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THE 2010 RAFTO PRIZE TO JOSÉ RAÚL VERA LÓPEZ FEARLESS DEFENDER OF MEXICO'S MOST VULNERABLE

This text is an excerpt from the Rafto Foundation's arguments for awarding the prize. The arguments in full are included in the press package and digitally at www.rafto.no

José Raúl Vera López (65), catholic bishop of Saltillo, Mexico, is awarded the Rafto Prize 2010 for his struggle for human rights and social justice. He is an uncompromising critic of power abuse and a fearless defender of migrants, indigenous peoples, and other groups at risk in Mexican society.

Bishop José Raúl Vera López is characterized as one of the most courageous critics of human rights violations in today's Mexico. Endangering his own security, he speaks out loudly and without fear against human rights violations, corruption, power abuses and the absence of the rule of law.

Human rights emergency in Mexico – migrants at risk

Mexico is not a poor country. Nonetheless, almost half of its 110 million inhabitants live below the poverty line. They also increasingly live in fear. A main reason is the waves of murders and violence that have followed in the wake of criminal cartels' brutal warfare to control the illegal drug trade.

Upon assuming office in December 2006, President Felipe Calderón declared war against drug trafficking and crime, and deployed military forces to conduct policing activities. The increased militarization and the cartels' counteroffensive have since resulted in more than 20,000 casualties, among them 1,000 police officers and 100 soldiers, and a rise in human rights abuses.

Particularly at risk are the many migrants on their way through Mexico, from El Salvador, Honduras, and Guatemala. Migrants are killed and exposed to kidnapping, harassment, robbery, and sexual assault by criminal gangs, but also by the immigration authorities, the police, and the army. A report from the Mexican Human Rights Commission shows that in six months between September 2008 and February 2009, 9,758 migrants were kidnapped in Mexico.

In an interview with *Frontera NorteSur* in March this year, Bishop Vera accused the Mexican police and representatives of the National Migration Institute of being part of a criminal network that kidnaps migrants, tortures their victims into giving up names of relatives, and then demands a ransom of 6,000-8,000 USD. If the relatives do not pay, victims are forced to sell their organs.

A brave critic

While sharing the government's concern for the power and violence of the drug cartels, Raúl Vera criticizes the methods used by the police and armed forces in their fight against crime, as well as the failure to address the underlying social causes. Unemployment and deep poverty secures steady recruitment. Widespread corruption among politicians, in the police force and within the legal system has provided the cartels with political influence and near-total impunity.

Mexico is the main artery for illegal drugs from Latin America to the USA, and the narcotics economy has reached staggering proportions. Annual income from the production and trafficking of drugs in Mexico has been estimated at 25 billion USD, and directly employs 450,000 people, rendering the cartels a potential state within the state. Ciudad Juárez, a city on the US border is considered the world's most dangerous city outside a war zone, with 2,660 murders in 2009.

Support for migrants

The human rights activism of Raúl Vera first emerged when he was assistant bishop in the southern region of Chiapas from 1995 to 1999. His work for the rights of poor peasants and indigenous peoples met with disapproval from landowners and authorities, and the Church responded by not appointing him Bishop of Chiapas. Instead, he was appointed Bishop of the diocese of Saltillo, on the US-Mexican border. But Raúl Vera refused to be silenced. He stepped up his human rights involvement with particular focus on the many migrants and deported in this border region. In 2002, he established the organization *Belén – the migrants' shelter (Belén – Posada del Migrante)*, which has given shelter and support to 40,000 migrants from all over Central America. This is dangerous work in today's Mexico. Amnesty International has demanded protection for all employees at *Belén* and the migrants who stay there.

Raúl Vera's engagement is wide-ranging. Besides the plight of the migrants, the dramatic increase in human rights violations against women and the impunity of army personnel is a serious concern. He has brought to attention the way in which military personnel systematically rape prostitutes, and the wave of femicides, which in the past 15 years have cost the lives of hundreds of young women in the border region. A 2009 Human Rights Watch report documented cases of Mexican Government soldiers raping teenage girls to force confessions during interrogation. No one has been held responsible for these crimes.

Raúl Vera's focus is on the vulnerable and excluded. He is engaged in struggles for the rights of indigenous peoples, poor peasants and workers, and the impunity for abuses committed by army and police personnel. Bishop Vera has given voice to prisoners, and criticised how poor people are criminalized. Contrary to the majority of the clergy, he speaks out in support of gays and lesbians as well as prostitutes. He insists that those in positions of power must be held accountable, and emphasizes that vulnerable groups in society must be made aware of their rights. As a vital tool in building awareness and empowerment, he founded *Brother Juan de Larios Centre for Human Rights (Centro Diocesano para los Derechos Humanos Fray Juan de Larios)*.

Critics in danger

It requires courage to be critical voice in Mexico today. Human rights defenders and journalists face serious risk. They are exposed to threats and surveillance, and some disappear or are killed as a consequence of their work. Mexico is one of the most dangerous countries in the world for journalists. In 2009 alone, eight Mexican journalists were killed.

Building hope for a better future

During a service in May this year, Bishop Vera spoke about the killed migrants. In contrast to the suspicions with which migrants commonly are viewed, he praised their determination to create a better life:

“These deaths show us the suffering of so many migrants, victims of hate on Mexico’s territory, as is the case also in other Central American countries and in the United States. The migrants bear witness of a new life, and remind us that a different world is possible. They wish for a better life for themselves and their families, and risk their lives to make the wish come true.”

By awarding the Rafto Prize 2010 to José Raúl Vera López, the Rafto Foundation wants to draw attention to the dramatic and worsening human rights’ conditions in Mexico, where the government’s attempt to contain the spiralling of violent crime has led to a militarization of society that has further deteriorated the human rights conditions. At the same time, we want to raise awareness of his efforts to improve this situation. The Prize honours an uncompromising champion of the rights of the most vulnerable groups in Mexico. Raúl Vera is able to see and care for individual human beings as well as to recognize how their lives are shaped by unjust power structures in society. Raúl Vera urges the Church to take on a more critical role in Mexico, and criticizes the close relationship between the leaders of the Church and the government. He combines the struggle for long term changes in Mexican society with comprehensive efforts to assist those with immediate needs. In this way, being “the voice of the voiceless”, Raúl Vera contributes to giving Mexico’s most vulnerable a life in dignity and hope for a better future.

Rafto Foundation, Bergen, Wednesday, 1 September 2010

The 2010 Rafto Prize is awarded at the National Venue of Theatre (Den Nationale Scene), in Bergen, Norway on Sunday 7th of November at 18.00.

The Rafto Foundation in Bergen, Norway was established after the death of Professor Thorolf Rafto in 1986, in gratitude of his longstanding work to help people who are oppressed and persecuted, and in the realization that this work must be ongoing.

The Rafto Prize is a human rights award established in memory of professor Thorolf Rafto. The Prize is awarded annually by the Rafto Foundation. Several Rafto Laureates: Aung San Suu Kyi, Burma (Rafto Prize in 1990), people of East-Timor by José Ramos-Horta (Rafto

Prize in 1993), Kim Dae-jung, South-Korea (Rafto Prize in 2000) and Shirin Ebadi, Iran (Rafto Prize in 2001) have subsequently been awarded the Nobel Peace Prize. The Rafto Prize contributes to a focus on human rights violations and on people and communities which need the attention of the world.

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