

Venezuela: Political Prisoners Cut Off from the World

Incommunicado Detention; Political Persecution



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Activists and relatives of prisoners release balloons calling for the freedom of political prisoners, in Caracas, Venezuela, April 14, 2025. © 2025 AP Photo/Ariana Cubillos

- Dozens of political prisoners in Venezuela have been held incommunicado for weeks, months, and some for over a year.
- The lack of communication and denial of visits has become a form of torture, inflicting suffering not only on those behind bars but also on their loved ones.
- Foreign governments should use regional and international forums to press for political prisoners' rights, including ending incommunicado detention and securing their unconditional release. The Vatican should do the same at the upcoming canonization of two Venezuelans.

(Washington, DC) – Dozens of political prisoners in [Venezuela](#) have been held incommunicado for weeks, months and some for over a year, Human Rights Watch and the Committee for the Freedom of Political Prisoners in Venezuela (Comité por la Libertad de los Presos Políticos, CLIPPVE) said today.

“These cases of political prisoners who have been cut off from their families and lawyers are a chilling testament to the brutality of repression in Venezuela,” said [Juanita Goebertus](#), Americas director at Human Rights Watch. “Governments should spare no diplomatic efforts to ensure that these detainees are released.”

Human Rights Watch and CLIPPVE documented 19 cases of incommunicado detention. The organizations interviewed relatives of those detained and reviewed documents and requests that the families and their lawyers submitted to Venezuelan authorities seeking visiting rights, all of which went unanswered.

In most of the cases documented, the people detained had ties with opposition political parties. Most have been denied visits and phone calls since the day of their arrest.

On August 24, 2025, Venezuelan authorities [released](#) 13 political prisoners, some of whom had been held in incommunicado detention. Among them was Américo De Grazia, an opposition leader from Bolívar state and member of the opposition’s campaign team in the July 28, 2024 presidential election. Hooded men abducted him on his way to a doctor’s appointment on August 7, 2024. His family had spent over 380 days cut off from any direct contact with him.

Most of those detained incommunicado were held in Helicoide prison, a former mall in Caracas that functions as the headquarters of the Bolivarian National Intelligence Service (Servicio Bolivariano de Inteligencia Nacional, SEBIN). The United Nations Independent International Fact-Finding Mission on the Bolivarian Republic of Venezuela has [said](#) that Helicoide has torture rooms.

Freddy Superlano, national coordinator of the opposition party Voluntad Popular, has been held incommunicado since hooded men abducted him on July 30, 2024. On August 6, 2024, a SEBIN officer in Helicoide prison confirmed he was there. His wife said she only knew he was alive because prison guards routinely handed her his dirty clothes and brief notes from him asking her to bring basic necessities to the prison. On August 31, 2025, his wife was unofficially told he was transferred along with Roland Carreño, a journalist from the same party held incommunicado since August 2, 2024. Authorities have not confirmed their whereabouts.

Some others are being held in Rodeo I, a high-security prison in Miranda state. Political prisoners, including foreign nationals, held there have spent months in incommunicado detention. However, in May some of them were allowed to make a phone call.

In many cases, authorities have denied arrests or withheld information about detainees' whereabouts, in what amount to enforced disappearances under international law. Families often searched detention centers and morgues but only learned of detainees' locations through tips, or because prison guards agreed to accept personal belongings or because they received calls from public defenders, often several days after the arrest.

Even when families learned the detainees' whereabouts, visits are routinely denied. Many relatives said that dirty clothes and notes seeking personal items are the only proof they receive that their loved one is alive. Some families who live in other parts of the country must travel hundreds of miles to Caracas for these minimal interactions.

Some detainees have preexisting medical conditions that require monitoring, while others appear to have developed health problems during their detention. Relatives said they have not received official updates on their condition or formal prescriptions for medication.

Many of those arrested face charges of "terrorism" and "incitement to hatred." They are accused of financing or promoting "destabilizing acts" and conspiring against Maduro's government. In many cases, they were charged in virtual hearings, where they were denied the right to a lawyer of their choosing. In some cases, families submitted documents designating lawyers, but these were rejected because detainees could not sign them since they were detained incommunicado. Relatives were often only informed about these hearings after they took place.

