



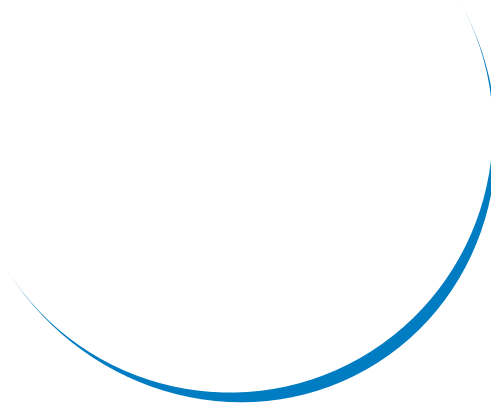
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Venezuela: Security Force Abuses at Colombia Border

Extrajudicial Executions, Arbitrary Arrests, Torture in Anti-Guerrilla Operation



(Washington, DC) – [Venezuelan](#) security forces have committed egregious abuses against local residents during a weeks-long operation against armed groups on the border with Colombia, Human Rights Watch said today.

Venezuelan security forces opened the offensive in Apure state on March 21, 2021, with the alleged purpose of combatting armed groups in Venezuela. The operation led to the execution of at least four peasants, arbitrary arrests, the prosecution of civilians in military courts, and torture of residents accused of

collaborating with armed groups. The abuses follow a pattern similar to that of systematic abuses that have led to international inquiries into possible crimes against humanity in the country.

“The egregious abuses against Apure residents are not isolated incidents by rogue agents, but consistent with the Venezuelan security forces’ systematic practices,” said [José Miguel Vivanco](#), Americas director at Human Rights Watch.

“International inquiries are essential into the mounting evidence against security force members who have committed abuses, and against commanders and top-level officials who knew or should have known what was happening during these operations.”

On April 5, Defense Minister Vladimir Padrino López [announced](#) the arrests of 33 people, to be tried under military jurisdiction. He said six camps of “terrorist groups” had been dismantled, and nine “terrorists” had been killed. He reported 8 deaths and 34 injuries of soldiers.

Confrontations between the Bolivarian National Armed Forces (Fuerza Armada Nacional Bolivariana, FANB) and a dissident group from the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (Fuerzas Armadas Revolucionarias de Colombia, FARC) known as the Martin Villa 10th Front broke out in various rural areas in Venezuela on March 21. Since then, at least 5,800 people have fled Apure state for Colombia, according to the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR).

Despite support from aid groups and the authorities in Arauquita, the Colombian city of [50,000](#) where most of the displaced Venezuelans and Colombians have arrived, shelters are overcrowded and aid is insufficient. Many more are staying in homes of friends and relatives in rural areas in the state of Arauca, Colombia, with limited, if any, access to aid. Colombian authorities have also reported the arrival of Venezuelans and Colombians living in Apure in the Colombian municipalities of Arauca and Saravena. Between 300 and 400 forcibly displaced people are in other parts of Venezuela.

Human Rights Watch interviewed 68 people in person in the state of Arauca and by phone in March and April. They included 38 people who had fled Apure, as well as lawyers, forensic experts, community leaders, journalists, local Colombian authorities, and humanitarian and human rights organizations. Most of those who had witnessed abuses feared reprisals in Venezuela and spoke on condition that their names and other identifying information be withheld.

Human Rights Watch also reviewed information from Colombian and Venezuelan authorities, and other evidence such as photographs, videos, and audio recordings of attacks, lootings, and people crossing the river to Colombia. The Venezuelan Attorney General's Office and Ombudsperson's Office did not respond to requests for information.

Displaced Venezuelans said that frequent airstrikes and fighting, as well as egregious abuses by Venezuelan security forces, caused them to flee.

The security forces they identified as responsible for abuses included the FANB, the Special Action Force of the Bolivarian National Police (Fuerzas de Acciones Especiales, FAES), the Bolivarian National Guard (Guardia Nacional Bolivariana, GNB), and the National Anti-Extortion and Anti-Kidnapping Command (Comando Nacional Antiextorsión y Secuestro, CONAS).

