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PRESS RELEASE

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Venezuela: Lethal violence, a state policy to strangle dissent

Recurrent attacks against the Venezuelan population and speeches inciting violence by the authorities indicate a premeditated policy of violent repression of any form of dissent, Amnesty International said today after a further increase in deaths during demonstrations, with at least 91 cases registered in only three months.

"What seemed to be isolated reactions by the Venezuelan authorities in the face of protests, in fact indicate a planned strategy by the government of President Maduro to use violence and illegitimate force against the Venezuelan population to neutralize any criticism," said Erika Guevara-Rosas, Americas Director at Amnesty International.

"The fact that those who think differently are the only people who are labelled as 'terrorists', who are prevented from demonstrating and against whom violence and illegitimate force is used, is proof of a strategy to silence the growing social discontent in Venezuela."

"If the authorities do not make a radical change and put an end to the premeditated violent repression against people who are considered critical of the government, irrefutable evidence will continue to accumulate for perpetrators and authorities to be held accountable before international criminal justice mechanisms."

Since protests began on 4 April, official sources cite at least 91 people killed and more than 1,400 injured in the context of the political crisis in Venezuela.

In addition, there are concerns about a probable worsening of the situation in the face of elections for the National Constituent Assembly, which will take place on 30 July in a context of high social conflict.

State violence

Over the past 3 months, Amnesty International has documented that [state security forces have violently suppressed protests against the government](#). An analysis of the facts indicates that these acts of violent repression are not only an uncontrolled reaction on the part of some security agents, but are part of a premeditated practice of using violence to stifle critical voices.

Amnesty International has been able to corroborate that the Bolivarian National Police and the Bolivarian National Guard have unduly used non-lethal force, including firing teargas directly at dissident demonstrators. An example of this is the case of Juan Pernalete, who died after being shot directly in the chest with a tear gas canister while he was demonstrating in Caracas in April 2017. Security forces have also used lethal weapons to suppress demonstrations, resulting in

deaths and injuries, including Fabián Urbina, who died on 20 June 2017 while he was protesting in Caracas from a gunshot fired by an officer from the National Guard.

[Attacks against communities and individuals not participating in protests have also been documented](#), including massive violent raids by security forces with [armored vehicles and tear gas](#), damaging vehicles and houses and endangering the lives of residents.

One of several examples of these attacks comes from La Isabelica, Carabobo, where inhabitants reported that in May 2017, security forces raided the community, firing tear gas directly into houses and randomly shooting at passers-by.

According to the cases documented by Amnesty International, these types of use of force, prohibited under international law, have been committed by security forces in Caracas and in Lara, Barinas, Carabobo, and Táchira states as well, indicating that these practices are not limited to one part of the country, but are much more generalized.

At the same time, these acts of violence have been specifically directed at those identified by the authorities as dissidents and against anti-government protests. [However, pro-government demonstrations are taking place without incident and have been safeguarded by the authorities](#), attesting to the fact that these acts of violence are aimed at silencing dissent.

In addition to acts of unlawful violence committed by state security forces, Amnesty International has evidence of several cases of [armed civilian groups that have attacked the civilian population](#) with the acquiescence of the authorities, which also seem to be linked to the same state policy of violence. These violent acts have targeted dissident demonstrations but also private homes in several states across the country, which again demonstrates the generalized nature of this strategy of violence. There is evidence that the attacks by these groups, commonly referred to as "armed collectives", [have occurred in the presence of state security forces and that the latter have not acted to protect the population](#). The most recent incident of this was the break-in by armed groups into the National Assembly on 5 July 2017, during which state security forces did nothing to intervene while armed civilians attacked members of parliament.

Creation of state apparatuses solely for violent repression

In addition, the government has created and implemented State bodies and mechanisms with a mandate to carry out acts of violent repression against the population. The development of apparatuses designed exclusively for the prosecution of demonstrators and suspected dissidents, such as the [creation of the "Anti-Terrorist Command"](#) and the [increase in the number of weapons and conscripts of the Bolivarian militia](#), indicate a calculated preparation for the implementation of a policy of violent repression.

Declarations inciting violence

Both the illegitimate use of force in all its dimensions, and the development of state mechanisms of persecution against the population, are framed within [a discourse of incitement to violence](#) that has been promoted and used by the Venezuelan government to legitimize violence as the standard response to any form of dissent. In particular, [calls by senior](#)

[officials including President Nicolás Maduro himself](#), addressed to both state security forces and pro-government civilian groups, promote the use of force and identify dissidents as terrorists, enemies and traitors to the motherland.

Consequently, these three elements - the illegitimate use of force against the population on a recurrent basis, the creation of state mechanisms dedicated to violent repression, and the repeated discourse of incitement to violence by the government - indicate a premeditated policy to violently neutralize any dissent against the government's actions.

"Venezuela is experiencing one of the worst human rights crises in its recent history. The escalation of violence sponsored by the government, and the lack of proposals by the State for a viable solution to confront the serious problems facing the majority of the population, including access to essential livelihoods such as food, medicines and all basic goods, are generating a crisis never before seen throughout the continent," said Erika Guevara Rosas.

"It is essential that the government address the dramatic situation that thousands of people are facing on a daily basis in the country, instead of instituting a regime of repression and violence."

The authorities that have promoted these mechanisms and strategies of violent repression have to put an end to their implementation immediately, especially in the face of growing social unrest ahead of the elections to the National Constituent Assembly, scheduled for 30 July 2017.

Faced with this, international criminal justice mechanisms – including the International Criminal Court and those countries that recognize universal jurisdiction - will be closely monitoring the situation in Venezuela. If senior government, military, and police officials do not eliminate the mechanisms that form part of a state policy of violence against the population, and do not end the promotion of violence in their speeches and official orders, they may be brought before the international criminal justice system.

Read more

Venezuela: Authorities' militarization of crisis escalates violence and promotes fear (News, 2 June 2017)

<https://www.amnesty.org/en/latest/news/2017/06/venezuela-militarizacion-de-la-crisis-por-parte-de-autoridades-intensifica-violencia-y-promueve-miedo/>

Venezuela: Use of military courts against civilians undermines rule of law (News, 10 May 2017)

<https://www.amnesty.org/en/latest/news/2017/05/venezuela-uso-de-tribunales-militares-contra-civiles-pone-en-jaque-al-estado-de-derecho/>

Venezuela: Increase in 'witch-hunt' of dissidents amidst political crisis (News, 26 April 2017)

<https://www.amnesty.org/en/latest/news/2017/04/venezuela-aumenta-caza-de-brujas-contra-disidencia-en-medio-de-crisis-politica/>

For more information or to arrange an interview, please contact: Josefina Salomón, +52 1 55 48 48 82 66, josefina.salomon@amnesty.org