"Our only way to show our love and that we think about them is by sending food, clothes, and medication," one relative said. On August 4, 2025, Helicoide authorities [restricted](#) families' food and personal deliveries to Fridays, ending daily food and multiple weekly drop-offs.

In other cases, prison authorities allowed visits for a period of time and then arbitrarily denied them for weeks or months. Josnars Baduel, detained in 2020 for allegedly participating in a failed maritime attack aimed at overthrowing Nicolás Maduro, which his family denies, spent the first five months of 2025 incommunicado, and has again been denied communication since August.

[Prolonged](#) incommunicado detention can amount to torture. The Inter-American Court of Human Rights has [said](#) that isolating detainees from the outside world causes psychological suffering, placing detainees in a highly vulnerable position and increasing the risk of abuse in prisons.

Foreign governments should leverage regional and international forums to press for the rights of political prisoners, Human Rights Watch and CLIPPVE said. These include the upcoming European Union-Community of Latin American and Caribbean States (EU-CELAC) summit, set to take place in Colombia in November.

The Vatican should also seize the upcoming [canonization](#) of two Venezuelans, set for October, to push for ending incommunicado detention and securing the unconditional release of political prisoners. Foreign governments should also press the Maduro government to allow independent medical professionals to assess the health conditions of those detained.

"The lack of communication and denial of visits has become a form of torture, inflicting suffering not only on those behind bars but also on their loved ones," said Sairam Rivas, coordinator of CLIPPVE and partner of political prisoner Jesús Armas. "We are forced to live in relentless anguish and uncertainty, clinging to signs of life as fragile as dirty laundry or a request for medication."

For selected cases, please see below.

For a list of cases of detainees who remain in incommunicado detention documented by Human Rights Watch and CLIPPVE, please click here: <https://www.hrw.org/detainees-in-incommunicado-detention-in-venezuela>

Unless otherwise noted in the text, the accounts below are based on Human Rights Watch and CLIPPVE's interviews with relatives of the victims.

Freddy Superlano



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On July 30, 2024, two days after the presidential election, two cars and four motorcycles chased down Freddy Superlano, national coordinator of the opposition party Voluntad Popular, when he was headed to the headquarters of the opposition campaign team, Comando Con Venezuela, in Caracas. Unidentified men came out of the vehicles and took Superlano and two other people away, his wife said. The arrest was recorded in a video shared on social media that Human Rights Watch verified.

For seven days, his wife searched for him in every detention center in Caracas. When she visited Helicoide, authorities initially denied he was there. But on August 6, she visited the prison again, and a SEBIN officer confirmed he was being held there.

His wife and children have not been able to contact him. “Our only proof of life are his dirty clothes and a small note with his handwriting where he requests medication, personal hygiene items, and food,” his wife said.

His wife, who lives in Barinas state, 500 kilometers from Caracas, has had to reorganize her life and her children’s care so she can alternate spending one week in Barinas and one week in Caracas to visit the prison.

She filed a *habeas corpus* petition in the early days of his detention and received a response a month later, when she already knew his whereabouts. Human Rights Watch and CLIPPVE also reviewed petitions that his family filed with the Ombudsperson’s Office, the Attorney General’s Office, and courts to be able to visit him. The petitions went unanswered, his wife said.

“This is really hard for the families on the outside, without knowing what is going on with them,” she said.

In early August 2024, a prosecutor charged Superlano with terrorism, incitement to hatred, treason, conspiracy and criminal association in a virtual hearing. His wife said he was denied the right to be represented by a lawyer of his choosing and that the government-appointed public defender has not visited him, which the defender admitted.

Until early August 2025, his wife had been able to send food to her husband daily and deliver personal belongings and clean clothes twice a week. But later that month, the authorities informed her that deliveries would be reduced to once a week.

On August 31, 2025, his wife was unofficially informed of his transfer. Authorities have yet to confirm his current whereabouts.