Interviewees said soldiers and security force agents raided the houses of families living in the town of La Victoria and its rural areas of El Ripial, Los Arenales, La Capilla y La Osa. The agents did not show a search warrant, witnesses said. Residents, mostly peasants, were dragged from their houses without arrest warrants. Agents ordered detainees to cover their heads with their t-shirts and beat them, threw them to the ground, and threatened to kill them.

An official list of detainees and their whereabouts has not been provided, but relatives and human rights groups reported they were initially held at a military base in the city of Guasdualito and, weeks later, transferred to a section within the Santa Ana prison in Táchira state that is administered by the military. Two detainees who were later released confirmed that they had been held in military installations. Multiple interviewees said that detainees were not members of armed groups.

On March 25, FAES took four members of a family from their house in La Victoria, said a family member. Their bodies were found a mile away, in El Ripial, with cuts, bullet wounds, and apparent bone dislocations. Forensic experts concluded that photos of the bodies suggest that they had been moved, and that firearms and grenades may have been planted by their hands.

Security forces broke into several houses and looted or destroyed personal belongings, food, and household items, residents said. Some families locked themselves inside their houses for days, then fled to Colombia. People with dual

Venezuelan and Colombian citizenship feared that security forces would consider this proof of ties to armed groups.

In 2020, the [United Nations Independent International Fact-Finding Mission](#) on Venezuela and the [Office of the Prosecutor](#) at the International Criminal Court (ICC) found evidence that crimes against humanity may have been committed in Venezuela. Their reports implicated the same security forces accused of committing abuses in Apure.

On March 26, Venezuelan Attorney General [Tarek Saab](#) [appointed](#) two human rights prosecutors to investigate events in Apure, and established a [joint commission](#) of 12 experts to investigate the killings in El Ripial. The Attorney General's Office has not responded to a Human Rights Watch request for information on the status of investigations.

The Venezuelan judiciary has routinely failed to adequately investigate compelling evidence of widespread human rights abuses, Human Rights Watch research has shown, allowing impunity to remain the norm.

The Office of the Prosecutor at the International Criminal Court and the UN Fact Finding Mission on Venezuela should assess the possible responsibility of those directly implicated in extrajudicial executions, arbitrary arrests, and torture by Venezuelan security forces in Apure, Human Rights Watch said. They should also assess the possible responsibility of commanders and high-level authorities who may have ordered abuses, or may bear responsibility for failing to take appropriate steps to prevent crimes or hold those responsible to account.

For additional information on Human Rights Watch's findings, please see below.

Systematic Human Rights Abuses in Venezuela

The abuses in Apure are similar to others that the Venezuelan security forces have systematically committed.

Between 2016 and 2019, Venezuelan police and security forces [killed more than 19,000 people](#), alleging "resistance to authority," according to data provided in several reports by the [United Nations Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights](#) (OHCHR).

The UN Independent Fact-Finding Mission found FAES responsible for 59 percent of all killings by security forces since 2014. Human Rights Watch [has documented](#) cases of alleged “resistance to authority” in the past in which there was no confrontation and FAES agents were implicated in extrajudicial killings and manipulating the crime scene. Similarly, [OHCHR concluded](#) that the information it analyzed “suggests that many of these killings may constitute extrajudicial executions,” and that FAES agents frequently manipulate the crime scene and evidence, and plant arms and drugs to suggest a confrontation.

Security forces [have also brutally mistreated](#) people in custody at least since 2014. In 2020 OHCHR [documented](#) cases of severe beatings with boards, suffocation with plastic bags and chemicals, waterboarding, electric shocks to eyelids and genitals, exposure to cold temperatures and/or constant electric light, being handcuffed for extended periods of time, and death threats.

More than 800 civilians have been prosecuted in Venezuelan military courts since 2014. The Fact-Finding Mission found an “increasingly frequent use of military jurisdiction to prosecute and try civilians.” Latin America has not seen such frequent use of military courts to try civilians since the dictatorships of the 1970s and 1980s, Human Rights Watch said. International law prohibits prosecutions of civilians by military courts when civilian courts can function.

Context of the Attacks in Apure

Armed groups operating in the eastern Colombian state of Arauca and the neighboring Venezuelan state of Apure [use violence to control peoples’ everyday lives](#). They impose rules normally enacted and enforced by governments, including curfews; prohibitions on rape, theft, and murder; and regulation of fishing, debt payment, and even closing times for bars. They exercise control through threats, kidnappings, forced labor, child recruitment, murder, and extortion of those carrying out virtually any type of economic activity.

