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Venezuela: Whether government employees are required to participate in activities that promote state policy and politicians, including those organized by pro-government groups (also known as colectivos and círculos bolivarianos); treatment of individuals who refuse to participate in those activities; the presence and activities of pro-government groups in regions other than Caracas, including in Maracaibo and Valencia; state protection (June-December 2017)

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Venezuela: Whether government employees are required to participate in activities that promote state policy and politicians, including those organized by pro-government groups (also known as colectivos and círculos bolivarianos); treatment of individuals who refuse to participate in those activities; the presence and activities of pro-government groups in regions other than Caracas, including in Maracaibo and Valencia; state protection (June-December 2017)

Research Directorate, Immigration and Refugee Board of Canada, Ottawa

1. Pro-Government Groups

1.1 Armed *Colectivos*

For further information on armed colectivos, including their areas of operation, objectives, activities and relationship with the government, as well as on the 2014 protests, refer to Response to Information Request VEN105785 of May 2017.

During a telephone interview with the Research Directorate, an assistant professor at La Trobe University in Melbourne, Australia, whose research concerns law and policy in Venezuela, stated that the colectivos function like a "gang," given their informal nature (Assistant Professor 30 Nov. 2017). During a telephone interview with the Research Directorate, a senior analyst of International Crisis Group stated that "para-police" is a more accurate term than "para-military" to describe armed colectivos because they are more integrated into police and intelligence organizations than into the military (International Crisis Group 1 Dec. 2017).

1.2 *Circulos bolivarianos*

According to sources, the term "*circulos bolivarianos*" is not equivalent to the term "armed colectivos" (International Crisis Group 1 Dec. 2017; Assistant Professor 30 Nov. 2017; Visiting Scholar 4 Dec. 2017). According to sources, the *circulos bolivarianos* date back to the start of the Chavez era, in the early 2000s (Assistant Professor 30 Nov. 2017; International Crisis Group 1 Dec. 2017). During a telephone interview with the Research Directorate, a visiting scholar at Cornell University's Industrial and Labor Relations (ILR) School at, who has published several books and articles on the social movements in Venezuela, stated that the *circulos bolivarianos* were set up as civil neighbourhood structures to enforce civil programs at the neighbourhood level, such as, for example, vaccination campaigns (Visiting Scholar 4 Dec. 2017). According to sources, *circulos bolivarianos* also exist at the international level (Visiting Scholar 4 Dec. 2017; Assistant Professor 30 Nov. 2017). According to the Visiting Scholar, there is no overlap between the *circulos bolivarianos* and armed groups (Visiting Scholar 4 Dec. 2017). The senior analyst of International Crisis Group described the *circulos bolivarianos* as "an early version of colectivos" and stated that some members of the *circulos* have become members of colectivos (International Crisis Group 1 Dec. 2017). The Assistant Professor mentioned the concerns in Venezuela, especially beginning in 2002, that some groups had access to weapons and would mobilize to defend the revolution (Assistant Professor 30 Nov. 2017). According to the senior analyst, many *circulos bolivarianos* were peaceful groups who supported the government but who, from the early days, involved armed elements (International Crisis Group 1 Dec. 2017). According to some sources, the *circulos bolivarianos* no longer exist (Lecturer 30 Nov. 2017) or no longer play an important role (International Crisis Group 1 Dec. 2017; Visiting Scholar 4 Dec. 2017). During a telephone interview with the Research Directorate, a lecturer in political science and Latin American studies at the University of Toronto, whose research focusses on Venezuelan politics and who has published a number of articles on the matter, stated that the *circulos bolivarianos* started to disband between 2004 and 2006, and they became community councils (Lecturer 30 Nov. 2017). Similarly, the Visiting Scholar stated that the *circulos* were replaced by elected communal councils or other civil society groups (Visiting Scholar 4 Dec. 2017).

2. Ties Between Armed Colectivos and the Government

According to the Assistant Professor, the colectivos have various informal ties to the government, but the situation is "very complicated" (Assistant Professor 30 Nov. 2017). In a joint report published in November 2017 by Human Rights Watch and Foro Penal, a Venezuelan human rights NGO that supports a network of 200 volunteer lawyers and provides assistance to, among others, victims of arbitrary detention and torture, the colectivos are defined as "armed pro-government gangs" responsible for "violent attacks or detentions that appear to be motivated by loyalty to the government" (Human Rights Watch and Foro Penal Nov. 2017, 20).

