

In Venezuela, Maduro's squeeze on NGOs threatens humanitarian aid

‘We are facing a disproportionate level of regulation that is very difficult to comply with.’



Last month, the Venezuelan government [removed the Red Cross's president](#) and liquidated its board, part of what aid and rights groups see as a broader effort to limit and control their activities in a country where the UN says one in five people need humanitarian assistance.

Two weeks before the court's early August decision, Diosdado Cabello, the number two in President Nicolás Maduro's ruling PSUV party, had [accused Mario Villarroel of conspiring against Maduro](#) and of "mafia-style activity" in the handling of the Red Cross's finances.

Venezuelan activists say that even if the allegations of corruption and employee abuse against Villarroel were true, the removal is an overreach by the state that sets a dangerous precedent, imperilling the independence of humanitarian and human rights organisations.

“We view the strategy and approach of the government in this matter as a direct attack on both the liberty of association and the ability to maintain and manage independent NGOs,” Ali Daniels, co-director of Venezuelan legal watchdog [Access to Justice](#), told The New Humanitarian.

The accusations should, Daniels said, have been handled by civil and criminal courts and within the International Committee of the Red Cross rather than via decree by the Venezuelan Supreme Tribunal of Justice (TSJ), whose independence has been [highly questioned](#).

The TSJ, in a statement on the ruling, ordered a “broad and diverse restructuring” of the Red Cross, though it also assured that the group’s humanitarian efforts would continue unaffected.

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The Venezuelan Red Cross operates eight permanent hospitals and maintains 33 “mobile health centres” that travel to communities in need to provide care, according to Communications Director Luis Manuel Farías.

“We have branches in every department of the country,” Farías told The New Humanitarian. “Our primary focus is on health needs. But we also have disaster relief and nutritional security teams. We have around 1,000 employees, and another 4,000 volunteers.”

Farías said that services provided by the Red Cross have not been affected by the removal of leadership, and that ongoing operations are being coordinated with the IFRC.

The IFRC has promised an investigation into Villaroel’s firing, as has the Venezuelan Red Cross.

Neither Venezuela's Office of the Presidency and Monitoring of Government Management, nor the Health Ministry, nor members of the TSJ responded to requests for comments in time for publication.

Shrinking space for civilian groups

Villarroel’s sacking comes as civilian organisations accuse Venezuela’s government of waging a broader campaign aimed at hampering their activities.

In January, the National Assembly – a legislative body controlled by Maduro’s party whose authority isn’t recognised by the United States or the EU – presented [a draft law](#) that creates new legal and operational hurdles for NGOs, including how they are funded. If they do not comply, they can be dissolved.

The “anti-society law” was [denounced](#) by more than 400 organisations as part of “an attack and harassment against democratic society”.

Days before the Red Cross intervention, the TSJ [ruled](#) against the internal elections of a ranchers’ association in the state of Táchira and those of a local chapter of the business guild Fedecámaras – ordering the old boards to remain in place.

Susana Raffalli, a nutritionist and humanitarian activist in Venezuela, told The New Humanitarian that Maduro’s government views NGOs and aid groups as part of the political opposition, and their work is heavily regulated. To limit their activities, she said it continuously discredits their work and paints them as controlled by foreign actors.

This kind of persecution, Raffalli said, is not new.

In January 2021, [five members](#) of [Azul Positivo](#), an NGO assisting people with HIV that has collaborated with several UN agencies, [were arrested](#) for alleged “criminal association” and “money laundering”. A few months earlier, [Alimenta La Solidaridad](#), a charity providing children with meals, was raided and had its finances probed because the government accused it of involvement in political activities, Raffalli said.

Emergency aid has long been at the centre of political tensions between Maduro's government and the opposition, which claims his December 2018 election was illegitimate and accuses him of ignoring Venezuela's worsening humanitarian crisis.

“Any setback or delay of humanitarian efforts is going to jeopardise the well-being of millions of people in a country desperate for continued aid.”

The situation escalated into a dramatic stand-off in February 2019 when Maduro ordered troops [to blockade a bridge](#) on the western border to stop a humanitarian aid convoy sent by opposition leaders entering from Colombia.

Although tensions have eased since, some experts worry what effect the new TSJ ruling could have on aid efforts in a country where malnutrition is rampant, the healthcare system has collapsed, and runaway inflation has made daily life for most Venezuelans a struggle. More than [7.7 million Venezuelans](#) have fled the country, with over 6.5 million settling in other Latin American and Caribbean countries.

“Any setback or delay of humanitarian efforts is going to jeopardise the well-being of millions of people in a country desperate for continued aid,” said Daniels.