Several armed groups operate both in Arauca and Apure, including the National Liberation Army (Ejército de Liberación Nacional, ELN), a guerrilla group formed in Colombia in the 1960s; and the Martín Villa 10th Front and the Second Marquetalia, both of which emerged from the demobilized FARC after the 2016 peace accord between the Colombian government and the FARC. The Patriotic Forces of National Liberation (Fuerzas Patrióticas de Liberación Nacional, FPLN), a Venezuelan armed group that originated during the 1990s, also operates in Apure.

The Second Marquetalia was formed in August 2019 by Luciano Marín Arango, alias “Iván Márquez,” the FARC’s former second-in-command and top peace negotiator, as well as by other former top FARC commanders.

Human Rights Watch research has shown that Venezuelan security forces and other authorities have tolerated and at times colluded with armed groups operating in Apure. In recent years, the ELN and the FARC dissident groups appear to feel safer and able to operate more openly in Venezuela than they do in Colombia. They have operated camps in Apure.

In early March, Venezuela’s FANB initiated Operation Bolivarian Shield to commemorate the anniversary of former Venezuelan President Hugo Chávez’s death, and “combat and expel internal and external threats, and Colombian armed groups.”

Confrontations between the FANB and the Martín Villa 10th Front broke out in various rural areas of Apure on March 21, local media reported, with airstrikes and shooting.

The Venezuelan Defense Ministry issued its first news release on March 22, saying that the March 21 clashes had resulted in the death of two soldiers and one commander of the Martín Villa 10th Front, known as “Nando.” Several Venezuelan authorities issued separate statements, holding Colombian authorities responsible for the presence of armed groups on Venezuelan territory. The government of Nicolás Maduro requested United Nations assistance to deactivate antipersonnel mines that they said armed groups laid in Venezuela.

Reports vary as to what triggered the hostilities, but human rights and aid groups in Arauca, as well as leaders from towns and rural areas in Apure where the attacks occurred, told Human Rights Watch that the Second Marquetalia is closely linked to the Maduro government and that—to consolidate control over drug trafficking—they are seeking to remove the rival Martín Villa 10th Front. Residents also said that they had witnessed frictions between the ELN and FARC dissident groups over control of the area.

Extrajudicial Executions

On the afternoon of March 25, based on interviews and audio testimony from family members and neighbors, and media reports, members of FAES dragged

four members of one family from their house in the neighborhood known as July Fifth (*Cinco de Julio*) in the town of La Victoria. The victims were Luz Dey Remolina, 42, Emilio Ramírez Villamizar, 44, Ehiner Yanfrán Anzola Villamizar, 22, and Yefferson Uriel Ramírez, 20.

Emir Remolina, 26, the son of Luz Dey and Emilio, said that he stopped by and saw his parents that morning, as he headed for work. In the afternoon, he noticed many security force agents on the streets and snipers on roofs, and he tried several times to reach his parents by cellphone. He got no response. Around 3:30 p.m., he went to his parents' house and found no one there. He found several household items destroyed, and furniture and a motorcycle were missing. Neighbors told him that FAES agents had taken his parents alive, with their t-shirts pulled up over their heads, and had loaded them onto an armored tank.

After several hours, Emir saw messages and photos circulating in WhatsApp groups reporting that FAES had killed a family on a farm near the rural area of El Ripial, about a mile from Emir's parents' home. The images, which Human Rights Watch reviewed, showed the bodies on the ground, face up, with weapons by their hands. Emir recognized them as his parents, brother, and uncle.

Venezuelan authorities, days later, [reported](#) that security forces had killed—"neutralized"—six people in El Ripial, without specifying their names.

At least 13 people from La Victoria said that Emir's relatives were not guerrillas but peasants who had lived and worked there for more than 15 years. Three people from El Ripial confirmed that the family did not live or have a farm in the area where their bodies were found.