The information in the following paragraph was provided by the Visiting Scholar:

The government's official position is that no group has the right to be armed or take justice into their own hands. The opposition sometimes accuses the government of having a relationship with armed colectivos, while the colectivos sometimes argue that they are under attack by the government. There is no institutionalized relationship, formal relationship between the government and the armed colectivos, or official informal relationship. That same source stated that they could neither confirm nor deny whether personal connections exist between people belonging to government institutions and people in colectivos (Lecturer 4 Dec. 2017).

The Lecturer pointed out that, in contrast, the term "colectivo" has become a catch all term for militant Chavistas and that, when confrontations occur, opposition media tend to hold the colectivos responsible for any aggression. According to that same source, the degree of coordination, discipline and subordination to government control is not as comprehensive as the headlines suggest (Lecturer 1 Dec. 2017). Still according to the same source, people are afraid of colectivos, but there is little evidence that have actually lived "up to any measure of their reputation" (Lecturer 1 Dec. 2017).

According to the Assistant Professor, the colectivos operate depending on their level of authority or location (Assistant Professor 30 Nov. 2017). According to that same source, the colectivos do not always work in connection with the state and security apparatus, and they have different formal and informal connections with the government (Assistant Professor 30 Nov. 2017). Some operate more independently, while others have connections and understandings with the police, courts or lawyers (Assistant Professor 30 Nov. 2017). According to the Assistant Professor, these connections are hard to investigate because they are based on interpersonal relationships between these groups and the police (Assistant Professor 30 Nov. 2017).

The Argentine news site Infobae notes that members of colectivos operate as bodyguards of officials of the Unified Socialist Party of Venezuela (Partido Socialista Unido de Venezuela, PSUV) (Infobae 23 Apr. 2017). According to a BBC report, an interview with a leader of a colectivo revealed that some colectivos act [translation] "with impunity" and that the government respects the actions of some groups because they are or were members of the police and are in contact with the police" (BBC 7 July 2017).

According to the Assistant Professor, armed colectivos also have connections with gangs and criminal activities (Assistant Professor 30 Nov. 2017). Similarly, Infobae reports the statements of the general coordinator of the Venezuelan Human Rights Action Education Program (Programa Venezolano de Educación Acción en Derechos Humanos, Provea), a Venezuelan NGO that documents and reports cases of human rights violations in Venezuela, that a large number of colectivos are funded by illegal activities (Infobae 23 Apr. 2017).

According to the Lecturer, although individuals in government organizations such as the Bolivarian National Guard (Guardia Nacional Bolivariana) may provide tactical support to colectivos, it is unlikely that there is explicit policy at the government level for activities of armed colectivos (Lecturer 30 Nov. 2017).

The information in the following paragraph was provided by the senior analyst of International Crisis Group:

The armed colectivos are groups who are politically loyal to the government and act as political enforcers. However, various groups are involved, and all groups do not necessarily have formal links to the government. The links between armed colectivos and the government have become more formal since the 2017 protests, but the colectivos are not integrated into the security forces in a formal sense and do not appear on their organizational charts. The members of the colectivos often wear a kind of "uniform", for instance, dressing in black with their faces covered. Evidence suggests that they have access to radio communications and liaison with security forces. The

government tries to keep its links with the colectivos secret, but there is a large and growing body of evidence that they are not just spontaneous groups that emerge to support the government. For example, it seems that they receive certain benefits, such as receiving motorcycles and clothing. The colectivos "clearly" act in concert with security forces; for example, when streets are blocked by police or national guards, but colectivos members are let through, and when they are not stopped when they participate in violent acts. There is considerable video evidence of this during the protests in 2014 and 2017, including instances of conversation with members of colectivos and members of security forces (International Crisis Group 1 Dec. 2017).

According to an August 2017 report published by the United Nations Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights, between April and July 2017, witnesses and sources stated that armed colectivos operated with the consent of, and sometimes in coordination with, the security forces and the local authorities (UN Aug. 2017, iii). According to the Assistant Professor, there seem to be agreements where colectivos take care of security arrangements in some places, or threatening opposition demonstrations, or trying to establish law and order, as in the events from April to June 2017; this role has been played by the colectivos for a long time (Assistant Professor 30 Nov. 2017). According to that same source, the colectivos can be useful to the government in that they fulfill functions that would be problematic for the government to take over, as the government cannot behave in abusive ways without being held responsible (Assistant Professor 30 Nov. 2017). According to that same source, it is possible that colectivos have certain responsibilities and that relationships with the government might emerge (Assistant Professor 30 Nov. 2017).

