



COI QUERY

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Reference period	January 2016-26 April 2023
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COI QUERY RESPONSE – Venezuela

Activities of the Bolivarian militia (January 2016-April 2023)

1. Information on whether members of the Bolivarian Militia can simultaneously work in a public enterprise, while keeping the militia position

1.1. Background information on the Bolivarian Militia

In a report released in September 2020, the UN Human Rights Council described the Bolivarian Militia¹ as a ‘civic-military union’, consisting of volunteers wishing to defend security of the country.² The Militia was originally created in 2005 by then-president Hugo Chávez.³ It

¹ Also referred to in this query response as ‘the Militia’ or ‘militia’

² UN Human Rights Council, Detailed findings of the independent international fact-finding mission on the Bolivarian Republic of Venezuela, A/HRC/45/CRP.11, 15 September 2020, [url](#), paras. 183-184

³ El Mundo, Maduro saca a la calle la Milicia para controlar las colas para comprar electrodomésticos, 12 November 2013, [url](#); InSight Crime, Maduro to Create Armed ‘Workers Militias’ in Venezuela, 24 May 2013, [url](#); KAS, Venezuela: The Chosen Path to National Defense. A Critical Perspective of Its Domestic and Regional Impact, n.d., [url](#), p. 92

became a ‘complementary’ unit of armed forces in 2008⁴, and in 2020 it officially became a fifth pillar of the Venezuelan armed forces, or FANB (Fuerza Armada Nacional Bolivariana-The Bolivarian National Armed Forces).⁵ The Militia is defined as a ‘special component’ of the FANB by Article 22 of the 2020 Constitutional Law of the Bolivarian National Armed Forces.⁶

Before the 2020 constitutional reform, the Militia was described as ‘a volunteer body’, consisting largely of personnel without any military training⁷ and equipment⁸ and was involved mostly in welfare programs, such as food production and distribution⁹.

According to a 2015 report by Chr. Michelsen Institute (CMI), ‘anyone can volunteer to participate in the militia’, and no previous military experience was required.¹⁰ Sources stated that many Militia members were senior citizens.¹¹ Sources reported on cases when the militia exercises were not taken seriously due to a lack of professionalism and a high participation of elderly citizens.¹² According to Wilson Center, militia ‘consists mostly of part-timers with limited training and poor equipment’.¹³ According to an article by Efecto Cocuyo, a Venezuelan news outlet, the Militia members did not have knowledge how to use weapons.¹⁴

Following the incorporation of the Militia into the FANB, sources reported on a training of the Militia with the armed forces in February 2020.¹⁵ According to an article by Argentinian newspaper Clarin from 14 February 2020, some militia members received [informal translation] ‘periodic training’ that did not necessarily involve training with weapons.¹⁶ According to the

⁴ Al Jazeera, Venezuela adds civilian militia to armed forces, 11 February 2023, [url](#); Strønen, I. Å., Servants of the nation, defenders of la patria: The Bolivarian Militia in Venezuela, in: Chr. Michelsen Institute, 2015, [url](#), pp. 1, 4

⁵ Dialogo Americas, Maduro’s Militia as Official Branch of the Armed Force is Unconstitutional, 5 March 2020, [url](#); Open Democracy, Institutional violence in Venezuela: What are militias and colectivos?, 3 July 2020, [url](#); UN Human Rights Council, Detailed findings of the independent international fact-finding mission on the Bolivarian Republic of Venezuela, A/HRC/45/CRP.11, 15 September 2020, [url](#), para. 184

⁶ Venezuela, Ley Constitucional de la Fuerza Armada Nacional Bolivariana [Constitutional Law of the Bolivarian National Armed Forces], 2020, [url](#)

⁷ International Crisis Group, Venezuela’s Military Enigma, 16 September 2019, [url](#), p. 4

⁸ Netherlands, Ministry of Foreign Affairs, General Country of Origin Information Report Venezuela 2020, 11 June 2020, [url](#), p. 75

⁹ International Crisis Group, Venezuela’s Military Enigma, 16 September 2019, [url](#), p. 4

¹⁰ Strønen, I. Å., Servants of the nation, defenders of la patria: The Bolivarian Militia in Venezuela, CMI, 2015, [url](#), p. 5

