



RESPONSES TO INFORMATION REQUESTS (RIRs)

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12 February 2004

VEN42408.E

Venezuela: Treatment of those perceived to be government opponents, particularly university students in Caracas, family members of high profile members of the Democratic Action (Acción Democrática, AD) party, and military personnel implicated in the April 2002 coup along with their families
Research Directorate, Immigration and Refugee Board, Ottawa

In its most recent annual report, the Venezuelan Program of Action and Education in Human Rights (Programa Venezolano de Educación-Acción en Derechos Humanos, PROVEA) described the period from October 2002 to September 2003 as one of continuing conflict between opponents and supporters of President Hugo Chávez Frías (Nov. 2003). During the course of this struggle, the parties involved broke the law and engaged in violent acts, resulting in 18 deaths and 186 gunshot injuries among individuals from both the pro- and anti-Chávez camps, as well as others not involved in the conflict (ibid.).

The PROVEA documented a number of areas in which the human rights situation improved over the previous 12-month period. For example, complaints of arbitrary detention decreased by 20 per cent, illegal searches by 80 per cent, threats and harassment by 34.9 per cent, and there was decrease, from 3.6 per cent to 2.8 per cent, in the number of peaceful demonstrations that were suppressed or impeded by state security forces (ibid.). However, the PROVEA indicated that journalists and offices of media companies continued to be the target of violence and threats, an assessment corroborated by Human Rights Watch (HRW) in its 2004 annual report (Jan. 2004). Furthermore, the PROVEA reported 10 instances of torture linked to the country's internal political conflict, as well as 27 cases in which government opponents were the victims of arbitrary detention (Nov. 2003). In some cases, such as that of two leaders of the Social Christian Party (Partido Social Cristiano, COPEI) in the Municipality of Ribas, Aragua who were detained by police for ten hours in June 2003, the victims were released without any legal proceedings (*procesos judiciales*) being initiated (PROVEA Nov. 2003).

In other instances, such as the 19 February 2003 detention of Carlos Fernández, ex-president of the Federation of Chambers of Commerce and Production Associations of Venezuela (Federación de Cámaras y Asociaciones de Comercio y Producción de Venezuela, FEDECAMARAS), although the authorities did initiate legal proceedings against him, they failed to follow due process by initially denying him access to legal counsel (PROVEA Nov. 2003). Fernández had been arrested because of his involvement in the December 2002-February 2003 general strike (*The Guardian* 21 Feb. 2003).

Several reports published since January 2003 refer to incidents in which government opponents were allegedly subject to mistreatment (*El Universal* 22 Nov. 2003; *ibid.* 7 June 2003; *The Guardian* 20 Feb. 2003; *Ultimas Noticias* 3 Jan. 2004). For example, members of pro-Chávez groups known as Bolivarian Circles (Círculos Bolivarianos) reportedly "intimidated and attacked people identified with the opposition" (AI 2003). In February 2003, the opposition accused the government of embarking on a "witch-hunt" against its critics, with Henry Ramos Allup, head of the Democratic Action (Acción Democrática, AD) party, claiming that plans had been drawn up to arrest key opponents (*The Guardian* 21 Feb. 2003). Ramos' statement could not be corroborated among the sources consulted by the Research Directorate, although *The Guardian* cited a pro-Chávez deputy as saying that 100 people were to be questioned regarding their involvement in promoting the December 2002-February 2003 general strike (*ibid.*).

There have been a number of violent incidents since 2003 involving individuals affiliated with the AD (*El Universal* 24 Mar. 2003; *ibid.* 14 Sept. 2003; *ibid.* 29 Jan. 2004). Examples follow.

During the night of 22-23 March 2003, presumed government supporters looted and destroyed the AD's offices in the UD4 district of Caracas (*El Universal* 24 Mar. 2003). According to the newspaper *El Universal*, no arrests were made in connection with the attack (*ibid.*).

In September 2003, government supporters living in the vicinity of Caracas' Plaza Bolívar reportedly confronted AD leaders and sympathizers who were present in the square in order to place a floral tribute before Simón Bolívar's statue (*ibid.* 14 Sept. 2003). A police officer was injured in the ensuing melee, which was said to include an exchange of blows along with gunfire and the detonation of tear gas bombs (*ibid.*).

