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Venezuela

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| Response to Information Request Number: | VEN03004.ZMI |
| Date: | April 21, 2003 |
| Subject: | Venezuela: Background Information on the Bolivarian Circles and the MBR-200 |
| From: | CIS Resource Information Center |
| Keywords: | Venezuela / Armed forces / Armed resistance movements / Coup d'etat / Human rights violations / Political movements / Political parties / Political repression |

Query:

Did the Bolivarian Circles exist prior to June 2001? If so, were any human rights violations attributed to them? Who, specifically, was targeted?

Response:

The Bolivarian Circles were officially established in June 2001 (see VEN02001.ZMI). In the year following their creation approximately 700,000 Venezuelans joined a Bolivarian Circle. The role of these neighborhood organizations is unclear in the polarized climate of Venezuela. Assessments of the Circles range from neighborhood improvement groups to violent supporters of the Chávez government (Hodgson 13 May 2002). The Bolivarian Circles are an outgrowth of the Movimiento Bolivariano Revolucionario (Bolivarian Revolutionary Movement, MBR-200). The MBR-200 was founded in the 1980s by dissident military officers, including Hugo Chávez. In the instructions presented to the Venezuelan people on 10 June 2001, President Chávez stated that by forming Bolivarian Circles citizens would "resuscitate" the MBR-200 (NUEVO HERALD 11 Jun 2001).

EXISTENCE OF BOLIVARIAN CIRCLES PRIOR TO JUNE 2001

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According to sources available to the Resource Information Center, some Bolivarian Circles existed in the months leading up to President Chávez's launching of the program in June 2001. Chávez declared the re-emergence of the MBR-200 in April 2001. On June 9, 2001, EL NACIONAL reported that the MBR had already formed in Caracas and three other states. Fanny Suárez, a woman interviewed for that same article, indicated that she joined the Caracas MBR in May 2001 (NUEVO HERALD 11 Jun 2001).

A May 2001 interview with Alfredo Peña, mayor of metropolitan Caracas, by the Venezuelan daily EL UNIVERSAL mentions that President Chávez had summoned the MBR-200 (Villegas Poljak 26 May 2001).

Hugo Chávez was one of the founders of the MBR-200. In the 1998 presidential campaign, Chávez was barred from using the MBR-200 as a political party (NUEVO HERALD 11 Jun 2001). Instead, Chávez ran for a coalition group known as the Polo Patriótico (Polo). The Polo comprised the Movimiento V República (Fifth Republic Movement, MVR), Patria Para Todos (Country for All, PPT) and the Movimiento al Socialismo (Movement Toward Socialism, MAS). The MVR was founded as the political wing of the MBR-200 following Chávez's release from prison in 1994 (The Economist Intelligence Unit 2 Aug 2002).

MBR-200 BACKGROUND

The MBR-200 grew out of an organization of military officers (COMACATE, a Spanish-language abbreviation for Commander Major Captain Lieutenant) who were disgruntled with the Venezuelan political system. "The goal of the MBR movement was to overthrow the president, try him on charges of corruption, and temporarily supplant the existing democratic system with a transitional regime that would lead to a 'true democracy.' Ideological inspiration for the movement was found in the thinking of Simón Bolívar, the hero of Venezuelan independence, as well as the ideas and life of Ezequiel Zamora and Simón Rodríguez. Marxist and radical populist influences were also reflected in some of the doctrinal statements" (Kornblith 1995, p. 85). Most sources indicate that the initial organization was formed in 1982.

Officers in the MBR-200 were considered nationalist and influenced the troops they commanded. "Members of this group participated in discussion circles that focused on the economic and political situation and shared a critical view of the functioning of the military as an institution" (Kornblith 1995, p. 85).

The MBR-200 became more public following the February 1989 repression of social protest known as the Caracazo. More than 300 Venezuelans were killed in the crackdown. The MBR-200 then mobilized in two coup attempts in February and November 1992. The MBR-200 is alleged to have committed human rights violations in these coup attempts. Both the February 4 and November 27, 1992 coup attempts were done with the support of leftist guerrilla groups dating to the 1960s, the Red Flag and the Third Way (Oppenheimer

5 Dec 1992).

HUMAN RIGHTS VIOLATIONS COMMITTED BY THE MBR-200

None of the sources currently available to the RIC address human rights violations committed by the MBR-200 in the 1980s. There was little reporting on human rights violations in Venezuela at that time. THE GUARDIAN reports that Amnesty International released no reports on Venezuela from 1968 to 1988 (Sganga 4 Nov 1988).

The MBR-200 was implicated in human rights violations during the November 27, 1992 coup attempt. "A radio station reported that nine people were killed at a television station seized by the rebels and a Reuter [sic] photographer said he saw at least four bodies in a pool of blood outside the building. About 1,000 civilians marched toward the palace in support of the rebels, but they dispersed when police fired tear gas at the crowd. Several cars and shops were set ablaze in the streets around the palace" (Bianchi 28 Nov 1992).

ADDITIONAL INFORMATION

More information on the MBR-200 can be found in the 1995 RIC Query Response "Venezuela: Movimiento Revolucionario Bolivariano." Additional information on the Bolivarian Circles can be found in the RIC Query Response, "Venezuela: Information on the Círculos Bolivarianos" (2002).

This response was prepared after researching publicly accessible information currently available to the RIC within time constraints. This response is not, and does not purport to be, conclusive as to the merit of any particular claim to refugee status or asylum.

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