



VENEZUELA: VICTIMS OF HUMAN RIGHTS VIOLATIONS DURING PROTESTS DEMAND JUSTICE

JOHN MICHAEL ORTIZ FERNÁNDEZ – LOSS OF SIGHT CAUSED BY RUBBER BULLET



On the 21st of April 2014, 16-year-old John Michael Ortiz Fernández was hit in the left eye by a rubber bullet, when he went out onto the balcony of his home in San Cristóbal (Táchira State). The bullet burned his retina and doctors believe he will not retain more than 30% of his sight in his left eye.

John Michael told Amnesty International that on that day protests broke out in the area where he lived. A member of the National Police reportedly fired tear-gas grenades and rubber bullets to break up the protest. John Michael went out onto the balcony when he heard explosions. He described what happened next: ***“I went out and as soon as the police officer saw me on the balcony, he raised his gun and fired immediately”***. According to his family, despite the seriousness of the injuries, when they arrived at the medical centre, staff initially refused to treat him until representatives of the Public Prosecution Service arrived.

John Michael and his family lodged a formal complaint with the Public Prosecution Service. However, at the time of writing they had not been informed of any significant progress in the case and no one had been charged in connection with the incident.

Amnesty International has documented many cases in which law enforcement officials used excessive force in the context of the pro and anti-government protests that took place in various parts of Venezuela between February and July of 2014. The victims included demonstrators, passers-by and people living in the neighbourhoods where protests were taking place.

The information obtained indicates that law enforcement officials frequently saw dispersing protests, including peaceful protests, as a priority and used force to do so, often without attempting to negotiate with the demonstrators or giving a clear prior warning.¹

Amnesty International has also documented the inappropriate use of rubber bullets by law enforcement officials

¹ For more information on the February to July 2014 events, see the following Amnesty International reports: *Venezuela: Human rights at risk amid protests* (Index: AMR 53/009/2014), available at <http://amnesty.org/en/library/info/AMR53/009/2014/en>; and *Venezuela: Briefing to the UN Committee Against Torture, 53rd session, November 2014* (Index: AMR 53/020/2014), available at <http://amnesty.org/en/library/info/AMR53/020/2014/en>.

who fired them directly at protesters and passers-by. According to the evidence gathered by the organization, on several occasions officers fired rubber bullets at people who were clearly unarmed at close range and without giving a clear warning, with the apparent intention of causing maximum injury. Rubber bullets fired at close range resulted in at least one death.ⁱ

According to the Public Prosecution Service, at least 54 people were injured by rubber bullets during the protests that took place between February and July 2014.

ⁱ See the case of Geraldín Moreno, Amnesty International, *Venezuela: Human rights at risk amid protests* (Index: AMR 53/009/2014), April 2014, p.8, available at <http://amnesty.org/en/library/info/AMR53/009/2014/en>.

ACT NOW!

Write to the Venezuelan authorities urging them to:

- Carry out a thorough, independent and impartial investigation into the events that led to the wounding of John Michael Ortiz, ensure that those responsible are brought to justice and ensure that he receives comprehensive and appropriate reparations.
- Ensure that protests are allowed to take place and that law enforcement officials use force only when strictly necessary and never against peaceful protesters, in line with the UN Basic Principles on the Use of Force and Firearms by Law Enforcement Officials.

Send your appeals to:

Vicepresident of the Republic

Sr. Jorge Arreaza
Vicepresidencia de la República
Esq. Carmelitas, Avenida Urdaneta,
Caracas, Venezuela.
Email: vicepresidencia@venezuela.gov.ve
ciudadano@vicepresidencia.gov.ve
Salutation: Dear Vice-president

Attorney General of the Republic

Dra. Luisa Ortega Díaz
Edificio Sede Principal del Ministerio Público,
Esquinas de Misericordia a Pele El Ojo
Caracas, Venezuela
Email: ministeriopublico@mp.gob.ve
Fax: +58 212 578 3239
Salutation: Dear Attorney General

Minister of the Interior, Justice and Peace

Almirante en Jefa Carmen Teresa Meléndez Rivas
Ministerio del Poder Popular para las
Relaciones Interiores, Justicia y Paz.
Edificio Sede del Ministerio, Avenida México
Caracas, Venezuela
Email: mijcudecon@gmail.com
Fax: +58 212 506-1558
Salutation: Dear Minister

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