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Venezuela

Response to Information Request Number:	VEN03001.ASM
Date:	November 21, 2002
Subject:	Venezuela: Information on Persecution of Chávez Dissidents
From:	INS Resource Information Center
Keywords:	Venezuela / Political opposition / Civil disobedience / Military personnel / Social unrest / Demonstrations / Human rights violations / Political repression / Political persecution / Protests / Political violence

Query:

Are Chávez dissidents at risk of persecution on account of their political opinion?

Response:

The political situation in Venezuela is increasingly tense, with protests and counter-protests at their highest level since the attempted coup in April 2002. There are allegations of violence from both Chávez supporters and opposition groups.

Sources available to the Resource Information Center do not indicate a concerted effort by the Government of Venezuela to persecute members of the opposition. The ECONOMIST reports that the Government of Venezuela has harassed opposition army officers. The government has also moved to limit citizens' activities by creating eight security zones in Caracas. Residents of these zones may not hold a demonstration without prior permission from the Defense Ministry (12 Oct 2002). As indicated below, the Chávez administration has increasingly lost control of the radicals within the Bolivarian Circles and is unable to prevent those elements from attacking and killing Chávez dissidents. For background information on the Bolivarian Circles please refer to the RIC Query "Information on Círculos Bolivarianos (Bolivarian Circles)," April 30, 2002.

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BOLIVARIAN CIRCLES

As recently as October 2002 the Chávez administration defended Bolivarian Circles as unarmed, neighborhood development groups. By November, the Chávez administration admitted that it no longer controlled the Bolivarian Circles (AP 17 Oct 2002, Sanchez 12 Nov 2002). General Enrique Medina Gomez, seen by many as the army's leading dissident, claims that between 2,000 and 3,000 members of the Bolivarian Circles are armed (ECONOMIST 12 Oct 2002).

Violence by Chávez supporters, in part, provoked the temporary overthrow of President Hugo Chávez on April 12, 2002. The coup occurred "after 19 people were killed in an opposition march on the [presidential] palace and commanders refused Chávez's orders to deploy troops against civilians"(Sanchez 26 Oct 2002). By the time Chávez was restored to power on April 14, over 60 people had been killed. No one has been prosecuted for these killings (Sanchez 12 Nov 2002). Earlier instances of violence are described in the April 2002 RIC Query Response.

Since the coup there has been an increasingly evident split between Bolivarian Circles that focus on community development programs and Circles that consider the defense of President Chávez as their primary mission. "There are no signs that the circles are organized paramilitary groups, training for armed combat. Instead, those who boast of being armed seem more like militia members, ready to sally forth with their own pistols and rifles to support Chávez" (Miller 30 Jul 2002).

More recently, on November 4, 60 people were wounded by Chávez supporters while marching to deliver a petition with over two million signatures calling for a referendum on President Chávez's government (Sanchez 12 Nov 2002, Deutsche Presse-Agentur 4 Nov 2002). The attacks were led by radical Bolivarian Circle leader Lina Ron who "ignored pleas by Chávez officials" in carrying out the attacks. According to EL MUNDO newspaper, President Chávez's response to the November 4 violence was, "Lina Ron is uncontrollable." Vice President José Vicente Rangel, while disagreeing with Lina Ron's actions, maintained that Ron was acting within her political rights (Selsky 9 Nov 2002).

On November 12, 2002, Chávez supporters trapped Caracas Mayor Alfredo Peña and opposition leaders in City Hall. "More than 400 National Guardsmen and police fought dozens of Chávez supporters after they surrounded city hall Tuesday...Protesters repeatedly fled tear gas and rubber bullets, only to regroup to throw rocks, fire shots and burn tires in the streets." The violence resulted in one death, and 20 wounded. Seven of these were injured by rubber bullets and 13 by live ammunition. This violence caused OAS Secretary General César Gaviria to warn against an increasing climate of impunity and urge the Venezuelan government to prosecute those responsible (Sanchez 12 Nov 2002).

DISSIDENT MILITARY

Military officers who participated in the coup were cleared of charges by the supreme court, but continue to face charges under the military justice system (Deutsche Presse-Agentur 4 Nov 2002). About 70 senior officers viewed as disloyal to Chávez, among them General Medina, remain employed by the armed forces but have been removed from their posts. Chávez maintains that dissident military officers are trying to force another coup. General Medina "claims that Mr. Chávez is trying to provoke just such a rebellion, confident that he can crush it and go on to turn the armed forces into a 'popular militia.' On October 9th, General Medina and two colleagues, helped by pot-banging protestors, eluded arrest by intelligence agents" (ECONOMIST 12 Oct 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.

References:

Associated Press. "Police Use Tear Gas to Disperse Pro-Government Demonstrators in Venezuela: Four Hurt," 17 Oct 2002.

Deutsche Presse-Agentur. "Opposition Petitions for Early Elections in Venezuela," 4 November 2002.

ECONOMIST. "A Tragic and Dangerous Stalemate," 12 October 2002.

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Sanchez, Fabiola. Associated Press. "Chávez Warns Venezuela's Opposition that Violence Will Be Met with Violence," 26 October 2002.

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