

AMNESTY INTERNATIONAL PRESS RELEASE

AI Index Number: AMR 53/018/2002 (Public)

News Service Number: 238

19 December 2002

Venezuela: step back from the brink – an urgent appeal to Venezuelan society and the international community

The next few days will be decisive for the rule of law in Venezuela, Amnesty International warned today. Amnesty insisted that the support of the international community is fundamental for the resolution of the crisis in the country in these critical hours.

"More than two weeks after a general civic strike began, the country once more runs the risk of political breakdown and a rupture in the constitutional order on which the full observance of human rights depends," the organization added.

"The seriousness of the situation faced today by Venezuelan society requires a concerted response from all sectors of society. The dilemma they face is whether to continue along the path of confrontation, perpetuating the cycle of violence, harassment and polarization, or whether to commit themselves to seeking peaceful negotiated solutions within the constitutional framework and in accordance with international human rights standards," it continued.

Amnesty International therefore urges all sectors of society and institutions to immediately take basic steps to defend the rule of law and restore governability. In particular:

Amnesty International urges the security forces to act with scrupulous attention to the standards that regulate the use of force when dealing with present and planned demonstrations and mobilizations. Since the tragic events of April 2002, Amnesty International has on many occasions denounced the excessive use of force by the police and the National Guard, that has resulted in death and injury. Any action ignoring these standards should be rigorously investigated and punished.

Attacks on journalists and other press workers should cease immediately. At moments of crisis, it is even more crucial to guarantee freedom of expression, the cornerstone of the rule of the law. Likewise, the indispensable work carried out by human rights defenders should not be unduly restricted and they should be able to count on the impartial protection of the law. By exercising their legitimate right to the freedom of assembly, association and expression, opposition sectors should take responsibility for choosing protest methods and tactics that do not undermine constitutional guarantees. Without these guarantees, the rights of all are prejudiced. In addition, considering the role played by the communications media in the development of the crisis, Amnesty International urges Venezuelan journalists and communicators to take responsibility for reporting the situation in a serious and impartial way, to avoid further polarizing the situation.

Both sides should commit themselves to the search for negotiated and peaceful solutions, through a dialogue focused on the need to strengthen the rule of law and full observance of human rights. The fundamental objectives of this process should be to end impunity,

depoliticize the armed and security forces, and recover the credibility of the administration of justice.

At the same time, the international community and especially the regional and international human rights organizations, must redouble their efforts to facilitate a peaceful resolution of the crisis, and to provide adequate mechanisms and resources to monitor the human rights situation in the country and stop the situation from deteriorating.

"To this end, we support the request made by the Inter-American Human Rights Commission for permission to make a monitoring visit to the country and we urge the government to extend an invitation to other inter-governmental human rights monitoring mechanisms," declared Amnesty International.

Background

Throughout this year, political polarization in Venezuela has been threatening to lead to large-scale violence. Currently, tension is especially intense due to an indefinite national strike, which is already in its twelfth day, convened by the opposition to overthrow President Chávez. In this context, there have been many acts of violence, including the killing of three people during an opposition demonstration held on 6 December in Francia Square in Caracas. The strike has paralysed many sectors of the economy.

On 11 April 2002, a similar national strike led to acts of violence which left 20 dead. This violence in turn led to a failed coup and the temporary detention of President Chávez. On 13 April, the President returned to power after major national and international protests at the breaking of the constitutional order. Since then, there have been attempts to negotiate a solution. César Gaviria, President of the Organization of American States is currently acting as a mediator in talks between the government and the opposition.

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