¹¹ Al Jazeera, Venezuela adds civilian militia to armed forces, 11 February 2023, [url](#); Clarin, Amas de casa, ancianos, jóvenes con discapacidades: las milicias de Nicolás Maduro para defender al chavismo, 14 February 2020, [url](#); Dialogo Americas, Maduro’s Militia as Official Branch of the Armed Force is Unconstitutional, 5 March 2020, [url](#); Kootneeti (The), Venezuela’s Armed Forces – Caught up in Crisis, n.d., [url](#), p. 4

¹² Al Jazeera, Venezuela adds civilian militia to armed forces, 11 February 2023, [url](#); BBC News Mundo, Qué es y quiénes integran la milicia, el cuerpo de civiles voluntarios dispuestos a ‘dar la vida’ por 12 Venezuela, 28 August 2017, [url](#)

¹³ Wilson Center, Venezuela’s Bolivarian Armed Force: Fear and Interest in the Face of Political Change, July 2021, [url](#), p. 4

¹⁴ Efecto Cocuyo, Comisión de Defensa de AN: Milicianos no están capacitados para portar armas de guerra, 9 December 2019, [url](#)

¹⁵ Dialogo Americas, Maduro’s Militia as Official Branch of the Armed Force is Unconstitutional, 5 March 2020, [url](#); Naval Post, Venezuela kicks off “Bolivarian Shield 2020” exercise with 2.3 million combatants, 16 February 2020, [url](#); Reuters, Venezuela holds military exercises as Maduro attempts to show force, 15 February 2020, [url](#)

¹⁶ Clarin, Amas de casa, ancianos, jóvenes con discapacidades: las milicias de Nicolás Maduro para defender al chavismo, 14 February 2020, [url](#)

CIA's The World Factbook page on Venezuela updated on 18 April 2023, the Militia 'is comprised of armed civilians who receive periodic training in exchange for a small stipend'.¹⁷

Estimated numbers of members of the militia vary. They have reportedly grown over the past years, from around 100 000 in April 2017¹⁸, 1.6 million in December 2018¹⁹, to more than 3 million in 2019²⁰, and 4.1 million in April 2020, according to statements by President Nicolas Maduro.²¹ In a page last updated in April 2023, the CIA's The World Factbook estimates members of the Bolivarian Militia at 200 000-225 000.²²

1.2. *Employment of the Militia members in public enterprises*

An undated article published by Konrad Adenauer Foundation (Konrad-Adenauer-Stiftung-KAS) stated that the Militia is 'composed by citizens working for public or private institutions who are voluntarily enlisted'.²³ An older article by El Mundo from November 2013 indicated that the Militia consisted of personnel from public institutions and companies, such as the state-owned oil enterprise Petróleos de Venezuela (PDVSA).²⁴ According to a report by the Dutch Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MFA) published in June 2020, volunteers who decided to join the militia enjoyed various benefits including a prospect of government jobs.²⁵ According to a journalist interviewed by EASO for the 2020 Venezuela report, members of the Bolivarian militia included 'public servants'.²⁶

The 2015 study on the Bolivarian Militia by CMI noted that 'many of those [militia members] interviewed performed public service, such as guarding public sites and actively interacting with local communities, on a regular basis'.²⁷ The same report noted that '[w]hilst most members have ordinary day jobs, those who perform public services, such as standing guard, follow a work schedule and receive a minor compensation for their labor'.²⁸ BBC News Mundo reported in August 2017 that some militia members received a minimum wage, while in most

¹⁷ CIA, The World Factbook, Venezuela, last updated 18 April 2023, [url](#)

¹⁸ UN Human Rights Council, Detailed findings of the independent international fact-finding mission on the Bolivarian Republic of Venezuela, A/HRC/45/CRP.11, 15 September 2020, [url](#), para. 183

¹⁹ CTC, Maduro's Revolutionary Guards: The Rise of Paramilitarism in Venezuela, August 2019, [url](#)

²⁰ Efecto Cocuyo, «Ley constitucional es un disparo al corazón de la Fanb», según Comisión de Defensa de la AN, 30 January 2020, [url](#); El Universal, Bolivariana alcanza los 3.300.000 integrantes, 8 december 2019, [url](#); VOA News, Venezuelan Leader Puts Militias on Patrol Ahead of Protests, 13 November 2019, [url](#)

