

# AMNESTY INTERNATIONAL PRESS RELEASE

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## Venezuela: Human rights once more hang in the balance

Amnesty International today expressed grave concern that this week's events in Venezuela -- including the detention of a prominent opposition figure and the killing of army dissidents -- could lead to a further deterioration of the human rights situation in the country," Amnesty International said.

At midnight on Wednesday 19 February, Carlos Fernandez, the President of the business association *Fedecamaras*, and a prominent leader of the general strike called by the opposition, was arrested by armed police agents in a restaurant in Caracas on charges including "rebellion, treason, instigation to commit criminal acts, conspiracy and sabotage". He was reportedly given access to legal counsel and his wife verified, after visiting him, that he had not been ill-treated.

Further warrants have reportedly been issued against other prominent members of the opposition who were involved in the 63-day national strike, including Carlos Ortega, head of the Venezuelan Workers Confederation (*Confederación de Trabajadores Venezolanos,CTV*), who has reportedly gone into hiding and claims that he fears for his safety if detained.

Although the government has denied any politically-motivated interference by the Executive in these arrests, days before President Hugo Chávez had urged judges and public prosecutors to take action against strike organisers. Furthermore, he has publicly expressed satisfaction at the arrests of what he called "coup plotters".

"The Judiciary has a key role in preventing these events from triggering an escalation of the human rights crisis," Amnesty International cautioned. The organization stated that any judicial action against the former leaders of the strike must be independent of any political interference and strictly adhere to international standards of due process, reflected in the constitution.

The arrest came only days after the deaths of three dissident soldiers and one woman last weekend. The victims, whose bound and gagged bodies were found at the beginning of this week in Caracas, had been shot dead. There were reported signs of torture on the bodies. The victims had been part of the anti-Chávez demonstration that had occupied Plaza Altamira in Caracas. The government has attributed the killings to internal feuds, while opposition figures stated publicly that the deaths were politically motivated.

"Given the Judiciary's crucial role in diffusing tensions around this case, there must be an immediate, impartial and exhaustive investigation into the killings," Amnesty International added.

"Immediate steps must be taken to protect witnesses who may be subject to intimidation given

the politicised nature of the case".

An Accord Against Violence and for Peace and Democracy was signed between the government and the opposition on 18 February. The accord, brokered by César Gaviria, secretary-general of the Organisation of American States (OAS), calls for the generation of "a climate of peace and calm in the country" and for the legislature to establish a "peace commission" that would be charged with investigating the deaths that took place during the failed coup against President Hugo Chávez in April 2002.

Amnesty International reiterated its call on the government, opposition and international community to ensure that respect for human rights principles is central to the agenda for resolving the crisis.

## **Background**

Throughout this year, political polarization in Venezuela has been threatening to lead to large-scale violence. Tension was especially intense during the 63-day national strike that ended earlier this month, which had been convened by the opposition to overthrow President Chávez. Three people were killed during an opposition demonstration held on 6 December in Francia Square in Caracas. The strike paralysed many sectors of the economy and analysts forecast that the Venezuela economy may shrink by up to 25% this year.

On 11 April 2002, a similar national strike led to acts of violence which left 20 dead. This violence in turn led to a failed coup and the temporary detention of President Chávez. On 13 April, the President returned to power after major national and international protests at the breaking of the constitutional order. Since then, there have been attempts to negotiate a solution. César Gaviria, President of the Organization of American States is currently acting as a mediator in talks between the government and the opposition.

For more background information, see **Venezuela: A Human Rights Agenda for the Current Crisis** (AMR 53/001/2003), published by Amnesty International in January 2003:  
<http://web.amnesty.org/ai.nsf/index/amr530012003>

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