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February 16, 2024

Venezuela: the government's escalating repression and attempts at evading scrutiny face resounding condemnation from international civil society

The undersigned international organizations strongly condemn the announced expulsion of the members of the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR) in Venezuela, as government repression had notably intensified ahead of scheduled presidential elections. These developments occur within a broader context of systematic attacks on political opponents and human rights defenders and erosion of civic freedoms.

On February 9, 2024, renowned human rights defender Rocio San Miguel was arbitrarily detained at Caracas Airport in Venezuela, while traveling with her daughter. Her detention follows a pattern of systematic arbitrary arrests and short-term enforced disappearances in the country. While the Attorney General acknowledged her detention, he failed to provide information on her whereabouts, despite efforts by her legal team to locate her. Some of San Miguel's family members were also detained and later released. San Miguel and her ex-partner remain in detention, allegedly at the Bolivarian National Intelligence Service (SEBIN) and the General Directorate of Military Counterintelligence (DGCIM) headquarters, respectively. At the time of the publication of this statement, neither family members nor lawyers have been able to see them.

On 15 February, the Venezuelan government announced it was suspending the activities of the OHCHR, signaling a concerning escalation in the country's attempts to evade international scrutiny and accountability. This decision came soon after the OHCHR expressed concern regarding the detention of San Miguel, noting that "her whereabouts remain unknown, potentially qualifying her detention as an enforced disappearance.", The announced suspension also took place a day after the publication of the UN Special Rapporteur on the Right to Food's report on his recent visit to Venezuela..

The OHCHR, including through its country presence in Caracas, has played an important role in monitoring and documenting the situation of human rights in the country and providing support and assistance to victims and survivors. The decision to suspend its presence therefore creates immediate protection gaps for individuals and communities at risk as the human rights situation is further deteriorating.

We strongly urge States, the UN Human Rights Council, and the broader international community to insist on the reestablishment of an effective OHCHR presence in the country and the release of all those arbitrarily detained for political reasons.

We also call upon the UN Human Rights Council to actively work towards the renewal of the mandate of the Fact-Finding Mission (FFM) in Venezuela in September 2024. The work of the FFM has been instrumental in investigating gross human rights violations and international crimes in Venezuela, some of which may amount to crimes against humanity, as well as identifying structural patterns and potential perpetrators of these crimes and violations. The FFM's work, including through its public reporting mandate, remains essential to alert the international

community of current patterns of repression and the risk of further deterioration. The FFM is also key to provide UN member States with recommendations on effective prevention and mitigation strategies in light of intensifying targeted persecution and system-wide repression.

Concerned governments and international actors, international organizations and justice mechanisms must remain steadfast in their commitment to uphold human rights in Venezuela, including during the upcoming session of the UN Human Rights Council.

Organizations

Amnesty International

CADAL

Center for Justice and International Law (CEJIL)

Centre for Civil and Political Rights (CCPR Centre)

Center for the Study of Law, Justice and Society – Dejusticia

Center for Legal and Social Studies (CELS)

CUBALEX

Due Process of Law Foundation

Franciscans International

Fundación Observatorio de Derechos Humanos y Justicia

Fundación para la Justicia y el Estado Democrático de Derecho

Global Centre for the Responsibility to Protect

Honduras Libre D19

Human Rights Watch

Human Rights and Justice Observatory Foundation

In a loud voice

Instituto de Defensa Legal (IDL)

International Commission of Jurists

International Federation for Human Rights (FIDH), within the framework of the Observatory for the Protection of Human Rights Defenders

International Institute on Race, Equality and Human Rights (Race and Equality)

International Service for Human Rights

Proética, capítulo peruano de Transparencia Internacional

Robert F. Kennedy Human Rights

Washington Brazil Office

Washington Office on Latin America (WOLA)

World Organisation Against Torture (OMCT), within the framework of the Observatory for the Protection of Human Rights Defenders

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