

£MEXICO

@Detention of Father Joel Padrón González

Amnesty International is concerned at reports of the detention of Father Joel Padrón González, parish priest of San Antonio de Padua in Simojovel, in the diocese of San Cristóbal de Las Casas, Chiapas.

Father Padrón, 52, was arrested at his home in the town of Simojovel at around 2.30pm on 18 September 1991 by four armed members of the state judicial police (*policía judicial del estado*) in civilian clothes. They did not identify themselves or present any arrest warrant. He was forced into a truck and driven to Tuxtla Gutiérrez, state capital of Chiapas, where he was taken to Cerro Hueco prison. He was accused of a number of offences including robbery, theft, conspiracy, illegal association and possession of arms in connection with the seizure of plots of land in Simojovel on 12 September 1991.

The following day, Father Padrón was taken before the Third District Judge of Tuxtla Gutiérrez, Edgardo Robles Sasso, where he denied the charges against him. According to reports, Father Padrón indicated that at the day and time of the occupation of the plot of land he was in his parish office. On 20 September, three local inhabitants came forward to present their testimonies to the judge regarding Father Joel Padrón's whereabouts on 12 September, supporting the statement he had previously made before the judge. A further three witnesses were supposed to go to the court the following day, but the judge did not call them to testify.

The judge confirmed seven of the charges against Father Padrón and remanded him in prison (*auto de formal prisión*). According to reports, it was not until the fifth day after Father Padrón's arrest that his defence lawyer gained access to the court documents. Even two representatives of the governmental human rights commission, the National Commission of Human Rights (*Comisión Nacional de Derechos Humanos*) who came to investigate the incident, were initially denied access to the legal papers.

Father Padrón has been a parish priest for over 20 years. He has worked closely with the Human Rights Centre "Fray Bartolomé de Las Casas" set up under the auspices of the Roman Catholic church. His work has included organizing human rights courses for communities in the municipality of Simojovel. Unconfirmed reports indicate that he recently received a series of anonymous threats relating to his work with local parishioners in the diocese of San Cristóbal de Las Casas.

His arrest took place a few days after the Bishop of San Cristóbal de Las Casas and president of the Human Rights Centre "Fray Bartolomé de Las Casas", Bishop Samuel Ruíz García, gave a press conference in France regarding human rights violations in Chiapas.

On 3 October, Bishop Ruíz García held a press conference in Mexico City in which he said that the state government of Chiapas had put forward a set of conditions for the release of Father Joel Padrón that were unacceptable. Bishop Ruíz said that these conditions included an undertaking by the diocese of San Cristóbal de Las Casas to abandon the work it had been carrying out for years on behalf of the poor, to refute all the denunciations of human rights violations in Chiapas and to recognize publicly that human rights in the state are respected.

Background to the arrest

The charges against Father Padrón relate to a dispute over land in Simojovel that had arisen between members of an independent trade union, the *Central Independiente de Obreros Agrícolas y Campesinas* (CIOAC, Independent Union of Agricultural Workers and Peasants) and a group of people who formerly belonged to the CIOAC but who had broken away from the union in 1990 and affiliated themselves with the ruling party of Mexico, the Partido Revolucionario Institucional (PRI, Institutional Revolutionary Party). According to reports, on 12 September 1991 over 100 peasants seized the plots of land occupied by the former CIOAC members.

Amnesty International's Concern

Amnesty International believes that Father Joel Padrón González has been arbitrarily arrested and falsely accused of offences relating to a land seizure that occurred on 12 September 1991 and is calling for his immediate and unconditional release.

Amnesty International is further concerned at reported irregularities in the proceedings against him, including his arrest without warrant by unidentified armed men, and calls for a full investigation into the incident.