Onder Ozkalipci and James Lin, members of the Independent Forensic Expert Group (IFEG), which is coordinated by the International Rehabilitation Council for Torture Victims (IRCT), and Carlos Valdés, former director of Colombia's Institute of Forensic Science, analyzed the photos showing the bodies of Emir's family members. They told Human Rights Watch that, based on their examination of the photos, the bodies appear to have been moved and the weapons staged, and that there is indication that one person was shot at close range.

The forensic experts said the four bodies followed a "pattern": they were on their backs, with arms extended to the sides, the men were without shirts, and they all had guns or grenades at similar distance to their right hand. The forensic experts also said that:

- Ehiner Yanfrán Anzola Villamizar had a grenade next to his right hand and a broken right humerus, which appears to have occurred before his death. His body had two bullet wounds in the chest, where there appears to be residue, which would indicate that he was shot at close range, less than three meters. It appears that blood was cleaned off his face.
- Luz Dey Remolina had entry and exit wounds on her right arm and a grenade near her right hand. The overall pattern of the bodies and the evidence that the bodies were moved indicate that the location of the weapon was staged.
- Emilio Ramírez Villamizar's face and torso had bloodstains that appeared to have been cleaned up. Blood had dripped down from a wound on the right side of his head in a direction that suggests he had later been moved toward the right. The pattern of bloodstains suggests that his arms were by his body, instead of extended out as in the photograph. Additionally, the experts indicated that it was very likely that his body was originally lying face down.

The bodies were in civilian [clothing](#), not in the combat uniforms of guerillas. [Family](#) members denied that guns and grenades shown near the bodies belonged to the victims.

On March 28, Emir recovered his relatives' bodies and buried them in Arauquita. Venezuelan authorities did not give him death certificates, autopsy reports, or other documentation of a forensic examination.

Arbitrary Detention and Torture

Since March 21, [local media outlets](#) and people from La Victoria have reported detentions by security and military forces. The authorities have not provided a comprehensive list of those detained or information on their whereabouts. Padrino, the defense minister, said that the 14th Military Tribunal would try [33 detainees](#). The Venezuelan Attorney General's Office and Ombudsperson's Office has not responded to Human Rights Watch's request for information about them.

Human Rights Watch has received information about the arbitrary arrest of 17 people, through direct testimony from family members, human rights organizations, or audio and video testimonies. Additional cases have been [reported by the media](#).

Nine witnesses said that FAES detained 10 of their relatives, after raiding their

homes without arrest or search warrants. Relatives, along with representatives from the human rights groups Foro Penal and Fundaredes, said the detainees were initially held at a military base in the city of Guasdualito, 62 miles from La Victoria, but they were not allowed to see them for weeks. On April 12, 26 detainees—25 men and 1 woman—were transferred to a military area within the Santa Ana prison in Táchira state, known as “Procemil,” family members and the Venezuelan nongovernmental group Foro Penal said.

In El Ripial and the neighboring rural area of Los Arenales, those detained were peasants who lived and worked on farms, based on information from people interviewed.

In La Capilla, a rural area about four miles from La Victoria, FAES agents took 17 men from their homes or shops, a wife of one of the detainees said. FAES agents covered the detainees’ heads with t-shirts, beat them, threw them to the ground, and threatened to kill them.

Some people were detained because they had videos or photos of the attacks or military presence in the area on their cellphones, witnesses and a human rights defender said. Fearing searches and arrest, many people interviewed in Arauquita said they had erased multimedia material related to the attacks in La Victoria and surrounding areas.

- FAES members took Alejandro, 23, and Vicente Rojas, 20, (pseudonyms), brothers who worked in a gas station, from their house in La Victoria at 10:30 a.m. on March 24, their sister said. Agents broke through the door, she said, and searched their cellphones for photos and videos. The agents pulled the brothers’ t-shirts over their heads and beat them on their stomachs and backs. A witness told the family that the young men were taken to Guasdualito military base. On April 10 their sister was able to visit them for 10 minutes at the military base. She said the brothers told her that agents had beaten them during their first days in detention. A lieutenant who said he was defending her brothers told her on April 12 that they had been charged with crimes before a military court, including “attacking a sentinel,” and that they would be transferred to Santa Ana prison.
- On the morning of March 21, 26-year-old Jessica Vera (pseudonym) noticed men in green uniforms, whom she identified as Bolivarian National Guard agents, near the little house in El Ripial she shared with her husband, Javier Cuesta (pseudonym), who owned a radio and TV repair business, and their children, ages 9, 5, and 2. By around noon, armored tanks were moving

through the streets, and security agents entered and searched houses. Jessica said that the uniformed men gestured to Javier across their courtyard to come out.

