

Congress of the United States

Washington, DC 20515

August 3, 2022

The Honorable Joseph R. Biden Jr.,
President of the United States
The White House
1600 Pennsylvania Avenue, N.W.
Washington, D.C. 20500

Dear President Biden,

Like many Americans and observers around the world, we are appalled by the brutal killings of Fathers Javier Campos and Joaquín Mora, Jesuit priests who were murdered in their church in Chihuahua, Mexico in June. This tragedy is emblematic of the rampant violence that plagues many regions of Mexico and takes a devastating humanitarian toll on the Mexican people. We write to urge your administration to work closely with the Mexican government to ensure prompt and full justice for these killings and to encourage the implementation of policies to end the cycle of violence.

As you may know, on June 20th Fathers Campos and Mora opened their church in rural northern Mexico to Pedro Palma, a local tour guide who was being pursued by a powerful member of the Sinaloa cartel. When the cartel boss arrived at the church, he murdered Mr. Palma before fatally shooting both priests. Known by their colleagues as “men of unbreakable faith,” Fathers Campos and Mora were killed for providing refuge to a man who feared for his life.¹

This horrific incident is far from unique in a country that has experienced surging violence for years. In 2021, there were more than 33,300 recorded homicides² in Mexico, up significantly from approximately 15,650 in 2014.³ Mexico also recently surpassed the grim milestone of 100,000 disappearances, with more than 20,000 occurring over the past two years.⁴ This incessant violence is fueled by organized crime and compounded by high levels of corruption in law enforcement. According to General Glen VanHerck, Commander of U.S. Northern Command, approximately one-third of Mexico is comprised of “ungoverned areas” where criminal organizations operate with impunity.⁵

Members of the clergy are particularly vulnerable to violence because they serve disadvantaged communities where organized crime is most prevalent. They also act as peacemakers, mediating disputes between gangs in regions with minimal government presence. For these reasons, more than 30 priests have been killed in Mexico over the past decade, and many of these murders remain unsolved.⁶

¹ Natalie Kitroeff and Oscar Lopez, “Murder of 2 Priests Hands Mexican Leaders a New Critic: The Catholic Church,” The New York Times, June 24, 2022, sec. World, <https://www.nytimes.com/2022/06/24/world/americas/mexico-priests-murder.html>.

² Kylie Madry, “Murders in Mexico Fall 3.6% in 2021, but Femicides Rise,” Reuters, January 21, 2022, sec. Americas, <https://www.reuters.com/world/americas/murders-mexico-fall-36-2021-femicides-rise-2022-01-20/>.

³ Alan Gomez, “After Years of Drug Wars, Murders Decline in Mexico,” USA TODAY, April 30, 2015, <https://www.usatoday.com/story/news/world/2015/04/30/mexico-drug-war-homicides-decline/26574309/>.

⁴ Vanessa Buschschlüter, “Mexico Disappearances Reach Record High of 100,000 amid Impunity,” BBC News, May 17, 2022, sec. Latin America & Caribbean, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-latin-america-61477704>.

⁵ U.S. Department of Defense, “USNORTHCOM - USSOUTHCOM Joint Press Briefing,” U.S. Department of Defense, March 16, 2021, <https://www.defense.gov/News/Transcripts/Transcript/Article/2539561/usnorthcom-ussouthcom-joint-press-briefing/>.

⁶ Mary Beth Sheridan, “Two Jesuit Priests in Mexico Are Slain in Area Torn by Drug Trade,” Washington Post, June 22, 2022, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/2022/06/21/mexico-priests-killed-chihuahua-violence/>.

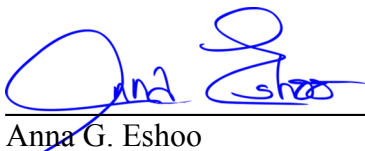
Given the disturbing reality that perpetrators of violent crime in Mexico are rarely brought to justice,⁷ it's critical that your administration work closely with the Mexican government to ensure there is full accountability for the murders of Father Campos, Father Mora, and Mr. Palma. As we write to you, the alleged killer, José Noriel Portillo Gil, has not been apprehended. This is highly alarming because Mr. Portillo is wanted for several other murders, including the killing of an American tourist in 2018.⁸

Along with working to promote justice in this particular case, we also encourage increased bilateral coordination with Mexico to address rampant violence. We applaud your successful efforts to develop a new security cooperation plan with Mexico, the U.S.-Mexico Bicentennial Framework, which prioritizes strengthening the rule of law, promoting human rights, and adopting a public health approach to reducing demand for illicit drugs.⁹ However, further action is needed to respond to a crisis of this magnitude.