²¹ UN Human Rights Council, Detailed findings of the independent international fact-finding mission on the Bolivarian Republic of Venezuela, A/HRC/45/CRP.11, 15 September 2020, [url](#), para. 183

²² CIA, The World Factbook, Venezuela, last updated 18 April 2023, [url](#)

²³ KAS, Venezuela: The Chosen Path to National Defense. A Critical Perspective of Its Domestic and Regional Impact, n.d., [url](#), pp. 97-98

²⁴ El Mundo, Maduro saca a la calle la Milicia para controlar las colas para comprar electrodomésticos, 12 November 2013, [url](#)

²⁵ Netherlands, Ministry of Foreign Affairs, General Country of Origin Information Report Venezuela 2020, 11 June 2020, [url](#), p. 76

²⁶ EASO, Venezuela Country Focus, August 2020, [url](#), p. 27

²⁷ Strønen, I. Å., Servants of the nation, defenders of la patria: The Bolivarian Militia in Venezuela, in: Chr. Michelsen Institute, 2015, [url](#), p. 11

²⁸ Strønen, I. Å., Servants of the nation, defenders of la patria: The Bolivarian Militia in Venezuela, in: Chr. Michelsen Institute, 2015, [url](#), p. 5

cases they were given only military clothing.²⁹ During the trainings, militia members received meals.³⁰

Additional information on employment of the Militia members in public enterprises could not be found among the sources consulted by the EUAA within the time constraints of this query. However, the following information could be relevant.

According to the 2020 EASO Venezuela COI report, members of *colectivos*³¹ included government employees and members of security forces.³² Sources indicated that some members of *colectivos*³³ were at the same time members of the militia.³⁴ According to the International Crisis Group, as reported in February 2020, this was the case for ‘many’ *colectivos*.³⁵ According to an article by *El Tiempo* from January 2019, as reported by Combating Terrorism Center (CTC), ‘[l]ocal militia branches are often informally incorporated into local *colectivo* groups as *colectivo* members are often enlisted into their ranks.’³⁶ According to an expert interviewed by the Immigration and Refugee Board of Canada (IRB) for a report about *colectivos*, ‘government employees ... “may” experience pressure to “participate in militia activities”.’³⁷ The same source stated that there was an ‘overlap’ between *colectivos* and security forces.³⁸ Moreover, UN Human Rights Council noted in a report published in September 2020 that membership in the Bolivarian Militia ‘appears to overlap’ with membership in another armed actors such as, for example, the Bolívar and Chávez Battle Units (UBCh), or the Popular Units for Integral Defence (UPDI).³⁹

²⁹ BBC News Mundo, Qué es y quiénes integran la milicia, el cuerpo de civiles voluntarios dispuestos a ‘dar la vida’ por 12 Venezuela, 28 August 2017, [url](#)

³⁰ Netherlands, Ministry of Foreign Affairs, General Country of Origin Information Report Venezuela 2020, 11 June 2020, [url](#), p. 76

³¹ The August 2020 EASO COI report on Venezuela describes *colectivos* as diverse groups including those doing community work, promotion of government social programs, but also ‘paramilitary groups’ or ‘pro-government militias’, among other terms. See: EASO, Venezuela Country Focus, August 2020, [url](#), p. 95

³² EASO, Venezuela Country Focus, August 2020, [url](#), pp. 27, 98

³³ The August 2020 EASO COI report on Venezuela describes *colectivos* as diverse groups including those doing community work, promotion of government social programs, but also ‘paramilitary groups’ or ‘pro-government militias’, among other terms. See: EASO, Venezuela Country Focus, August 2020, [url](#), p. 95

³⁴ CTC, Maduro’s Revolutionary Guards: The Rise of Paramilitarism in Venezuela, August 2019, [url](#); International Crisis Group, A Glut of Arms: Curbing the Threat to Venezuela from Violent Groups, 20 February 2020, [url](#), p. 8; InSight Crime, Venezuela’s Leftist Collectives: Criminals or Revolutionaries? 24 November 2014, available at: [url](#)