They ordered him to lift his shirt, cover his head with it, and raise his arms. They asked for his identity card and he asked his wife to look for it in the house. When she came out with the ID, her 9-year-old daughter told her the men had taken him away handcuffed. An agent told her they would investigate her husband as a “guerrilla fighter.”

She and her children walked to La Victoria to inquire about his whereabouts. When Jessica arrived at the town, she saw some soldiers who told her only that he was at a military facility. After three days of fruitlessly seeking information, while attacks continued in La Victoria, she crossed, with the children, to Arauquita. On April 16, Jessica told Human Rights Watch that her husband, with whom she had been able to speak by phone, had been transferred from the military base in Guasdualito to the Santa Ana prison in Táchira.

Human Rights Watch interviewed a 17-year-old boy and an adult who said FAES detained them at the military base in Guasdualito and released them after six days.

- Pedro Cabrera (pseudonym), a 43-year-old Colombian who lived in Apure, said that on March 21, FAES and GNB agents detained his two-month-pregnant wife Camila Vélez (pseudonym), and their sons, Marcos (pseudonym), 17, and Ernesto (pseudonym), 14, in the Los Arenales rural area. They had been awakened that day by gunshots and shells exploding, Pedro said that because he did not have a Venezuelan ID, he hid near his house. From there, he watched agents throw his wife and children to the ground, kick them in the stomach, cover their faces with their own t-shirts, and tie their hands behind their backs.

Marcos, who was released six days later with his brother, said that during beatings at the time of the arrest, agents accused his brother, his mother, and him of being members of a guerrilla group. They took them to a nearby house, threw them to the ground again, and continued to beat them until nightfall, when they took them to a military base in La Victoria.

The next day, agents transferred the boys and their mother to the

Guasdualito military base, where FAES and GNB agents held them in an overcrowded, unventilated cell with approximately 30 people and no measures to limit the spread of Covid-19, he said. They slept on the floor and were fed only mangoes and water.

He said a member of the military informed them that they were accused of “rebellion,” “treason,” “attacking a sentinel,” and “theft of military objects,” but they were not taken before a court or given access to a lawyer. During the initial days of Marcos’ arrest, security agents beat him and the other detainees repeatedly. They used the butts of their rifles to punch them in the stomach and the head, he said.

On the sixth day, Marcos and Ernesto were released with six other people, two children and four adults. Officials from the Ombudsperson’s Office took the two brothers to a shelter, and the next day handed them over to a relative, who helped them get to Arauquita. A Human Rights Watch researcher saw some of Marcos’s bruises, and Jairo Urrutia (pseudonym), 54, who was detained in the same cell as Marcos, corroborated his story.

On April 14, Pedro told Human Rights Watch that his wife, Camila, had been transferred to the Santa Ana prison. Although he had not been able to speak with her, he learned through a relative who was allowed to visit her that she had lost her pregnancy.

- Jairo Urrutia said that on March 21, FAES and GNB agents entered his house in El Ripial, threw him to the ground, tied his hands behind his back, and loaded him into a tank where they kicked him in the stomach. He was taken to the Guasdualito military base, where FAES and GNB agents accused him of being a “guerrilla informant” and held him in an overcrowded cell. He said that on the sixth day he was taken to a hearing before a military court, where a military judge told him that he was being accused of “rebellion,” “firearms possession,” “attacking a sentinel,” and “resistance,” but the Ombudsperson’s Office requested his release. He was not assisted by a lawyer. He fled to Arauquita that night.

Three people interviewed said they were victims of abusive treatment during raids.

- Carlos Pérez (pseudonym), 28, and Diego Ruíz (pseudonym), 14, said that at around noon on March 25, at least 15 FAES agents broke down the door to Carlos’s house, where Diego was staying too. The agents threw them to

the ground and covered their faces with their t-shirts. They took each to a different house nearby, where they forced both to kneel with their hands tied behind their backs while they interrogated them about their alleged links to guerrilla groups, which Carlos and Diego denied. The agents made them eat dirt and kicked them in the ribs.

