, Velázquez told NCR, in February he managed to promote a direct phone call between two drug lords in Chilpancingo after 10 days of terror in the city, caused by the conflict between two cartels. At least seven bus drivers had been attacked and killed by criminals, and people avoided leaving their homes for over a week. With the priests' mediation, the cartels decided to leave the population out of their dispute and peace was reestablished.

Vigilantes of "El Machete," an armed group made up mostly of Indigenous people to defend themselves against drug cartels, protest growing violence in Pantelhó, Mexico, July 27, 2021. (CNS/Reuters/Jacob Garcia)

That effort can be highly dangerous. Velásquez has been threatened on a number of occasions and his car was hit by bullets last year.

"Any person that somehow disturbs those who hold political, economic, or armed power, is under risk, especially those who defend human rights, the environment or the native people," he told NCR.

"Those things happen here in Mexico, in Africa as a whole and in any other part of the world that is seen merely as a reserve of wealth by the imperialist nations," he added.

Mourners become emotional during the burial of Fr. Marcelo Pérez in San Andrés Larrainzar in the southern state of Chiapas, Mexico, Oct. 22. Perez was killed Oct. 20. (OSV News/Reuters/Gabriela Sanabria)

Since Pérez's killing, the Indigenous people of Chiapas have organized several processions and marches. They demand justice and promise his death will not be forgotten.

"They thought they would silence us by taking out our head, which was Father Marcelo. But they killed the wrong person. He was the one who has awakened us, and now we're not giving up that fight," Vasquez Luna said.

She said that most people had feared that Pérez would be imprisoned by the government due to the false accusation that he headed the local self-defense militia. Many communities were ready to stage large protests for his release, she added.

"We knew he was facing several risks, but we couldn't do anything. He gave his life for us. We, who lived with him, know and feel that he is a saint. Maybe the church will canonize him someday, but for us he's already St. Marcelo," she said.