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VENEZUELA: AMNESTY INTERNATIONAL DELEGATION ENDS VISIT WITH DISAPPOINTMENT AND ALARM

The worsening human rights situation in Venezuela, which demands urgent measures, appears to meet growing governmental indifference, said Pierre Sané, Amnesty International's Secretary General who headed the delegation which visited the country 13-21 July.

The delegation, which had hoped to meet President Rafael Caldera to hand over a memorandum with the organization's concerns and recommendations, was received instead by the Presidential Minister, Asdrubal Aguiar, who later dismissed Amnesty International's concerns as "biased and partial".

Amnesty International's memorandum points to an increase in impunity for perpetrators of gross human rights violations, such as torture and extrajudicial executions by the security forces, as well as alarmingly bad prisons conditions, and the continuing practice of administrative detention of innocent people under the so-called "law of vagrants and crooks". Meanwhile, the delegation noted, the outstanding work of Venezuelan human rights defenders is under increasing pressure and, in some cases, even threat from some local authorities and security forces.

The delegation met with dozens of human rights organizations, visited prisons and detention centres, and interviewed scores of victims of human rights violations to document recent cases of abuse. It expressed grave concern and alarm about its findings.

For example, in the *Division de Menores de la Policia Tecnica Judicial de Coche*, a detention centre for minors in Caracas, it found dozens of children as young as 12 years old enduring up to two month of cruel, inhuman and degrading conditions of detention, including lack of water, sanitation and adequate food, with no access to medical care and no recourse to legal defence.

"Many beared signs of recent torture such as bruises in several parts of the body and even fractured bones," a forensic expert who participated in the delegation said. Venezuela signed the United Nations (UN) Convention of Children's Rights in 1990.

In the Reten de Catia, a prison in Caracas, the delegation found several advanced and untreated cases of tuberculosis among inmates, at least one of them dying for lack of any medical care, and living in torturous conditions of imprisonment. The authorities have repeatedly announced an improvement of conditions in the Reten de Catia but these have continued to deteriorate.

The delegation also interviewed and examined people recently tortured by high ranking police officers in the *Comisaria del Oeste*, a police department in Caracas, as a result of their grass-roots activism in poor neighbourhoods. All were later released following a national and international campaign on their behalf, but the perpetrators have not been brought to justice nor

suspended from duty. Venezuela is part to the UN Convention against Torture and Other Cruel, Inhuman or Degrading Treatment or Punishment, and to the Interamerican Convention to Prevent and Punish Torture.

Amnesty International has also noted that in vast regions of the country bordering with Colombia the Venezuelan armed forces stationed there, purportedly to combat drug trafficking and alleged Colombian guerrilla activities, have continued to act with total impunity. Many people are fleeing the region following generalized and systematic human rights violations by the security forces in the areas under their control, where many Constitutional guarantees remain suspended.

Amnesty International has made an urgent appeal to the Venezuelan Government to implement a number of measures including an immediate end of gross human rights violations and putting an immediate end to the impunity enjoyed by perpetrators; an immediate improvement of prison conditions, the abolition of the law of vagrants and crooks, and the implementation of a law to prevent and punish torture.

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