

# AMNESTY INTERNATIONAL

## PUBLIC STATEMENT

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### **A serious investigation into the grave events at the prison in Uribana is urgently needed**

An independent, objective and impartial investigation needs to be carried out by the Venezuelan authorities to clarify what took place at the *Centro Penitenciario Región Centro-Occidental*, Central-Western Region Prison, in the town of Uribana in Lara state on 25 January 2013.

According to the *Ministerio del Poder Popular para el Servicio Penitenciario*, Ministry of People's Power for Prison Services, last Friday its authorities and the Bolivarian National Guard carried out a search of the prison in Uribana in an attempt to disarm the prison population. The operation ended with 58 people dead and 90 injured, many of them as result of bullet wounds.

It is unacceptable for a search, which should be a routine operation, to lead to so much violence. This clearly demonstrates – yet again – that the Venezuelan prison system is in crisis and that it has reached extremely alarming levels.

Amnesty International has warned the Venezuelan authorities on several occasions that the serious state of the prisons needs addressing as a matter of urgency. Unfortunately, until fundamental steps are taken to deal with the problems in the prison system, such events will carry on happening.

In July 2011, the government set up the Ministry for the Prison Service in order to find a solution to the problems in the prison system, which range from chronic overcrowding and lack of access to adequate medical care to extreme delays in the administration of justice and the absence of an independent system for inspecting prisons.

Despite its creation, during 2012 at least 450 people died and 860 were injured in Venezuelan prisons. The recent events at the prison in Uribana – where, according to local sources, 2,135 prisoners were living in space designed for 850 – illustrate the magnitude of the crisis in the country's prison system.

The Vice-President, Nicolás Maduro, announced that the Attorney General would open an investigation into the events. The Venezuelan authorities must investigate what happened, identify those responsible, and establish whether disproportionate force was used by the security forces.

Amnesty International calls on the Venezuelan authorities once again to take urgent action to address this situation which is continuing to deteriorate. It is essential that measures are put in place to ensure that inmates' court cases are settled quickly and that every prison in the country complies with basic standards with regard to the infrastructure, staffing and resources that are required for there to be a properly functioning prison system.

Specific action also needs to be taken to prevent and punish violence between inmates and human rights violations by the prison authorities. This should include measures to prevent inmates from possessing firearms and explosives. Those responsible for bringing such weapons into prisons should also be investigated and punished.