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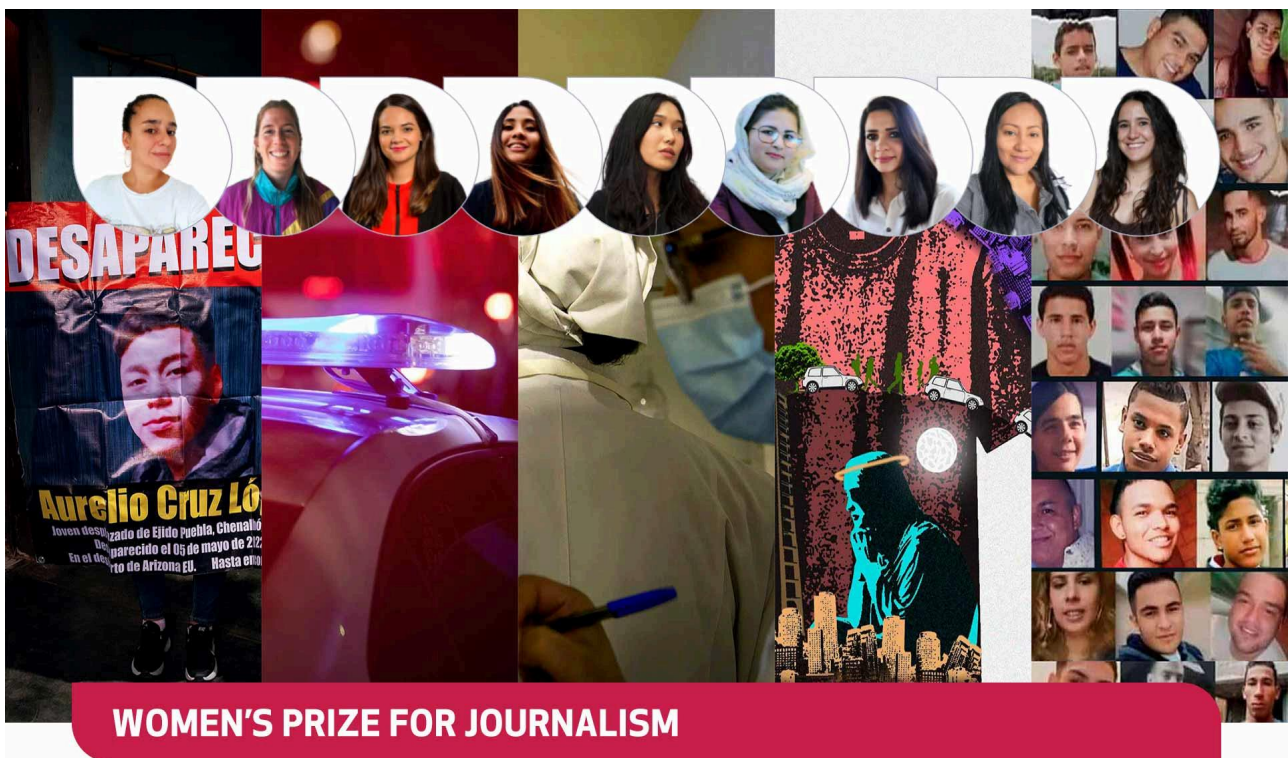
Venezuela: Even the Priests Say Amen

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'Hope of Mother', an organization led by Lisbeth Surita, has registered 48 cases of Venezuelans missing in the border regions.

One afternoon, in a town in the Venezuelan state of Táchira, close to the border with Colombia, 30 armed men arrived at the parish house aboard Toyota pickup trucks and motorcycles. Each wore a tunic marked with the inscription ELN, the initials of the National Liberation Army of Colombia guerrilla group.



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They surrounded the parish priest and asked if he had any weapons.

“In the house of God there are no weapons,” the priest told them.

Then one of the militants opened a folder that contained a sheet of paper.

“We are going to read you this booklet so that you live in peace and the church can remain here,” he said.

The ELN warned the priest - who must remain anonymous for security reasons - that if he failed to comply with their rules, he would disappear.

According to an investigation that includes around 30 interviews with teachers, former officials, civil society activists and villagers, the Colombian rebel group has consolidated its de facto rule in border parts of the Venezuelan states of Táchira and Apure.

The ELN, one of Columbia's most powerful insurgent groups, govern areas in the municipalities of Delicias, Junín, Las Mesas, Seboruco, Ureña and San Antonio in the state of Táchira, in the Venezuelan Andes, as well as the municipality of Páez in Apure, in the Los Llanos region.

This regime has been in place for more than a decade, maintained in the state's partial absence and in some cases with the complicity of the authorities.

The Táchira priest described the contents of the so-called "book of God" that militants read out to him. The first rule was that all locals must notify the guerrillas in advance if they visited the trails around the town as tolls from the passage of people and merchandise through these routes constitutes a key source of their income.

The guerrillas also told the priest that he must notify the ELN when he planned to visit the local area or accompany international agencies. He was not allowed to carry out community collections and warned not to speak to the media.

The priest said that the level of intimidation was terrifying, adding, "Honestly, your legs and heart are shaking."

He was told that any infringements would be met with penalties.

"People don't change if there is no punishment. Punishment is part of the organisation. If the man is not punished, the man doesn't change," he recalled being told by one of the commanders.

