



RESPONSES TO INFORMATION REQUESTS (RIRs)

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Venezuela: The group Fuerza Solidaria; its branches, executive, whether it is registered with the government, whether membership cards are issued, its general activities, whether members have experienced problems with pro-Chavez groups or Bolivarian Circles; or political groups who currently oppose President Chavez (2001-July 2004)

Research Directorate, Immigration and Refugee Board, Ottawa

According to its own Website, Fuerza Solidaria is a non-profit civil association founded in May 2001 and has three main objectives: 1) to promote the improvement of Venezuelan citizens' living conditions, 2) to carry out research and undertake programs to bring Venezuela out of underdevelopment and convert the country into a developed and industrialized country, 3) to defend the principles and values traditionally associated with the Venezuelan people such as liberty, equal opportunity, solidarity, justice, and work (n.d.a).

However, the Website also explains that because public powers (*poderes publicos*), such as the legal and electoral systems, have been "kidnapped" (*secuestrados*) by Chavismo or pro-Chavez factions, the only way to fulfil the Fuerza Solidaria mandate is to take to the street (*tomar la calle*) in order to force a peaceful and democratic exit of the Chavez government (ibid.). A December 2001 article from the independent electronic news publication VHeadline described Fuerza Solidaria as a "maverick right wing group" (7 Dec. 2001). In addition, *Latin American Weekly Report* stated that Fuerza Solidaria was a "small rightwing group" (24 Sept. 2002).

With regard to the group's executive, the Fuerza Solidaria Website lists Alejandro Pena Esclusa as the president of the association while the vice-president is identified as Oswaldo Koenke Cottin (n.d.a). The Buenos-Aires-based newspaper *El Dia* described Esclusa as a staunch critic (*acerrimo critico*) of President Chavez, who publicly accused Chavez of trying to repeat the Cuban revolution in Venezuela (21 Sept. 2002). Apparently, Esclusa is also the director of the government opposition group Democratic Block (*Bloque Democratico*), a coalition of more than 40 non-governmental organizations of which Fuerza Solidaria is an affiliate (Fuerza Solidaria n.d.b).

The Research Directorate was able to find reference to only one incident involving a Fuerza Solidaria member, which occurred in September 2002 when Alejandro Pena Esclusa was detained by agents of the Directorate of Intelligence and Prevention Services (*Direccion de Servicios de Inteligencia y Prevencion*, DISIP) (*El Universal* 4 Apr. 2004; *El Dia* 21 Sept. 2002). According to the Caracas-based newspaper *El Universal*, on 19 September 2002, a DISIP patrol

intercepted Pena Esclusa's car and detained him (4 Apr. 2004). *El Dia* also reported that Esclusa was arrested but later released with the help of a lawyer from the Attorney General's office (Fiscalia General) (21 Sept. 2002).

According to the *Latin American Weekly Report*, Esclusa was arrested and questioned for the 17 September 2002 publication of newspaper advertisements, sponsored by Fuerza Solidaria, urging the armed forces to "restore constitutional order" in the country by overthrowing President Chavez (24 Sept. 2002).

No information about whether Fuerza Solidaria is registered with the government, issues membership cards or has experienced problems with pro-Chavez groups or Bolivarian Circles 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 for refugee protection. Please find below the list of additional sources consulted in researching this Information Request.

References

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Internet: Amnesty International, Human Rights Watch, Overseas Security Advisory Council (OSAC), World News Connection/Dialog.

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