Similarly, Human Rights Watch and Foro Penal state that colectivos at times "worked alongside Venezuelan security forces to suppress demonstrations" (Human Rights Watch and Foro Penal Nov. 2017, 5). According to that same source, they attacked protesters, bystanders or people they believed to be government opponents, "often in plain sight of Venezuelan security forces" (Human Rights Watch and Foro Penal Nov. 2017, 20). According to sources, a member of Provea was detained by armed colectivos in 2014, after a day of violent protests (Infobae 23 Apr. 2017; International Crisis Group 1 Dec. 2017).

Human Rights Watch and Foro Penal state that they found no evidence that highlevel officials who knew or should have known about the abuses committed by colectivos took any steps to prevent and punish such violations; they downplayed the abuses or issued "implausible" blanket denials (Human Rights Watch and Foro Penal Nov. 2017, 2). According to the same source, these high-level officials therefore bear responsibility for "pervasive, serious abuses being committed on their watch" (Human Rights Watch and Foro Penal Nov. 2017, 2).

2.1 2017 Protests

For information on the activities of the colectivos before April 2017, refer to Response to Information Request VEN105785 of May 2017.

The Lecturer noted that the armed colectivos do not organize rallies, they participate in them (Lecturer 30 Nov. 2017).

According to sources, key protests were held in Venezuela in 2017, and the government responded with violence (Human Rights Watch and Foro Penal Nov. 2017, 1; *New York Times* 8 Aug. 2017; UN Aug. 2017). According to the Human Rights Watch and Foro Penal report, in April 2017, tens of thousands of people protested in Venezuela and, since April, more than 5,400 people have been detained, some of whom by armed colectivos (Human Rights Watch and Foro Penal Nov. 2017, 1, 4). According to the report by the Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights on the protests between 1 April and 31 July 2017, armed colectivos broke into protests riding

motorcycles; they "harassed, attacked and shot at demonstrators, media workers and bystanders" and "arrested demonstrators and participated in violent house raids" (UN Aug. 2017, iii). According to that same source, the "armed colectivos are allegedly responsible for at least 27 killings during recent demonstrations" (UN Aug. 2017, iii). According to Human Rights Watch, the government's response to the 2017 demonstrations involved widespread violence and brutality against anti-government protesters and detainees; the scope and severity of the "repression" reached "levels unseen" in Venezuela in recent history (Human Rights Watch and Foro Penal Nov. 2017, 1). According to that same source, in 2017, the security forces and pro-government groups attacked protesters "using extreme and at times lethal force, causing dozens of deaths and hundreds of injuries" (Human Rights Watch and Foro Penal Nov. 2017, 1).

2.2 Pressure to Participate in Activities of Armed *Colectivos* and Treatment of Individuals who Refuse to Participate

For further information on the treatment of suspected whistle-blowers or former government employees, by the government or pro-government groups refer to Response to Information Request VEN105784 of May 2017.

Without providing details, the Assistant Professor stated that employees of the government may face pressure to participate in activities of the colectivos that promote state policies or political candidates (Assistant Professor 30 Nov. 2017).

According to the senior analyst, it is generally understood by populations that there may be serious consequences if a person is "expected to attend [a] rally", but they do not; that individual may be seen as a dissident (International Crisis Group 1 Dec. 2017). According to that same source, when an employee in public administration refuses to participate in activities in support of the government, they may be fired, demoted or "made to suffer" (International Crisis Group 1 Dec. 2017).

According to some sources, access to state-subsidized food provided by the government is regulated by the "party card" (*Carnet de la patria*) (Lecturer, 30 Nov. 2017; International Crisis Group 1 Dec. 2017). According to the Lecturer, in a situation of food shortages, people do not tend to complain, and there is a fear that the issuance of the card may be limited to government supporters (Lecturer 30 Nov. 2017). According to sources, someone who refuses to participate in activities of the colectivos could lose access to certain benefits such as subsidized food (Assistant Professor 30 Nov. 2017; International Crisis Group 1 Dec. 2017). The senior analyst stated that people who live in social housing could be thrown out of their home (International Crisis Group 1 Dec. 2017). The Assistant Professor noted that colectivos are involved in public housing neighbourhoods, for example to ensure security (Assistant Professor 30 Nov. 2017). According to the report by the Office of the Commissioner of Human Rights, "colectivos controlled activities in low-income areas in cities"; for example, "they decide who receives government assistance and perform surveillance and intelligence activities for the authorities" (UN Aug. 2017, 29).