Guerrillas On the Rise

The ELN, a group with its roots in the 1960s, began to use Venezuelan territory as a refuge following the rise of Hugo Chávez to power in 1999. The ELN initially had less military importance and less territorial influence than the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC), the main guerrilla group in Colombia until the demobilisation that began in 2017. However, once FARC was demobilised, the ELN expanded to fill the territorial gaps it left.

"The ELN controls widespread and very lucrative criminal economies in Venezuela, among which smuggling, drug trafficking and illegal mining are the most profitable," read a report by the specialist Insight Crime media. "In areas dominated by the ELN, the guerrilla has replicated the political-military social model implemented in Colombia, through which goods, services and economic opportunities are provided to communities, while on the other hand parallel systems of taxation and administration are imposed."

The guerrilla group monitors who enters and leaves each area under its control.

A Jesuit leader who has worked in the rural areas of Alto Apure for more than two years recalled passing through a government checkpoint in Majumba, just a few metres before reaching El Nula, Apure state.

"What happens after here is your responsibility," an official told him.

The priest recounted how he also had to apply to the ELN for permission to allow for humanitarian organisations to enter the municipalities.

"Sometimes they approve it and then you have to go through the verification process. During the activity, they certify that humanitarian work is really being done," he said.

ELN logistics and communication are run through the state's Communal Councils, according to all 30 interviewees in the seven municipalities visited for this research.

"In Los Ríos, they eat in their houses and some even live in those houses," said one Seboruco official in Táchira state. "I have seen them with military boots, green pants, and how they travel on motorcycles and Hilux trucks. Some speak with a Colombian accent and others have an accent from central Venezuela."

Those who transgress ELN commandments or commit crimes are banished, sent to work in the fields or sentenced to cleaning the streets. Some are beaten or tied in the sun to trees or lamp posts.

Several teachers from the Delicias municipality, in Táchira, who asked to remain anonymous, recalled an incident in 2018 when the guerrillas entered the Simón Rodríguez School because some students had supposedly misbehaved.

The guerrillas took away five students, returning them five days later. The students reported having their heads shaved, being tied to trees crawling with ants and that some women were tortured by having their nails pulled out.

“No one dares to make mistakes. People do not file complaints, but rather they go to them. People want justice and they are the ones who achieve it,” said one Delicias teacher.

A former local official in the Seboruco municipality recounted how a group of young people, carrying brooms and cleaning products, had their heads shaven and were taken to the town's Plaza Bolívar, each wearing white shirts with the label, “I must take care of the square.”

This was their punishment for an act of vandalism.

“They had them like that for a week,” she continued. “And we can see this throughout the town. Anyone who disobeys is also sent to clean the streets. They say they want to maintain order and peace in the town, but they do it with violence and fear.”

In Guasdalito, Páez municipality, Apure state, a historical ELN enclave for more than 30 years, five people testified that the group carried out torture and punishment in rural areas.

“They tie people to horses or trees, completely naked,” one interviewee said.

Local government does not impinge on the ELN activities.

“When the guerrillas first arrived in the area, they asked the municipal authorities not to intervene in the work they carry out, an agreement that has been respected,” said an official from the Antonio Rómulo Costa municipality, in the northern area of Táchira.

“We are told numerous times to stay out of it. We don't dare ask them for any favours either, we know that they charge dearly,” said another municipal source.

Local Services

At the same time, the ELN works to build an image of vigilante heroes, attractive in lands abandoned for decades by the government authorities of Venezuela.

Less than two years ago, the guerrillas completely renovated a school in the Buena Vista village, Bolívar municipality of Táchira state.

“They changed the roofs, the kitchen and improved the infrastructure. In total, it was an investment of about five million Colombian pesos [1,300 US dollars]. They sent several workers to make the repairs,” said a local teacher, adding that similar improvements were made in the schools in the neighbouring sectors of Quebradas, La Línea and Hato Grande.

In the village of San Pablo, Seboruco municipality, a teacher said that several times the ELN had brought them paint and contributed with Christmas dinner and gifts for the schoolchildren.

“There is so much need that one even appreciates the help,” the teacher said. However, the philanthropy has a cost.

“I don't know where they live, but they know perfectly well where my house is, whether I come to work or not,” the teacher said. “I live far from the school, so they know what time I leave my house. They have my phone number and once offered me a salary. I didn't really accept it because I'm afraid of the consequences.”

The fear is palpable and few people dare to talk about it.

“Professor, here the less you ask, the more you live,” a guerilla told a teacher at a school in El Nula.

Young people in impoverished rural areas view these groups as an alternative source of adventure and empowerment.

Three municipal school coordinators from Junín, Táchira, who asked to remain anonymous, confirmed that students took on various roles; informants, smugglers and even hitmen.

“Many of our students arrive late at night and tell us that they traffic gasoline all night,” added a researcher from a national organisation in Táchira. “They offer them motorcycles, a weekly salary, women and to pay their families' expenses.”

“Students make alliances with these groups because it means power for them. Many tell us, 'Why study, teacher, if what I earn in one night smuggling gasoline is more than a fortnight's salary at home?'” said a researcher from a national educational organisation, adding that children as young as 12 joined the ELN.

The Jesuit priest from Alto Apure said that given the lack of other opportunities, young people believed that this was the best route to support themselves and their families, adding, “The most attractive thing for a 16-year- old is to join the guerrillas.”

Claudia Smolansky and Anggy Polanco are independent Venezuelan journalists.

This is an edited version of their investigation, originally published by Armando.Info. A related report can be found [here](#).