

# AMNESTY INTERNATIONAL PUBLIC STATEMENT

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## Freedom of Expression under attack in Venezuela

A massive fine levelled against one of Venezuela's television channels seems to be another attempt by the authorities to curtail freedom of expression, Amnesty International said today.

The state media regulator Conatel fined Globovisión the equivalent of US\$2 million for allegedly having contravened the Law on Social Accountability in Radio and Television.

Globovisión is accused of allegedly "justifying crime" and promoting "hatred and intolerance for political reasons" during its coverage of a crackdown on the riots that took place in the overcrowded El Rodeo Prison, outside Caracas, in June, in which 37 people died.

Amnesty International has long received reports of Venezuelan journalists and media workers being subjected to intimidation and threats because of their work in recent years.

Several media outlets critical of the government have not been awarded licenses to operate.

In January 2010, RCTV International and five other cable television channels were closed for allegedly having contravened the same Law on Social Accountability in Radio and Television.

In 2009, at least 34 radio stations had their licenses revoked because of alleged non-compliance with telecommunications regulations. The authorities claimed that these stations "play[ed] at destabilizing Venezuela", leading to speculation that their editorial line may have been the real reason behind their closure.

This ongoing clampdown suggests the authorities' failure to respect the legitimate work of the media, particularly when a channel is known to have an editorial line critical of the government.

President Hugo Chávez has in the past accused Globovisión of supporting a coup attempt against his government in 2002.

In August 2009, a group of government supporters broke into Globovisión's headquarters in Caracas, launching tear gas canisters into the building and attacking staff and security guards. To Amnesty International's knowledge, nobody has been brought to justice over the incident.

Last year, the Globovisión's owner was arrested for several days and charged with "disseminating false information" and "insulting the President" in a statement he made during a meeting of the Inter-American Press Association.

Globovisión representatives have said that paying this US\$2 million fine – which amounts to 7.5 per cent of profits – would bankrupt the station, forcing it off the air. Government officials have said that if the channel refused to pay the fine, it would be held in contempt and be subject to further legal action.

Amnesty International is concerned that this latest incident is part of an ongoing pattern of erosion of freedom of expression in Venezuela, and is having a chilling effect on other journalists and media workers exercising their right to freedom of expression and in carrying

out their key role of the media in enabling the right of everyone to seek and receive information and ideas of all kinds.