3. Presence and Activities of Pro-Government Groups Outside of Caracas

According to the senior analyst, in general, armed colectivos are present in all large cities and in some small cities in Venezuela (International Crisis Group 1 Dec. 2017). Human Rights Watch and Foro Penal documented 88 cases involving at least 314 people who, between April and September 2017, were victims of "serious human rights violations" committed by security forces and colectivos, in Caracas and 13 other states (Human Rights Watch and Foro Penal Nov. 2017, 1).

3.1 Maracaibo

Among the incidents documented by Human Rights Watch and Foro Penal in the report published in November 2017, some concern violations committed in the state of Zulia [of which Maracaibo is the capital] (Human Rights Watch and Foro Penal Nov. 2017, 1). According to the Assistant Professor, colectivos are present in Maracaibo and, during the demonstrations from April to June 2017, colectivos came to the protests and harassed the demonstrators (Assistant Professor 30 Nov. 2017). According to the same source, the mayor of San Francisco, on the southern side of Maracaibo, is suspected of having strong connections to the colectivos (Assistant Professor 30 Nov. 2017). In June 2017, on its website, the Zulia branch of Primero Justicia, a Venezuelan opposition political party (*PHW* 2015, 1624), reports that, according to protesters, the colectivos were sent into the streets by the mayor of San Francisco, Omar Prieto (Primero Justicia Zulia 20 June 2017).

3.2 Valencia

Among the incidents documented by Human Rights Watch and Foro Penal in the report published in November 2017, some concern abuses committed in the state of Carabobo [of which Valencia is the capital] (Human Rights Watch and Foro Penal Nov. 2017, 1). According to the senior analyst, the presence and activities of armed colectivos in Valencia is "very much in evidence" (International Crisis Group 1 Dec. 2017). For example, according to the same source, a former governor of the state of Carabobo was often accused of directing colectivos, including through a tweet in which he appeared to give instructions (International Crisis Group 1 Dec. 2017). According to the senior analyst, a video recording of the 2014 protests shows motorcycles entering and leaving a military facility in Valencia, which suggests that they went in to get instructions (International Crisis Group 1 Dec. 2017). According to sources, some protesters were shot dead during the protests in Valencia in 2014 by civilians on motorcycles (International Crisis Group 1 Dec. 2017; *Latin Times* 19 Feb. 2014).

4. State Protection

According to sources, there is no state protection available for individuals who refuse to participate in the colectivos' activities (International Crisis Group 1 Dec. 2017; Assistant Professor 30 Nov. 2017). According to the senior analyst, there is no rule of law in Venezuela and while the constitution prohibits discrimination and there exists progressive institutions such as the office of the Ombudsman, there is no recourse apart from at an international level (International Crisis Group 1 Dec. 2017). According to that same source, the government has made it clear that these recourses, such as the international courts, have no jurisdiction in Venezuela (International Crisis Group 1 Dec. 2017). According to the Assistant Professor, any protection would be informal, for example, using connections with someone more powerful or merely "say[ing] what you have to say" to avoid participating in an activity (Assistant Professor 30 Nov. 2017). According to the same source, an individual without access to such connections or resources would be vulnerable (Assistant Professor 30 Nov. 2017). According to the senior analyst, even individuals at a high level in the political hierarchy may be affected, and someone located at lower levels would have very little protection (International Crisis Group 1 Dec. 2017). According to the Lecturer, there is little recourse for someone who refuses to participate in a rally during the election period (Lecturer 30 Nov. 2017). According to that same source, if an individual works for a state enterprise and refuses to participate in a rally when the employer wants them to join, they will be accused of siding with the opposition (Lecturer 30 Nov. 2017). According to the Lecturer, given that shortages are real, limited freedom of expression and dissent, and social pressure, self-censorship takes place (Lecturer 30 Nov. 2017). Therefore, although the employer may not explicitly state that someone may be dismissed for not participating in a rally, employees fear reprisals (Lecturer

30 Nov. 2017). According to that same source, it is rare that individuals will contact the police willingly to file a complaint because the police in Venezuela have a bad reputation and are known to commit robberies themselves (Lecturer 30 Nov. 2017).

This Response was prepared after researching publicly accessible information currently available to the Research Directorate within time constraints. This Response is not, and does not purport to be, conclusive as to the merit of any particular claim for refugee protection. Please find below the list of sources consulted in researching this Information Request.

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