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On August 27, 2024, hooded men dressed in black abducted Perkins Rocha, a lawyer for the opposition party Vente Venezuela, outside a pharmacy in Caracas. That same day, security agents searched his apartment and seized some of their belongings, such as computers, clothes and even perfume, his wife said.

His wife received official confirmation of his arrest and that he was held in Helicoide two days later, when a public defender texted her. For several months, guards periodically gave her small slips of paper with her husband's handwriting requesting personal belongings. Sometimes the guard let her write a reply on the back. However, this varied with changes of prison authorities and guards. The only other evidence she has that he is in Helicoide is that every week guards allow her to drop off clothes for him and hand her his dirty ones, she said.

According to information shared by the public defender, on August 29, authorities presented Rocha before a judge, in a virtual hearing, to charge him with treason, terrorism, conspiracy to commit a crime, incitement to hatred, and criminal association. He has been denied access to legal counsel of his choice, despite written requests signed by his wife, which Human Rights Watch and CLIPPVE reviewed.

Rocha has a brain shunt, a history of cerebral tuberculosis, and a fragile abdomen following multiple surgeries. His wife said he has also been requesting medication to treat other conditions.

Since prison conditions tightened on August 4, the family can only deliver food once a week, between 10 a.m. and 2 p.m., and up to 10 liters of water every eight days, his wife said. Now, people delivering packages must sign a form and pose for full-body photographs holding the bags being delivered. "It's very degrading," she said.

His wife has filed complaints and requests, some of which Human Rights Watch and CLIPPVE reviewed, with the Ombudsperson's Office, the human rights department of the Attorney General's Office, and courts, among other places, seeking permission to visit him. She received no response.

"Incommunicado detention is torture for all of us," she said. "We are all hostages along with him," his wife said.

Biagio Pilieri



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On August 28, several vehicles and motorcycles chased Biagio Pilieri, national coordinator of the political party Convergencia, journalist, and a member of the opposition campaign team, in Caracas, his wife said. SEBIN agents took him and three other people away, including his son and the person driving the car in which he was riding.

The family learned that day that Pilieri and his son had been taken to Helicoide, based on GPS tracking. His son and the other passenger were released the next day. Pilieri and the car's driver remain behind bars.

On August 30, a public defender told his family that he had been charged with terrorism, incitement to hatred, treason, conspiracy to commit a crime, and criminal association. The authorities have denied the family the right to appoint a private lawyer and have not been able to visit or see him, they informed.

Pilieri suffers severe gastrointestinal issues, stress-induced hypertension, knee problems, and polyps, his wife said. Through pieces of paper that guards read to his family, he has requested medication for respiratory and prostate conditions. His family has not received any information on whether he has access to medical treatment. A guard once told them that he was "fine."

Human Rights Watch and CLIPPVE reviewed some of the numerous petitions the family has submitted to the Ombudsperson's Office and the Attorney General's Office. They also filed a *habeas corpus* and two "constitutional protection" appeals. All have been denied or ignored.

In recent months, it has become even harder for the family to have some sort of contact with Pilieri. The guards used to read them notes from him, but these have become more infrequent, his wife said. Since August, guards have also restricted packages and food deliveries to once a week.

His family said that being unable to see him has been "inhumane" and "painful," Especially since his mother-in-law, that lives with him, has been receiving cancer treatment for the past two years.

Jesús Armas



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On December 10, six hooded men arrested Jesús Armas, a former Caracas councilman and high-level member of the opposition's campaign team as he was leaving a coffee shop at 9 p.m. in Caracas, a friend who witnessed the arrest told his family.

In the days that followed, his partner Sairam Rivas, who is also coordinator of CLIPPVE, and Armas' parents visited several detention centers in Caracas, asking for him, but authorities refused to provide information on his whereabouts. The relatives tried to present a habeas corpus petition on December 12, 13, and 16, but court personnel refused to accept it.