³⁵ International Crisis Group, A Glut of Arms: Curbing the Threat to Venezuela from Violent Groups, 20 February 2020, [url](#), p. 8

³⁶ CTC, Maduro’s Revolutionary Guards: The Rise of Paramilitarism in Venezuela, August 2019, [url](#)

³⁷ IRB, Venezuela: Pro-government groups (also known as *colectivos*), including the Tupamaros [also known as the Revolutionary Tupamaros Movement (Movimiento Revolucionario Tupamaro, MRT)]; their areas of operation, objectives, activities, and relationship with the government, including instances of collusion; whether these groups operate under a unified command and the nature of cooperation among the different cells throughout the country (2021–January 2023), 7 February 2023, [url](#)

³⁸ IRB, Venezuela: Pro-government groups (also known as *colectivos*), including the Tupamaros [also known as the Revolutionary Tupamaros Movement (Movimiento Revolucionario Tupamaro, MRT)]; their areas of operation, objectives, activities, and relationship with the government, including instances of collusion; whether these groups operate under a unified command and the nature of cooperation among the different cells throughout the country (2021–January 2023), 7 February 2023, [url](#)

³⁹ UN Human Rights Council, Detailed findings of the independent international fact-finding mission on the Bolivarian Republic of Venezuela, A/HRC/45/CRP.11, 15 September 2020, [url](#), para. 239

2. Information on whether tasks of the members of the Bolivarian Militia include training of the colectivos members, especially regarding their treatment of protesters

No information about members of the Bolivarian Militia training the members of colectivos, or, more specifically, training them regarding their treatment of protesters, could be found in sources consulted by the EUAA within the time constraints of this query. However, the following information could be relevant.

The Ministry of Defense of Venezuela describes on its website functions of the Bolivarian Militia that include a training role in the following points [informal translation]:

- '1. Enlist, organize, equip, instruct, train and retrain the formed Bolivarian Militia units. [...]
- 3. Organize and train the Territorial Militia and the Combatant Corps, to execute integral defense operations aimed at guaranteeing national sovereignty and independence'.⁴⁰

In February 2020, Reuters reported that after the Militia officially became a part of FANB, training became one their listed tasks,⁴¹ as stipulated by article 61 of Constitutional Law of the Bolivarian National Armed Forces from 2020.⁴²

According to a report by UN Human Rights Council from September 2020:

'Four different former military officials with whom the Mission spoke said that the colectivos are hired to administer Government social programs as a way of channelling money to them as payment for their "services". According to other former State employees interviewed by the Mission, the Government uses the figure of Bolivarian Militia to pay the colectivos in an official way. There is also information that some members of colectivos are also serving in State security forces'.⁴³

Concerning the training of colectivos, sources indicated that they were trained by 'the Venezuelan government'⁴⁴, by 'the military or the police'⁴⁵, 'Colombian rebels'⁴⁶, or, as reported by an intelligence firm Grey Dynamics, 'FARC [Revolutionary Armed Forces of

⁴⁰ Venezuela, Ministerio del Poder Popular para la Defensa-Ministry of Defense, Funciones de la Milicia Bolivariana, n.d., available at: [url](#)

⁴¹ Reuters, Venezuela makes civilian militia part of armed forces, 11 February 2020, [url](#)

⁴² Venezuela, Ley Constitucional de la Fuerza Armada Nacional Bolivariana [Constitutional Law of the Bolivarian National Armed Forces], 2020, [url](#)

⁴³ UN Human Rights Council, Detailed findings of the independent international fact-finding mission on the Bolivarian Republic of Venezuela, A/HRC/45/CRP.11, 15 September 2020, [url](#), para. 2019

⁴⁴ CNN, The Venezuelan radio host leading an armed 'colectivo' in support of Maduro, 24 May 2019, [url](#)

⁴⁵ USA Today News, Venezuelan President Maduro often uses 'colectivos' rather than military to maintain order, [2019], [url](#)

⁴⁶ InSight Crime, Guerrilla-Trained 'Colectivo' Threatens Humanitarian Aid to Venezuela, 6 February 2019, [url](#)

Colombia], ELN [National Liberation Army, Colombia], and Wagner reportedly provided military training to groups in Táchira'.⁴⁷