The court's decision against the Red Cross also jeopardises human rights, said Rafael Uzcátegui, director of [Provea](#), Venezuela's oldest human rights organisation.

“Aside from being highly irregular from a legal standpoint, we worry that this same strategy could be applied not only against humanitarian NGOs, but also human rights and civil organisations,” Uzcátegui said about the TSJ ruling. “This is opening a Pandora's Box in regards to setting a legal precedent.”

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The decision to remove 75-year-old Villarroel, who led the country's Red Cross branch for 43 years, was based on accusations by the prosecutor's office that he had engaged in “harassment and ill-treatment” of employees.

In a statement, Venezuela's Red Cross expressed its "absolute and unrestricted support" for Villarroel. But according to [investigations published in the Venezuelan media](#), he maintained a tight grip over the organisation and would arbitrarily fire employees who disagreed with him.

A senior staff member of the Venezuelan Red Cross who insisted on anonymity told The New Humanitarian that Villarroel would boast of his ties to Venezuela's judiciary to intimidate co-workers. Such missteps may have presented the Maduro government with an opportunity to tighten its grip over civil society organisations. Villarroel denies the accusations.

The TSJ appointed a new board that includes leading businessmen, university authorities, and even an Olympic athlete. It is now led by Ricardo Cussano, the former president of Fedecámaras. Cussano is also a member of [Foro Cívico](#), a group that seeks to democratise Venezuela through existing government institutions.

"We want to establish a governance and management style with more open and transparent processes," Cussano told The New Humanitarian.

According to journalist Pedro Pablo Peñaloza, who has written about the relations between Fedecámaras and Maduro's government, the Venezuelan Red Cross hasn't been formally taken over by Maduro's government, but rather seems to be "collateral damage" of elite infighting. The authorities' objective, he said, wasn't taking over the institution but removing Villarroel because of his alleged influence within the judiciary. They resorted to non-regime figures to enact these actions to make it seem less like a governmental intervention.

To Raffalli, the nutritionist and humanitarian adviser, the government intervention in the Red Cross's leadership shows that humanitarian organisations are now being used as "spaces to dialogue and negotiate with the government". The fact that figures close to Foro Cívico as well as businessmen who belong to [reformist groups](#) are part of the new board is a sign of that, she added.

In recent years, human rights NGOs in Venezuela have cooperated with investigations by the International Criminal Court and by the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights into alleged crimes against humanity by the Venezuelan government.

The TSJ's recent intervention, Uzcátegui suggested, could worsen self-censorship: "Organisations are under pressure not to focus on human rights violations in the course of their work out of fear the government may begin to view them as a thorn in their side."

Barriers to humanitarian aid

After decades of mismanagement and government corruption, Venezuela has experienced the biggest economic contraction of any country outside of war, spurring an ongoing humanitarian crisis.

It has the second-highest rate of undernourishment in the Americas, [according to UNICEF](#). The 2022–2023 UN Humanitarian Response Plan for Venezuela [estimates](#) that 5.2 million people need

support in terms of health, food security and water, sanitation, and hygiene.

Strict government regulations and oversight on NGO financing has reduced the ability of some organisations to fund their activities, according to Raffalli.

“The government is now demanding that the financial activities of humanitarian NGOs at national and international banks be subjected to over-compliance,” she said. “We are facing a disproportionate level of regulation that is very difficult to comply with. This has made humanitarian responses slower and enormously more complex.”

The Maduro government has been [unwilling](#) to relinquish its control over aid deliveries or [to allow sufficient aid](#) to enter the country, according to a 2023 study by the Wilson Center, a non-partisan Washington-based research institute. But donors have also become more unwilling to assume the risks associated with disbursing funds in a heavily sanctioned country.

According to the Assessment Capacities Project (ACAPS), which measures barriers to the entry of development and humanitarian aid, in 2022 Venezuela faced [higher barriers](#) than countries at war or with long-running armed conflicts, such as Syria, Yemen, the Democratic Republic of the Congo, and Afghanistan.

These compliance issues have made donors less inclined to fund humanitarian organisations, and make it difficult to carry out basic financial transactions, [according to the Wilson Center](#) – especially in situations where a US or European bank account is necessary.

Raffalli said she also fears that humanitarian aid efforts in Venezuela have become part of the negotiations between the opposition and the government that are underway in Mexico. These talks have centred on a long-delayed deal to create [a humanitarian fund](#) for Venezuela.

“This is an aberration,” she said. “The humanitarian situation in the country and the need of humanitarian aid should never have been a bargaining chip in the dialogue agendas between the government and the opposition.”

Tony Frangie Mawad reported from Caracas, and Joshua Collins from Bogotá.

Edited by Daniela Mohor and Tom Brady.