We urge your administration to deepen cooperation with the Mexican government and civil society groups to root out corruption, increase the investigative capacity of Mexican law enforcement, and strengthen the independence of prosecutors and judges in Mexico. We also encourage you to push back against President Andrés Manuel López Obrador's militarized approach to combatting organized crime which raises serious human rights concerns and fails to confront the root cause of violence: the pervasive culture of impunity.

By increasing our efforts to address the crisis of violence afflicting our Mexican neighbors, we will honor the legacies of Fathers Campos and Mora and all those lost to this senseless bloodshed. Thank you for your attention to this important issue and for your ongoing commitment to restoring peace and strengthening human rights in Mexico.

Sincerely,



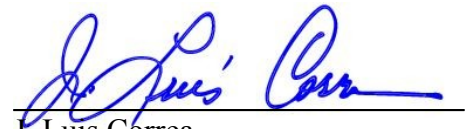
Anna G. Eshoo
Member of Congress



James P. McGovern
Member of Congress



Jesús G. "Chuy" García
Member of Congress

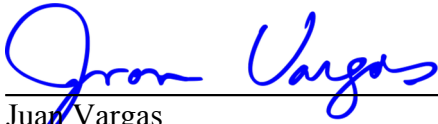


J. Luis Correa
Member of Congress

⁷ Albinson Linares, "Violent Crimes Rise in Mexico; 94.8% Go Unpunished," NBC News, October 11, 2021, <https://www.nbcnews.com/news/latino/violent-crimes-rise-mexico-948-go-unpunished-rcna2846>.

⁸ Julia Jacobo and Anne Laurent, "Missing North Carolina Teacher Found Shot to Death on Dirt Road, Mexican Officials Say," ABC News, November 20, 2018, <https://abcnews.go.com/International/missing-north-carolina-teacher-found-shot-death-dirt/story?id=59322566>.

⁹ U.S. Department of State, "Summary of the Action Plan for U.S.-Mexico Bicentennial Framework for Security, Public Health, and Safe Communities," United States Department of State, January 31, 2022, <https://www.state.gov/summary-of-the-action-plan-for-u-s-mexico-bicentennial-framework-for-security-public-health-and-safe-communities/>.



Juan Vargas
Member of Congress



Eleanor Holmes Norton
Member of Congress




Raúl M. Grijalva
Member of Congress



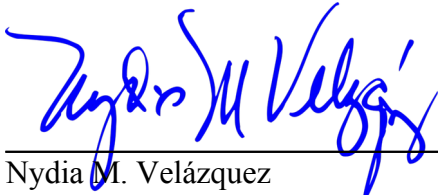
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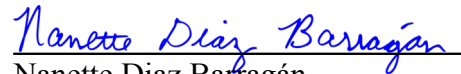
Katie Porter
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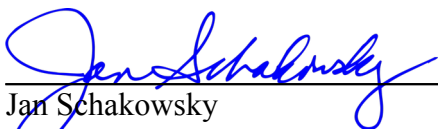
Grace F. Napolitano
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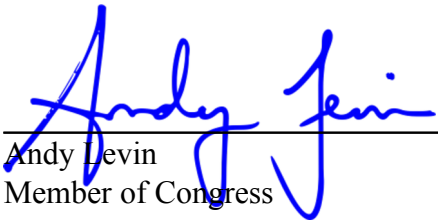

Dina Titus
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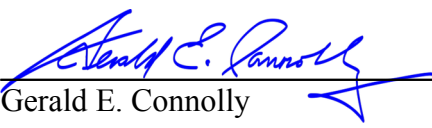

Jimmy Panetta
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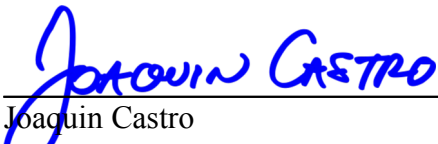

Mike Quigley
Member of Congress

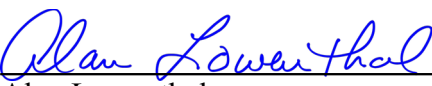

Tony Cardenas
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Adriano Espaillat
Member of Congress


Andy Levin
Member of Congress


Gerald E. Connolly
Member of Congress


Joaquin Castro
Member of Congress


Alan Lowenthal
Member of Congress


Sheila Jackson Lee
Member of Congress

cc: The Honorable Antony Blinken, Secretary of State
The Honorable Ken Salazar, U.S. Ambassador to Mexico