According to an older article by El Mundo published in February 2014, one of the roles of the Militia was to repress protests [informal translation] 'together with paramilitary groups such as the feared Tupamaro'.⁴⁸

According to a July 2017 report by Amnesty International (AI), boosting capacities of the Bolivarian militia is a part of '[t]he development of apparatuses designed exclusively for the prosecution of demonstrators and suspected dissidents'.⁴⁹ In a report from November 2017, Human Rights Watch (HRW) wrote that "‘Colectivos’ at times worked alongside Venezuelan security forces to suppress demonstrations", without explicitly mentioning the Bolivarian militia and its role in the training. The same report concluded that the government and pro-government forces 'systematically used disproportionate force to suppress anti-government protests' between April and July 2017.⁵⁰

In August 2017, the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR) released a report looking into abuses against protestors in Venezuela that found that 'the joint operation of armed forces, militias and peoples' forces' announced by Maduro in April 2017 'resulted in increased violence against demonstrators'.⁵¹ In the period between 1 April - 31 July 2017, between 124-157 deaths in relation to demonstrations were recorded, as well as estimated 2 000-12 000 injured persons in a context of demonstrations.⁵² This happened under the 'Plan Zamora', aiming at achieving 'internal order' by cooperated activities of the armed forces (including Bolivarian Militia), police, and intelligence.⁵³ Additional information on treatment of protesters by the Bolivarian Militia could not be found among the sources consulted by the EUAA within time constraints.

In April 2019, as reported by the Guardian in the context of an electricity rationing plan in Venezuela, 'Maduro has called on armed pro-government groups to help subdue unrest'.⁵⁴ One woman was reportedly shot dead by members of one colectivo in the Zulia state.⁵⁵

According to a March 2019 report by InSight Crime, colectivos 'have been allowed to act with impunity in exchange for their support in combating anti-government protests'.⁵⁶

⁴⁷ Grey Dynamics, Colectivos: Maduro's Venezuelan Militias, 1 January 2022, [url](#)

⁴⁸ El Mundo, Los guardianes de la revolución, 25 February 2014, [url](#)

⁴⁹ Amnesty International, Venezuela: Lethal violence, a state policy to strangle dissent, 10 July 2017, [url](#)

⁵⁰ HRW, Crackdown on Dissent, Brutality, Torture, and Political Persecution in Venezuela, November 2017, [url](#), pp. 5, 54

⁵¹ OHCHR, Human rights violations and abuses in the context of protests in the Bolivarian Republic of Venezuela from 1 April to 31 July 2017, August 2017, [url](#), p. 8

⁵² OHCHR, Human rights violations and abuses in the context of protests in the Bolivarian Republic of Venezuela from 1 April to 31 July 2017, August 2017, [url](#), p. 10, 14

⁵³ UN Human Rights Council, Detailed findings of the independent international fact-finding mission on the Bolivarian Republic of Venezuela, A/HRC/45/CRP.11, 15 September 2020, [url](#), paras. 229-232

⁵⁴ The Guardian, Venezuela: Maduro calls on armed groups to keep order amid electricity rationing, 1 April 2019, [url](#)

⁵⁵ The Guardian, Venezuela: Maduro calls on armed groups to keep order amid electricity rationing, 1 April 2019, [url](#)

⁵⁶ InSight Crime, Maduro Relies on 'Colectivos' to Stand Firm in Venezuela, 18 March 2019, [url](#)

According to a source interviewed for the Dutch MFA 2020 report, militia members were deployed to crack down on demonstrations, but another source interviewed for the same report was unable to corroborate this.⁵⁷

3. Information on consequences for members of the Bolivarian Militia who have refused to obey orders

No information on consequences for members of the Bolivarian Militia who have refused to follow orders could be found among the sources consulted by the EUAA within the time constraints of this query. However, the following information could be relevant.

According to a report by UN Human Rights Council from September 2020, the conduct of members of the Bolivarian Militia was regulated by the Law on Military Discipline from December 2015.⁵⁸ The law is available in Spanish⁵⁹. An English translation of the law could not be found among the sources consulted by the EUAA.

