

AMNESTY INTERNATIONAL PUBLIC STATEMENT

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Amnesty International calls for the immediate release of judge Afiuni

Amnesty International received with concern the news that on 13 December Venezuelan authorities extended the house arrest of judge María Lourdes Afiuni for two more years arguing that they had not been able to conclude the trial in the previous two years of preventive detention. Amnesty International calls for her immediate release.

In December 2009 judge Afiuni was arbitrarily arrested and detained for more than a year, accused of “corruption, abuse of authority, aiding escape, and association to a commit crime”, after granting conditional freedom to banker Eligio Cedeño. Judge Afiuni’s decision was in accordance with Venezuelan legislation according to which no person should remain in custody for more than two years awaiting trial.

For Amnesty International the detention of judge María Lourdes Afiuni is a case of unwarranted political interference by the executive branch. One day after her arrest in 2009, President Hugo Chávez welcomed the detention of judge Afiuni and requested that she be awarded the maximum sentence of 30 years. Amnesty International has watched with concern statements by the executive on this case, since this generates unwarranted pressure on the impartiality and the independence of the judicial system.

The conditions of judge Afiuni’s prison detention were worrying, as she was held with prisoners that she herself had convicted, and she received threats. In February 2011 she was placed under house arrest because of serious medical conditions she was suffering, which required urgent medical attention.

The UN working group on Arbitrary Detention, as well as the Special Rapporteurs on the situation of human rights defenders and the independence of judges and lawyers, have asked for the immediate release of judge Afiuni.

Two years after being detained no reliable evidence has been presented against judge Afiuni; for this reason Amnesty International calls, once again, for her immediate release.