In late January 2004, unidentified individuals forced their way into the AD's headquarters in the City of Mérida, where they broke windows and ignited gasoline bombs (*ibid.* 29 Jan. 2004). A local AD leader blamed the attack on supporters of Florencio Porras, the pro-Chávez Mérida state governor (*ibid.*).

No mention of the treatment of family members of high profile AD members that could be found among the sources consulted by the Research Directorate.

According to the PROVEA, demonstrations organized by students were the ones most frequently suppressed or impeded by state security forces during the period from October 2002 to September 2003 (Nov. 2003). In late January 2004, four University of Los Andes (Universidad de Los Andes, ULA) students suffered minor gunshot wounds during an opposition march in Mérida (*El Universal* 29 Jan. 2004).

Media reports published in 2003 describe two incidents in which students leaders were detained (*ibid.* 22 Nov. 2003; *ibid.* 7 June 2003).

On 5 June 2003, Claudia Heredia, president of the Federation of University Centres of the Central University of Venezuela (Federación de Centros Universitarios de la Universidad Central de Venezuela, FCU-UCV), was reportedly threatened and briefly detained by government supporters while participating in a

meeting in the City of Trujillo (ibid.). According to Herrera, her captors attempted to force her to sign a document admitting responsibility for disturbances (*disturbios*) in the area (ibid.).

On 20 November 2003, Danny Ramírez, former president of the Student Centre of the University of Táchira (Centro de Estudiantes de la Universidad de Táchira), was arrested by DISIP officers on suspicion of involvement in the 12 April 2003 occupation of the state governor's residence (ibid. 22 Nov. 2003). Witnesses claimed that Ramírez was beaten and humiliated by arresting officers (ibid.). No additional information on the treatment of Ramírez following his arrest or on the length of his detention could be found among the sources consulted.

On 20 January 2004, the BBC reported that approximately 100 military officers had been dismissed for supporting the April 2002 coup. However, the PROVEA claimed that officers involved in the coup had not been sanctioned (*sancionados*) (Nov. 2003), a claim corroborated by the Website Venezuelanalysis.com, which indicated on 30 December 2003 that

anti-Chavez military officers and civilians have had favourable sentences in Venezuelan courts in recent times. After the coup d'etat of April 2003, the Supreme Tribunal exonerated of all charges the dissident military officers involved in the ousting of President Chavez.

However, there have been reports of a number of violent incidents involving anti-Chávez military personnel taking part in the occupation of Caracas' Plaza de Francia de Altamira (*The Guardian* 20 Feb. 2003; *Ultimas Noticias* 3 Jan. 2004). This protest, which included officers who participated in the April 2002 coup, began on 22 October 2002 (PROVEA Nov. 2003) and ended in December 2003 (*El Día* 15 Jan. 2004).

During the night of 15-16 February 2003, protest participants Felix Pinto, Angel Salas and Darwin Arguello were abducted near the square by unidentified armed men (*The Guardian* 20 Feb. 2003). The three, all of whom were military personnel, were subsequently found dead, their bodies bearing signs of torture and gunshot wounds (ibid.). Salas had reportedly been the target of "constant intimidation" since deciding to join the protest (ibid.).

On 3 January 2004, the Caracas newspaper *Ultimas Noticias* reported that Navy Corporal Erwin Salas, Angel Salas' brother, had been detained by the DISIP on 22 December 2003. According to Salas, he was tortured by DISIP officers while in custody in an attempt to force him to reveal the whereabouts of fellow anti-Chávez officers Néstor González and Felipe Rodríguez (ibid.). Salas claimed that he escaped from his captors by jumping out of a vehicle in which he was being transported (ibid.).

No mention of the treatment of family members of military personnel implicated in the April 2002 coup could be found among the sources consulted by the Research Directorate.

This Response was prepared after researching publicly accessible information currently available to the Research Directorate 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. Please find below the list of additional sources consulted in researching this Information Request.

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