Carlos said that a FAES agent pointed a gun at his neck and threatened to kill him. He pulled the trigger, but the gun was not loaded. Diego said that the FAES agents holding him did the same, at least four times, and that an agent squeezed part of his nose with pliers so he would confess his supposed ties to guerrilla groups.

After several hours, both were released. They fled to Arauquita with their families that night.

- On March 25, two tanks with some FAES agents entered the farm where Pablo Ramírez (pseudonym) and his family lived and worked, in the rural area of La Victoria. Pablo said that agents stuck a knife in his right little finger as they interrogated him about his alleged links with guerrilla groups. When he did not answer, they sank the knife deeper into his finger, then twisted his finger with pliers. “I felt that they were going to break it,” he said, showing his finger with a scar. The agents threatened to kill him, take his 5-year-old son away, and cut his 5-month-pregnant wife’s belly to take out the baby she was carrying. The family fled to Arauquita.

Humanitarian Response in Colombia

As of April 19, Colombian authorities indicated that more than 5,800 people, including Venezuelans and Colombians who had been living in Venezuela, had fled Apure since March 21, mostly through informal crossings using canoes to cross the Arauca river. The majority were staying in 19 shelters in Arauquita. In late March, when official numbers indicated that 4,500 people had fled, local authorities in Arauquita told Human Rights Watch that approximately 3,000 more were staying in homes of friends and relatives in rural areas of Arauquita.

The Arauquita shelters are administered by local authorities with crucial support from international humanitarian groups, including UNHCR, Save the Children, the Norwegian Refugee Council (NRC), UNICEF, Comitato Internazionale per lo Sviluppo dei Popoli (CISP), among others. Despite sustained support by aid groups to bolster local capacity to provide food, drinking water, health supplies,

and medical attention, available aid is insufficient. Some children have continued going to local schools in Colombia, but their education is difficult because they were forced to leave their materials at home, aid workers said.

Overcrowding in shelters makes social distancing difficult and, together with difficulty properly isolating people who have Covid-19, has most likely contributed to the spread of Covid-19 in shelters. As of April 16, the authorities had confirmed 76 positive cases.

The authorities and aid workers also said that it is enormously difficult to help people staying outside of urban shelters due to security risks from guerrilla groups in Arauca.

The activity of international aid groups in La Victoria, Venezuela, has been largely suspended due to the ongoing situation.

Some interviewees, including aid workers, said that people displaced in Arauca fear returning home under current circumstances and will most likely stay in Arauca or move elsewhere in Colombia, given security concerns and because they lost their homes and personal belongings in the attacks.

Recommendations

To the Office of the Prosecutor at the International Criminal Court and the UN Fact-Finding Mission on Venezuela:

- Review promptly allegations of extrajudicial executions, arbitrary arrests, and torture by Venezuelan security forces in Apure, as well as gender-related violence, including cases documented in this report.
- Analyze the possible responsibility of those directly implicated in the abuses, and of commanders and high-level authorities who may have ordered abuses, or may bear responsibility for failing to take appropriate steps to prevent crimes or hold those responsible to account.

To the administration of Colombian President Ivan Duque:

- Carry out a comprehensive census in Arauca of all Venezuelans and Colombians who were forced to flee Apure, including those currently not staying in shelters, and guarantee their access to legal status in Colombia.

- Ensure that those arriving in Arauca have access to basic humanitarian aid, including food, shelter, personal protective equipment and other hygiene supplies necessary to prevent the spread of Covid-19, medical attention including access to sexual and reproductive health services, and access to drinking water and basic sanitation.
- Effectively implement the “state of public calamity,” [decreed](#) on April 6 in Arauquita, which under [Colombian law](#) would allow greater resources from the national government to support humanitarian efforts to provide aid to displaced Venezuelans and Colombians in Arauquita.

To donor governments and international humanitarian agencies:

- Support efforts to ensure sufficient humanitarian aid is available for authorities in Arauca administering shelters created to house the thousands of displaced people who recently fled Apure.
-

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