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Americas - Venezuela

Venezuela – Enduring crisis

Venezuela urged to improve media situation

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Venezuela's year-old [economic and social crisis](#) has had a [big impact on freedom of information](#). Physical attacks on journalists have hurt the climate for independent media and freely-reported news has become rare, adding information to the list of basic staples in short supply.

During its last Universal Periodic Review (UPR) by the UN Human Rights Council in October 2011, the Bolivarian Republic of Venezuela was asked to guarantee unrestricted access to state-held information as soon as possible. The government then led by Hugo Chávez rejected the request.

The Venezuelan government accepted none of the 12 recommendations on freedom of information. At the request of UPR-Info, an NGO that supports the UPR process, Reporters Without Borders has produced this evaluation of the current state of freedom of information in Venezuela, whose next UPR will be in October 2016.

Urgent need for physical safety

The Venezuelan government rejected the request for guarantees for freedom of expression and the safety of journalists made during the 2011 UPR. It also refused to reinforce the public's right to physical integrity and access to information. These issues are unfortunately as relevant as ever, and increasingly worrying.

Street protests against the high crime rate and shortages have not let up since March of this year and have been accompanied by a great deal of harassment of local and foreign journalists, including threats, insults, physical violence, arbitrary arrest and theft or destruction of equipment.

Some journalists have been persecuted by the police. They include [Mildred Manrique](#) of *Diario 2001*, who was arrested arbitrarily at least four times from February to May 2014.

According to the National Union of Venezuelan Journalists (SNTP), the Bolivarian National Guard (GNB) has been responsible for 62 per cent of these abuses. The constant street protests have also spawned the emergence of violent civilian groups that have been to blame for many excesses.

Not all the attacks on journalists have taken place during demonstrations. Two individuals shot **Fernando Zaurín Ramírez**, the head of *Órbita TV's Circuito Rádio*, in Anzoátegui state on 22 July, wounding him in the collarbone area. After an operation, he was pronounced out of danger.

Despite the deplorable impact of these events, Reporters Without Borders has not noted any new measures by the government to protect journalists. It is vital that Venezuela should start to respect the right to information by guaranteeing journalists' physical integrity, and it should give the international community a renewed undertaking to respect this principle.

Reporters Without Borders has registered more than 500 violations of the right to information since the start of 2013. Venezuela should therefore consider adopting the Inter-American Commission on Human Rights recommendation that every South American country should create its own mechanism for protecting journalists and human rights defenders.

In view of the considerable political tension prevailing in Venezuela, the authorities must also recognize the importance of the role played by journalists in covering protests, as stressed in a UN resolution adopted on 28 March 2014.

The prosecutor-general's office announced on 13 May that it was [investigating 97 members of](#)

[the security forces](#) on suspicion of mistreating and torturing demonstrators and journalists covering demonstrations. According to the SNTP's tally, there have been 181 cases of police harassment and violence against journalists since the wave of protests began.

The findings of this investigation have yet to be announced. What has become of this pledge? Have these 97 policemen and soldiers been questioned? Have their victims been interviewed? As this is a matter of public interest, this information should be released as soon possible in order to respect the principle of transparency, one that was stressed during the UPR and also rejected by Venezuela.

Polarization and economic challenges

As well as concrete threats in the form of physical attacks on journalists, there is the more insidious threat from the lack of media pluralism at a time of extreme political polarization. The media are split into two warring factions, those supporting the government and those opposing it. The former defend President Nicolás Maduro against the threat that the privately-owned media and his critics represent.

The "[information war](#)" condemned by the president is aggravated by the hostility that the government often shows towards the media. Insulting comments about the media by officials such as communication and information minister Delcy Rodríguez just fan the flames of polarization.

In a recent open letter to the daily *El Universal*, for example, Rodríguez said journalist **Nelson Bocaranda's** 15 July column criticizing her constituted a "gratuitous insult and cowardly slander." This kind of statement is all the more serious as only government officials can initiate a legal action accusing someone of "desacato" (disrespect for a government official or contempt of court), which is punishable by imprisonment.

Reporters Without Borders regards prison sentences and exorbitant fines that can bankrupt the targeted journalist or news media as completely disproportionate. The decriminalization of "desacato" as part of an overhaul of media legislation that would bring it into line with international standards was one of the international community's requests at the last UPR that Venezuela rejected.

Venezuela's traditional media, which are dominated by a few privately-owned publishing companies, are currently undergoing profound structural change. One example has been the 2013 purchase of Cadena Capriles – a media group that includes one of the leading dailies, *Últimas Noticias* – by Latam Media Groups, an offshoot of the UK's Hanson Group, which also bought the TV station *Globovisión*.

El Universal, Venezuela's oldest daily and still one of its biggest-selling newspapers, was bought in July of this year by the Spanish group Epalisticia, which appointed Jesús Abreu Anselmi, a former deputy minister of infrastructure and friend of National Assembly speaker Diosdado Cabello, to the newspaper's board. The SNTP has already reported several cases of internal censorship.

In view of the opposition media's sway over public opinion, is the Venezuelan government trying to realign the most influential ones through its relations with the companies buying them? Reporters Without Borders deplores the lack of transparency in these media takeovers.

Difficulty accessing state-held information is another disturbing issue raised during the UPR. In Venezuela, several state-owned national media such as the *AVN* news agency and the *Ciudad Caracas* and *VTV* television stations are responsible for providing information about the state, and the tension between state and privately-owned media complicates access for the latter.

Several journalists, for example, were denied access to a Supreme Court of Justice hearing on 25 March, during the contempt proceedings against San Cristóbal's mayor.

Such obstacles to access to information, imposed arbitrarily by government representatives, are common in Venezuela and violate the constitution, which guarantees the right to transparent information about subjects of public interest. Article 57 of the constitution requires officials to respond to all requests for information about their activities.

State-owned media are nonetheless sometimes also the target of freedom of information violations. Demonstrators attacked *VTV's* headquarters in Caracas in February.

Freedom of information requires acceptance of criticism and the existence of an opposition. But pluralism is not just about a variety of editorial policies. The government – and opposition – must accept the principle of a pluralism that needs to be supplied with information independent of political and business interests.

No freedom of information will be possible without fair access to the means of communication for all citizens in Venezuela, which is ranked 116th out of 180 countries in the 2014 [Reporters Without Borders press freedom index](#).

The current state of freedom of information in Venezuela is very worrying and requires the

government to engage with the international community. However, the Chavista government's rejection of 12 freedom of expression recommendations indicates little interest in improving the situation.

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