

AI Index: PRE 01/116/2010
01 April 2010

Venezuelan government deliberately targeting opponents

Amnesty International urged the Venezuelan authorities to stop targeting government critics following a series of politically motivated arrests.

At least three individuals seen as opposed to President Hugo Chávez were arrested and charged in March alone.

“Charges brought for political reasons against critics are being used to silence dissent and prevent others from speaking out” said Guadalupe Marengo, Americas Deputy Director at Amnesty International.

“President Chavez must stop persecuting those who think differently or speak out against his government.”

Oswaldo Álvarez Paz, former governor of the state of Zulia, was arrested on 22 March after he said in an interview that Venezuela had become a haven for drug trafficking and citing accusations by a Spanish court that the government supports armed opposition groups. He is currently being held in the Helicoide, headquarters of the national intelligence services.

Wilmer Azuaje, parliamentary deputy and a critic of President Chávez, was arrested on 25 March. He was accused of reportedly insulting and hitting a woman police officer. He has since then been released but faces prosecution.

Guillermo Zuloaga, owner of TV station Globovisión, was arrested on 25 March and charged with disseminating false information and insulting the President in statements that he made during a recent Inter American Press Association meeting in Aruba. He has since been released but also faces prosecution.

In December 2009, Judge Maria Lourdes Afiuni was arrested and charged with complicity in the escape of a former banker because she ordered his release.

Richard Blanco, a member of an opposition party, was arrested in August 2009 and charged with inciting and injuring a police officer during a demonstration.

The evidence against him is based on video footage from the demonstration. To Amnesty International's knowledge there is no evidence in these videos of Richard Blanco inciting violence or injuring a police officer.

Background Information

Over recent years the Venezuelan government appears to have established a pattern of clamping down on

dissent through the use of legislative and administrative methods to silence and harass critics. Laws are being used to justify what essentially seems to be politically motivated charges, which would indicate that the Venezuelan government is deliberately targeting opponents.

The Inter American Commission of Human Rights has stated that the arrest of Guillermo Zuloaga "evidences the lack of independence of the judiciary and the utilization of the criminal justice system to punish criticism, producing an intimidating effect that extends to all of society."

Following the detention of Judge Maria Lourdes Afiuni UN experts said that "Reprisals for exercising their constitutionally guaranteed functions and creating a climate of fear among the judiciary and lawyers' profession serve no purpose except to undermine the rule of law and obstruct justice." In January, after the RCTV and other TV channels were suspended from broadcast the European Parliament stated that "The 'National Telecommunications Commission' should show itself to be independent of the political and economic authorities and ensure equitable pluralism".

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