



The Venezuelan Program of Education and Action on Human Rights, PROVEA presents its tenth edition of the International Bulletin, February 2014. This issue presents as a global topic, an analysis of the causes of the demonstrations and protests that began on February 12 and have been increasing since then, generating many acts of violence and violations of human rights. In the specific topic we will look in retrospect to repression during the events of February 1989, known as El Caracazo, highlighting impunity in crimes that were committed and making a comparison with the current situation in the country. In the section on conjuncture, we will analyze the troubling rise of paramilitary groups activated in cooperation with the security forces to control the demonstrations started in February 12.

We take this opportunity to draw the attention of the international community on the need for spaces of constructive dialog in Venezuela to end the current violence and the violations of human Rights, to solve the country's problems and to settle differences among Venezuelans without destroying the social boundaries. Our newsletter is available in Spanish, Portuguese, English and French on our website <http://www.derechos.org.ve>. We welcome your suggestions and comments to the e-mail boletin@derechos.org.ve.

Want to know the 20 human rights landscape in the **past 15 years in Venezuela**? See our special report "15 years on human rights: social inclusion, political exclusion"

> **GLOBAL TOPIC**

The causes of demonstrations in Venezuela

In early February of 2014 a series of protests originated in Venezuela within a context of economic difficulties in the country.

According to official figures from the [Central Bank of Venezuela](#) (BCV), in 2013 the country recorded an inflation rate of 56%. The most expensive cities were Valencia (60.9 %), San Cristobal (60.5 %) and Ciudad Guayana (59.6 %). Meanwhile, [during the month of December](#) of that year the scarcity index stood at 22.2%. In February 2014, the country's main bank said "The efforts of the Executive will continue to focus on providing those items with the highest consumption of Venezuelans, such as food, personal- hygiene and cleanliness in the home." Across the country have been observed lots of consumers standing in line, trying to acquire scarce supplies and supermarket products. The state food distribution networks, [MERCAL](#) and [PDVAL](#) suffer the same levels of [shortage](#) that the private markets have, creating a situation that violates the right to food.

Moreover, the Centre for Documentation and Social Analysis of the Venezuelan Federation of Teachers (Cendas -FVM), an organization that has historically measured monthly variations in the so called [Family Food Basket](#) (CBF) announced that for the month of December of 2013 the price of CBF was 15622.05 Bs, representing an increase of 617.76 bolivars from the previous month . Also reported that the variation of the CBF in 2013 over the previous year was 66.4 % (Bs 6.234.02). According to this figure, 5.3 minimum wages are required to purchase the CBF. According to the National Institute of Statistics, from five million people in the formal sector (with a 72.14 %) gain two minimum wages. If two people are working on this situation in a family, they still



Photo: La Patilla

have a deficit of more than one minimum wage just to acquire the necessary calories at home.

On 1/22/14, the government announced a [devaluation of 79% for the importation](#) of items considered non-essential and also for the foreign exchange quotas (for travelers and electronic purchases), initiating a program of economic adjustment.

Some analysts related to the Government recognize the tough economic situation. Felipe Pérez Martí, former Minister of Planning in the Hugo Chavez administration, described the current state of

“hyperinflation”: “People are hoarding things because when money is worthless, it is preferable to buy cars or food. In addition: we have a huge fiscal deficits and the way in that the Central Bank is printing money are classic symptoms of hyperinflation.”

Despite the efforts of the Executive to grant resources for agriculture, Venezuela remains a net importer of food, thus affecting the situation of shortage. According to the Commission for the Administration of foreign exchange (Cadivi) in 2012 7246.96 million were allocated to cover ordinary imports for the food and beverage sector, ie, an increase of 14.9 % compared with the given in 2011. According to [figures from CADIVI](#), importing food and agricultural products represent the largest group of beneficiaries with 35 new companies in the ranking of the top 100 companies with the largest amount of dollars received.

Besides inflation and the high cost of living, crime is one of the complaints of the protesters. Nicolás Maduro’s government recognizes that the country by 2013 had a [murder rate of 39 per 100 thousand inhabitants](#), hiding the amount of killings during the year. Meanwhile , the [Venezuelan Observatory of Violence](#) accounted 24,763 killings that year, a rate of 79 per 100 thousand inhabitants (hpcmh), that exceed the highest regional figure (Honduras) with 77.5 hpcmh followed by Mexico (23.8 hpcmh) and Brazil (15.5 hpcmh). The lowest murder rate is 2 hpcmh in Chile. In this area, the element that aroused widespread indignation was the murder of actress Monica Spear, who was Miss Venezuela in 2004, She was murdered the night of January 6, 2014. Spear lived abroad, but had returned to travel across the country and promote its tourist attractions, when she was [assaulted and murdered in her car with her husband](#).

In this scenario, last 04/02/14 students from the Tachira National

Tips

During the recent protests and demonstrations that have occurred in the country have been multiple violent incidents and human rights violations. Between 12/02/2014 and 12/03/2014 we can mention the following figures:

About [1,300 people were arrested](#) and of these, about 33 remained in detention, according to the Penal Forum.

