

Reporters Without Borders

<http://www.rsf.org/venezuela-right-to-information-more-26-02-2014,45933.html>

Americas - Venezuela

Open letter

Right to information more endangered than ever in national crisis

26 February 2014

The protests in Venezuela have turned violent and the journalists covering them are on the front line. Through acts of violence and crackdowns, the security forces and self-proclaimed paramilitary groups have become obstacles to media workers.

Polarization between pro-government and opposition media has peaked again after [lingering since the April 2013 elections](#), when Reporters Without Borders [urged candidates to come out in support of media pluralism](#) and [called for journalists to be given protection](#).

Because the situation for freedom of information and journalists' safety is now critical, Reporters Without Borders has written an open letter to Nicolás Maduro, the President of the Bolivarian Republic of Venezuela.

Paris, 26 February 2014

President Nicolás Maduro
Government of the Bolivarian Republic of Venezuela

Dear President Maduro,

Reporters Without Borders is worried by the decline in freedom of information in Venezuela. Our international organization defends freedom of information as enshrined in Article 19 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and is politically unbiased and unaffiliated to any private or diplomatic interest. We are particularly concerned about the difficulties that journalists have encountered when covering the protests that have been taking place since the start of February, and about your decision to step up censorship in response to the protests.

We have so far registered more than 70 incidents in which media personnel were targeted. They include at least 60 cases of physical or verbal aggression and 13 arrests, usually accompanied by the theft or destruction of equipment. In one case, the premises of the national television station, VTV, were attacked.

Journalists are being targeted by the National Bolivarian Guard, the National Bolivarian Police and by certain demonstrators and paramilitary groups that are taking advantage of the demonstrations to spread terror. This toll is liable to grow in the current climate of extreme tension if measures are not taken quickly to protect journalists.

As the UN Human Rights Council said in its Resolution 19/35 of 18 April 2012, protests and demonstration "contribute to the full enjoyment of civil, political, economic, social and cultural rights". The role of journalists during protests is therefore essential to an open democracy, to inform the public and to witness the security forces' response.

The comments by certain members of your government are just aggravating the situation. In response to complaints by the National Union of Media Professionals and the National Association of Journalists, communication and information minister [Delcy Rodríguez said](#): "They are talking about attacks on journalists but we haven't heard of them and the prosecutor's office hasn't either."

I can assure you that the cases documented by Reporters Without Borders and other NGOs such as Espacio Público, IPYS and Human Rights Watch were not imagined. Espacio Público representatives actually accompanied photojournalist **Gabriel Osorio** to file a complaint before the Ombudsman office and the prosecutor's office. Reporters Without Borders urges you to

quickly set up a parliamentary commission of enquiry into the many threats and attacks on journalists since the start of February so that they do not remain unpunished.

In reaction to the scale of the protests, [you have chosen censorship](#), although censorship is never an appropriate response. On 11 February, the head of the National Telecommunications Commission (CONATEL) warned journalists that any coverage of violent events was banned, and that anyone contravening the prohibition would be punished.

Strict censorship was imposed the next day on the Colombian TV news channel *NTN24* and was then extended to social networks, with a 48 hour block on access to photos posted on Twitter. On 20 February, you said you planned to ban the US news channel *CNN* in Venezuela, a process that is already under way since permits to work in Venezuela have already been withdrawn from four of its correspondents.

The expulsion and censorship of international TV stations means the death of broadcast media pluralism in Venezuela, because most of the national and local stations have been brought under government control. The print media, the last remaining source of independence news coverage, have been forced to reduce issues or even stop publishing because of the shortage of newsprint.

The Radio, TV and Electronic Media Social Responsibility Law ([RESORTMEC](#)) allows the government to use CONATEL to impose sanctions on the non-aligned media and to [control their content](#).

The end of government control of news and information is one of the leading demands of the protesters. We ask you to appreciate the importance of what your compatriots are asking of you.

News and information continue to circulate in Venezuela, but in a dangerously polarized form. Dialogue is needed for news reporting to be conducted in a trouble-free manner. We take account of your accusations of manipulation of some the images of the protests, but we draw your attention to the deeply undemocratic nature of the censorship that you yourself apply to the flow of information in your country.

We urge you to regard media pluralism as the key to ensuring access to complete and generally objective news coverage. The war that you are waging against what you call "media terrorism," a war designed to protect the public from supposed calls for violence, is one of the key factors responsible for this media polarization.

We thank you in advance for the attention you give to these requests.

Sincerely,

Christophe Deloire
Reporters Without Borders secretary-general

Photos: [Mariana Vincenti](#)

Other images



JPEG - 46.5 kb
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