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Venezuela: UN experts condemn use of counter-terrorism laws to convict trade unionists and labour leaders

11 August 2023

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GENEVA (11 August 2023) – UN experts* warned today that convicting trade unionists and labour leaders on terrorism charges was a “chronic misuse” of Venezuela’s counter-terrorism laws against those advocating for the rights of workers.

The experts expressed deep concern about the 1 August 2023 judgment convicting six Venezuelan trade union and labour leaders under the Organic Law against Organised Crime and Financing of Terrorism measures.

“It is evident that we are witnessing chronic misuse of counter-terrorism measures against those advocating for the rights of workers, addressing working conditions, and those engaging in trade union organisations in Venezuela,” the experts said. “In a legal process marked by irregularities and exceptionalities, such abuse of counter-terrorism measures is entirely contrary to international law,” they said.

In a previous [communication](#) to the Government of Venezuela, the experts highlighted the lack of fair trial protection, failure to provide access to lawyers for union activists and labour leaders, the inadequacy of evidence to the charges applied, and the failure of key informants to testify at trial.

“We denounce the misuse of counter-terrorism laws against those who have advocated for the protection of social and economic rights and the freedom of association in society,” the experts said. “This kind of misuse is an attempt to stifle and choke organised civil society.”

While underscoring that the use of counterterrorism measures must be necessary, proportionate, and non-discriminatory, the experts recalled that the United Nations Security Council and human rights bodies have consistently held that counter-terrorism legislation and practice must be undertaken in respect of human rights.

The experts were profoundly concerned that all those convicted had been given exceptionally long prison sentences.

“We see such extensive prison sentences as an attempt to take civil society actors out of circulation and damage civic space in Venezuela,” the experts said. “The harsh sentencing serves as a warning to others who might engage in dissent or associational activity, contrary to the government’s views,” they said.

The convictions epitomised a growing and concerning trend in Venezuela of targeting and harassing those who disagree with the Government or defend human rights, the experts said. “Venezuelan authorities were using the language of counter-terrorism to ostracise and undermine legitimate human rights work,” they said.

“These convictions are an attack on freedom of association, targeting organisations whose *raison d’être* is drawing individuals into collective action to improve their lives and the lives of their communities,” the UN experts said.

They urged the Venezuelan Courts to urgently review the convictions, applying internationally compliant human rights standards of adjudication and review.

“The use of counter-terrorism legislation against civil society actors and human rights defenders must cease forthwith,” the experts said. They invited other governments and all relevant UN human rights and counter-terrorism bodies to focus on the misuse of the counter-terrorist legislation and demand that the Government of Venezuela complies with its international human rights obligations. In this regard, the experts encourage the Venezuelan authorities to fully implement the commitments undertaken with the International Labour Organisation.

“We call for swift and decisive action to protect labour rights defenders in Venezuela,” the experts said.

*The experts: Fionnuala Ní Aoláin, **Special Rapporteur on the promotion and protection of human rights while countering terrorism** and Clément Nyaletsossi Voule, **Special Rapporteur on the rights to freedom of peaceful assembly and of association**;

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UN Human Rights, Country Page – **Venezuela**

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