[87 cases and 162 violations of freedom of expression](#) were presented by the organization Public Space. (Espacio Público)

24 people were killed according to the [Venezuelan Observatory of Social Conflict](#).

Until March 15 Penal Forum had received reports of [59 cases of torture](#).

The number of injured people is not calculated.

University [held a protest in San Cristobal](#) denouncing the alleged sexual abuse of a university student. The campus was raided and the arrest of 6 students woke solidarity from other institutions of higher education. The Executive intolerant response generated a chain reaction, which had its zenith when on February 12, after the completion of 18 peaceful demonstrations across the country three protesters were killed in Caracas. The mix of economic crisis with repression is harmful to human rights.

> SPECIFIC TOPIC

From the Caracazo to 2014 protests

In February of 1989, in Venezuela there was an intense popular protest against government economic measures affecting the already low incomes of the masses. The protest was such that overflowed the capacity of police forces, therefore the government suspended the constitutional guarantees and sent the army to suppress the demonstrations and the turbulence. The official toll was 346 people killed, while NGOs estimated about a thousand of people, mostly by excessive use of force.

What happened in February and March of 1989 is the highest level situation regarding human rights violations in the contemporary history of Venezuela by the number of people killed, bullet wounded and missing. 25 years after the families of the victims are still waiting for the investigation and punishment of those responsible of the crimes.

The protests in February- March 2014 have had another origin. They began as a student protest against insecurity. The protest was suppressed and six students arrested and sent to jail. Faced with this situation the student movement began a national day of protest to



Photo: El Carabobeño

demand the release of imprisoned students, which resulted in more repression and more detainees. Amid this context some political opposition leaders called on 12/02/14 to protest in different states against the government. At the end of a demonstration that was peaceful but there were massive violence that left three people dead, two of them allegedly by shots fired by the political police (SEBIN).

Before the murders, large but peaceful demonstrations turned violent and outbreaks remained in some cities with a balance of new deaths, gunshot wounds, arrested and prosecuted for protesting. At the time of writing this bulletin, the official death toll is 28, which includes people killed by gunfire from both police and military officials and private citizens as well as other dead in the framework of the demonstrations.

State action to restore public order has been characterized by a disproportionate use of force and firearms, tear gas and mistreatment of people who are arrested. We understand the State's duty to act in violence; however, there are international and national rules on how to proceed without causing violations of human rights. Now and then the Government actions run in a different way from the constitutional democratic control of public demonstrations.

A characteristic element of repression in February-March of 2014, appeared as a political phenomenon, is the cooperation of paramilitary groups in measures of repression. This phenomenon intensifies with the expression used by the President Nicolas Madu-

ro on 03/05/14 indicating "tealight that turns on, tealight that goes off" encouraging social organizations and the armed government supporters groups to confront those involved in protests. That exhortation to the armed groups that support the Government, to perform policing duties and to maintain the public order is unconstitutional and is a way to incite the violent confrontation between people who think different.

An initiative promoted by the government as a way to respond to the political crisis that was caused by protests, violence and repression, was to convene a National Peace Conference. The government stated that it would be an unconditionally dialogue. Business and church sectors accepted the call, but not the opposition parties or the student opposition leadership. Neither human rights NGOs (who have not been called to join to this process), or other civil society organizations.

The conference held a few meetings, while in parallel repression levels remain very high, like the disqualification to those dissenting from the Government. There are also threats and persecution against some political leaders. So far it has not achieved the purpose of lowering existing levels of political polarization and violence and has been unable to generate better conditions for coexistence in the country. PROVEA believe in a sincere dialogue, connected to the demands of society to address problems such as insecurity, shortage, high inflation and failure of public services.

> ISSUES ON NATIONAL CIRCUMSTANCES

It is urgent to stop the activities of paramilitary groups in Venezuela

The involvement of paramilitary structures in repressive actions against demonstrators has highlighted the danger of these groups in the context of the social unrest that has lived Venezuela in February. There are many testimonies, photographic evidence and videos showing groups of people in civilian clothes, sometimes hooded, firing on protesters, giving them capture, using tear gas and firing into houses.

Although these groups have acted in the past assaulting protesters in isolation, in the present circumstances has seen them acting jointly with state security forces in violent control tasks against the demonstrators or under the complacent gaze of police and military who do nothing to stop them. That level of coordination is one of the new elements that characterized the actions of these groups.

However, it can not be said that it is a state policy, but evidenced a high level of tolerance in the State structure and also shows coordination at the time of repressing demonstrators.

Some social movements (the so-called Collectives) have been pointed as responsables for those violent actions, but some of those grassroots organizations that are ideologically close to the government has been in contact with PROVEA for a while and we can tell that these groups mostly perform social work with people in



Paramilitaries abduct protester in Mérida / Social Networking

their communities and help them to organize and solve community problems. Armed groups are few and claimed themselves as such, as is the case of Carapaica Revolutionary Liberation Movement, the Collective La Piedrita and Los Tupamaros who have even achieved to have councilors elected by popular vote. The presence of these groups is mostly in the **23 de Enero community**, a populous neighborhood located in west Caracas, and would count with branches in some parts of the country. There is also the so-called Bolivarian Liberation Force, a group that defines itself as a guerrilla and operate mainly in the west of the country in Apure and Barinas state.