On December 16, Armas called Rivas and told her that he was being held at the Zona 7 detention center in Caracas. He requested food and clothes. Armas said that he had been held for several days in an unofficial detention center in Caracas, where SEBIN officers suffocated him with a bag over his head as they interrogated him.

After three days, Rivas said, Armas was transferred to the headquarters of the Bolivarian National Police (Policía Nacional Bolivariana, PNB) in Maripérez. Armas told her he was taken before a judge in a virtual hearing, but his family and lawyer were not informed. Through his public defender, his family learned Armas was charged with financing terrorism, conspiracy, treason and criminal association.

On December 18, Armas' parents attempted to visit him in Zona 7, but prison authorities refused to grant them access. His relatives later heard rumors that he had been transferred to Helicoide. However, when his mother asked prison guards there the next day, they denied it. Later that day, a guard at Helicoide handed Armas' family a list of items that he needed in his handwriting. The list included clothing, a chair, and a plastic container, among other things.

"Since he was moved to Helicoide, he has been without any contact with the outside," Rivas said. The only information his family has received about him is through his dirty clothes and small pieces of paper a guard reads to them detailing the items Armas needs in prison. "Sometimes, he asks for things we've already brought him, which suggests he might not be receiving everything we bring," Rivas said.

Armas suffers from asthma, for which he has requested medication and inhalers.

Luis Palocz



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On December 14, 2024, Luis Palocz, a political leader and activist from the Chacao municipality in Caracas, hung up a call with his partner. “I’ll call you back,” he said, but he never did. Concerned, his partner called the restaurant where he was, and staff told her that something had happened. Witnesses told his partner that eight hooded men dressed in black surrounded him, beat him as he resisted, and forced him into a white car, then drove away.

That night, his family filed a complaint of enforced disappearance with the Attorney General’s Office, as he had been taken without a warrant. In the days that followed, they submitted multiple complaints in various places and searched all known detention centers without success. Helicoide officials told them he was not being held there.

On December 20, his partner returned to Helicoide, where officers told her he had been transferred there the previous day, after being held at the police headquarters in Maripérez.

The authorities in a virtual hearing in March charged Palocz with terrorism, incitement to hatred, conspiracy, and criminal association, a public defender told his family. The family has had no access to the case file, and private lawyers are not allowed to represent him.

She said that the only confirmation that he is alive comes from occasional handwritten notes he is allowed to send, usually requesting personal items. “The first time I saw his handwriting, it was a relief,” she said. The notes are vague and focused on requests for items, but sometimes no note is handed to her. She has guessed Palocz’s health problems from the medications he asks her to buy.

A major blow came when SEBIN changed its package delivery rules, reducing it to once a week. “I can’t explain what it’s like to have that contact taken away when we have no visits and no letters ... its psychological; they play with them,” his partner said.

The situation has taken a heavy economic and psychological toll on the family, they said.

Luis Somaza





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Five unidentified men armed with long guns dragged Luis Somaza, an opposition leader with Voluntad Popular, out of his house on the evening of February 12, 2025. His sister arrived at his home just as the hooded men were forcing her brother into an unmarked car. Security forces also took his car and personal belongings without a warrant, she said.

On February 27, a public defender informed the family that he was being held at Helicoide and said Somaza had been presented in a virtual hearing and charged with rebellion and criminal association. He has not been allowed to appoint a private lawyer, his sister said.

Human Rights Watch and CLIPPVE reviewed several complaints the family filed with various government institutions, including the Ombudsperson's Office and the human rights office of the Attorney General's Office. They received no response, Somaza's sister said.

The family has had no direct contact with him since the day of his arrest. His sister said the only proof they have received that he is alive are the small notes he has written requesting personal items. She said she can recognize that the dirty laundry handed to her is his because of stains caused by Somaza's chronic inflammatory illness.

His sister does not know if he has been seen by a doctor or prescribed specific medications. When she observes more prominent stains on his clothes, she sends more medication, knowing that prolonged stress and poor hygiene can aggravate Somaza's medical condition.

The family lives in constant anguish, caught between not knowing how he is and fearing reprisals for speaking out, they said. They have had to reassure his children that their father is still alive.