The Venezuelan Law on Military Discipline from December 2015 in Article 33, under the Section on ‘Classification of Offenses’ of chapter I regarding ‘Disciplinary Offenses’ states: [informal translation] ‘[Disciplinary offense] It is any act or omission of the military man or woman in active service in the Bolivarian National Armed Force, as well as of the personnel of the Bolivarian Militia in a situation of mobilization, which implies the simple transgression of the duties, obligations, prohibitions and other provisions established in this Law, which brings as a consequence the application of the disciplinary measures provided herein, without prejudice to the civil, criminal or administrative liability that may be applicable.’⁶⁰

The aforementioned Law under the Section on ‘Classification of Offenses’ of chapter I regarding ‘Disciplinary Offenses’, classifies in article 36 as ‘mid-level offense’ the [informal translation] ‘Avoidance of the fulfillment of moral or legal commitments expressly embedded’⁶¹. The same Law also classifies in article 37 as ‘Serious Offenses’ to [informal translation] ‘Promote situations in order not to comply with a superior order or to delay its execution’ and [informal translation] ‘Failing to comply with an order due to negligence’⁶².

⁵⁷ Netherlands, Ministry of Foreign Affairs, General Country of Origin Information Report Venezuela 2020, 11 June 2020, [url](#), p. 83

⁵⁸ UN Human Rights Council, Detailed findings of the independent international fact-finding mission on the Bolivarian Republic of Venezuela, A/HRC/45/CRP.11, 15 September 2020, [url](#), p. 45

⁵⁹ Venezuela, Ley de Disciplina Militar, [The Law on Military Discipline], 2015, [url](#)

⁶⁰ Venezuela, Decreto N° 2.175 de fecha 30 de diciembre de 2015, con Rango, Valor y Fuerza de Ley de Reforma de la Ley del Estatuto de la Función Policial, publicado en la Gaceta Oficial de la República Bolivariana de Venezuela N° 6.210 Extraordinario de esa misma fecha, 2015, available at: [url](#)

⁶¹ Venezuela, Decreto N° 2.175 de fecha 30 de diciembre de 2015, con Rango, Valor y Fuerza de Ley de Reforma de la Ley del Estatuto de la Función Policial, publicado en la Gaceta Oficial de la República Bolivariana de Venezuela N° 6.210 Extraordinario de esa misma fecha, 2015, available at: [url](#)

⁶² Venezuela, Decreto N° 2.175 de fecha 30 de diciembre de 2015, con Rango, Valor y Fuerza de Ley de Reforma de la Ley del Estatuto de la Función Policial, publicado en la Gaceta Oficial de la República Bolivariana de Venezuela N° 6.210 Extraordinario de esa misma fecha, 2015, available at: [url](#)

Information on the implementation of the Law on Military Discipline could not be found among the sources consulted by the EUAA within the time constraints of this query.

Additional information on the treatment of military personnel by the authorities, including on desertion, discharge from service, and dissidents, can be found in the 2020 EASO COI report on Venezuela.⁶³

According to an investigator interviewed by IRB in 2023 on a topic of pro-government groups, 'if a person is unwilling to work with these groups, "they are unlikely to get a position [in government] to start with or they will not stay in position for a very long time".'⁶⁴

A 2019 CTC report noted that access of military officers to public offices depended on loyalty to the United Socialist Party of Venezuela (Partido Socialista Unido de Venezuela, or PSUV), while dissident officers were 'discharged'.⁶⁵

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Canada, IRB (Immigration and Refugee Board of Canada), Venezuela: Pro-government groups (also known as colectivos), including the Tupamaros [also known as the Revolutionary

⁶³ EASO, Venezuela Country Focus, August 2020, [url](#), pp. 59-62

⁶⁴ IRB, Venezuela: Pro-government groups (also known as colectivos), including the Tupamaros [also known as the Revolutionary Tupamaros Movement (Movimiento Revolucionario Tupamaro, MRT)]; their areas of operation, objectives, activities, and relationship with the government, including instances of collusion; whether these groups operate under a unified command and the nature of cooperation among the different cells throughout the country (2021–January 2023), 7 February 2023, [url](#)

⁶⁵ CTC, Maduro's Revolutionary Guards: The Rise of Paramilitarism in Venezuela, August 2019, [url](#)

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