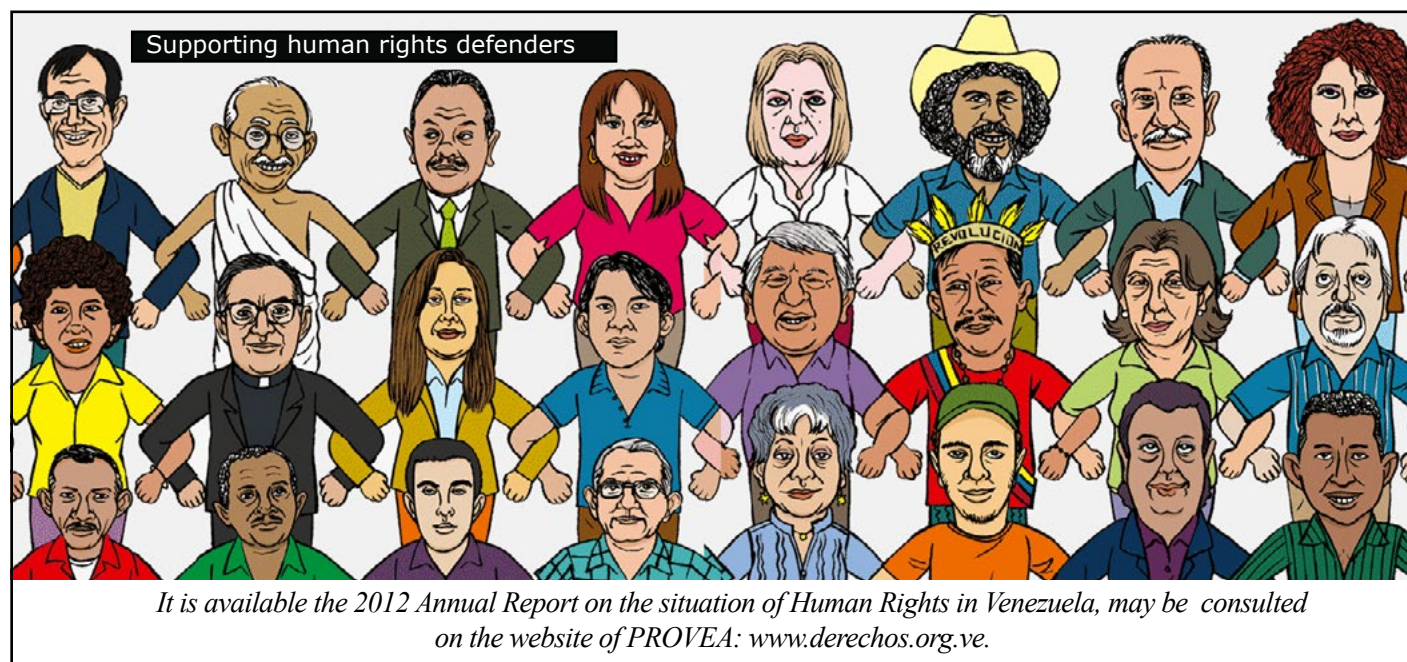
Since the government has been attempts to disarm these groups, particularly in the neighborhood of 23 de Enero, in the context of disarmament policies. However, these timid attempts show a lack of political will for disarmament by both of these groups as part of the State. On the other hand, impunity for the crimes committed by these structures is an incentive for them to stay and commit new crimes.

Colombia's experience with serious consequences on human rights shows the urgency of the Venezuelan government to take serious policies to dismantle these groups and bring to justice those responsible for the crimes they have committed. As in the case of Colombia, paramilitary groups in Venezuelan born under the shadow of the state and begin to act in a coordinated manner or under a situation of lack of presence of the official security forces. The actions of these groups are contrary to the State's

exclusive monopoly of force, an important part of the whole idea of the modern state.

PROVEA has been warning to the State that the actions of these groups engage its international responsibility as established by the Inter-American Court of Human Rights in Colombia's dossier to rule on the **slaughter of Mapiripán** (paragraph 123 of the source) and the **slaughter of 19 merchants** (paragraph 124 of the source). In particular, the Court has held that the actions of these groups are not merely individual acts because they are related to the active conduct or omissions committed by State officials. In this respect the responsibilities of the State and the failure to take the necessary measures to prohibit, prevent and adequately punish the criminal activities of these organizations are derived.

It is very serious that on 5/03/2014 the President has incited the population to confront the protesters. PROVEA has warned the authorities that can not host the clash of different groups of the population, because the control of public demonstrations is **part of Security organs' responsibility which are civil in nature and should respect the dignity and human rights without discrimination** (Article 332 of the Constitution). In regard to paramilitary or vigilante groups, while their crimes remain unpunished it means that the State is encouraging their actions. It is essential that the Attorney General impulse and conducts investigations and the judiciary prosecute those responsible for the crimes.



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