



**Venezuela – Researched and compiled by the Refugee Documentation Centre of Ireland on 26 June 2015**

**Information regarding violence, threats and kidnapping of wealthy business owners in Venezuela.**

The 2014 US Department of State (USDOS) country report on human rights in Venezuela, in a section titled “Role of the Police and Security Apparatus”, states:

“Criminal kidnappings for ransom were widespread in both urban centers and rural areas; kidnappings included both ‘express kidnappings,’ in which victims were held for several hours and then released, and traditional kidnappings. On August 18, former minister Rodriguez Torres reported kidnappings so far in the year had decreased by 52 percent nationwide--from 245 in 2013 to 117. NGOs and police noted many victims did not report kidnappings to police or other authorities.” (US Department of State (25 June 2015) *2014 Country Reports on Human Rights Practices – Venezuela*, p.11)

See also USDOS report which, in a section titled “Safety and Security”, states:

“According to the Venezuelan National Counter Kidnapping Commission official statistics have shown alarming increases in reported kidnappings throughout the country since the commission's founding in 2006. According to Venezuelan government statistics, 583 kidnappings were officially reported to officials. Police sources indicate that as many as 80% of kidnappings go unreported, meaning that the official figure of 583 kidnappings in 2012 is likely much lower than actual numbers.” (US Department of State (20 August 2013) *Venezuela: Country Specific Information*, p.5)

In a sub-section headed “Kidnappings” this report states:

“Kidnappings, including ‘express kidnappings’ in which victims are seized in an attempt to get quick cash in exchange for their release, are a serious problem. One common practice is for kidnappers to follow potential victims into building garages and kidnap them at gunpoint, although the majority of kidnappings occur while traveling in vehicles. Kidnappings of U.S. citizens and other foreign nationals from homes, hotels, unauthorized taxis and the airport terminal do occur, and are more frequently being reported to the embassy. As a recent example, in March 2012, a U.S. citizen, currently residing in Caracas was traveling home in his vehicle when he was overtaken and then blocked by a single vehicle. Several armed men exited the blocking vehicle and forced the victim out of his car and into a separate vehicle. The kidnappers held the victim while driving throughout Caracas conducting other kidnappings and robberies. The victim was eventually released unharmed. ‘Virtual kidnappings,’ in which scam surveys are conducted to collect contact information on minors, which is then used to call parents for ransoms without the children being taken, and ‘inside kidnappings,’ in which domestic

employees are being paid large sums of money for keys and information in order to enter and kidnap children for ransom, have also been reported to the embassy. U.S. citizens should be alert to their surroundings and take necessary precautions.” (ibid, p.9)

An article from UK newspaper The Independent states:

“There are a lot of scared families in Caracas, and a lot of grieving loved ones. Venezuela boasts many unhappy superlatives: with an annual total of around 20,000 homicides (the government refuses to release accurate statistics) the country competes yearly with half-a-dozen other unfortunate places for the world’s highest murder rate; there is reported to be one firearm in circulation for every two citizens, making Venezuela the most weaponised environment on earth; and every year there are, according to the police, at (the very least) 2,000 kidnaps for ransom nationwide. Again, the exact figures of how many people are kidnapped are unknown: in a country notorious for local police corruption, most abductions are not reported, and ransoms are paid quietly – and illegally – out of the glare of official scrutiny. Between 2008 and 2009, the National Institute of Statistics in Venezuela estimated that there were a staggering 16,917 kidnaps nationwide. These findings were suppressed by the government, but not before they were leaked to the Venezuelan press. Whatever the real figure, one thing is certain: Caracas is in the grip of a kidnap crisis. Whether it’s for a few hours tied up in the back of their own car, or taken hostage for days, weeks or even months in a slum safe-house, dozens of people are being kidnapped in the city every month.” (The Independent (10 October 2013) *Taking no prisoners in the kidnap capital of the world: On the streets of Caracas with an elite police squad*)

A report published by the InSight Crime foundation states:

“Kidnapping in Venezuela has reached epidemic proportions since late President Hugo Chavez took power in 1999, as growing social instability and poverty levels have provided fertile breeding grounds for both organized and petty crime to flourish. In the first 12 years of Chavez's presidency, official figures revealed a more than 20-fold increase in kidnapping. Recent government statistics indicate kidnappings decreased by 51 percent between June 2013 and June 2014 -- the year following the creation of a national anti-kidnapping unit. However, it is unlikely that either this figure or the numbers acquired by El Nacional reflect the actual scale of the problem. According to criminologist Fermin Marmol Garcia, at least 70 percent of kidnappings in Venezuela go unreported. Government kidnapping statistics also exclude the most common form of the crime -- express kidnappings -- which frequently last only a few hours. Field research carried out by InSight Crime indicates there were between 20 and 40 express kidnappings a day in Caracas alone in 2010, while a study by criminologist Marmol concluded that 90 percent of all kidnappings in 2012 fit this modality.” (InSight Crime (11 July 2014) *Venezuela Kidnapping Figures Mask True Scale of Problem*)

The 2015 Overseas Security Advisory Council report for Venezuela, in a section titled “Kidnapping Threat

“Kidnapping remains a major criminal industry in Venezuela. Kidnappings in Caracas happen primarily during the night but are not uncommon during the day. The government officially does not track kidnappings, but it is believed

that kidnapping cases remained constant in 2014 compared to 2013. Criminologists report that 80+ percent of kidnappings go unreported for fear of retaliation by kidnapers. Investigations by the Criminal, Penal, and Scientific Investigation Bureau ('CICPC') have identified multiple, heavily-armed criminal gangs specializing in express kidnappings in the wealthier neighborhoods of Caracas. CICPC's specialized unit aimed at combating kidnapping has had limited success but has so far failed to reduce the number of kidnapping incidents significantly. Kidnappers operate with little fear of arrest, prosecution, or incarceration. In addition, in early 2015, 13 CICPC officers were arrested as part of a larger kidnaping ring. A majority of kidnappings are 'express kidnappings,' which usually last less than 48 hours (sometimes as short as two hours). Victims have been driven around and forced to withdraw cash from multiple ATMs until the accounts balances were zero or the card was locked by the bank. However, changes in Venezuelan law and banking practices have restricted daily withdrawal amounts, making the old practice less lucrative. In recent years, it has become more common for kidnapers to hold their victims for several hours, giving the victim's family and friends time to gather a ransom payment. Paying ransom is against Venezuelan law." (Overseas Security Advisory Council (OSAC) (19 February 2015) *Venezuela 2015 Crime and Safety Report*)

A BBC News report states:

"Kidnappings, especially for ransom, are common in Venezuela, and a number of diplomats, businessmen and athletes have been abducted in recent years. While the majority of those kidnapped for ransom are released soon after being taken, some victims have been killed or died from injuries sustained during their ordeal." (BBC News (14 April 2014) *Venezuelan Globovision journalist Nairobi Pinto freed*)

In a paragraph headed "String of abductions" this report states:

"In February, former Venezuelan boxing world champion Antonio Cermeno was killed after being kidnapped in Caracas. In 2012, the trade attache at the Costa Rican embassy in Caracas was abducted and later released. It is not clear if a ransom demand was met. The Mexican ambassador Carlos Pujalte and his wife were also briefly kidnapped in Caracas in 2012 before being freed. And in 2011, the Chilean consul in Caracas was abducted, beaten and shot in the leg before being released. In the same year, baseball player Wilson Ramos was also kidnapped from his family home in the city of Valencia before being rescued by the security forces." (ibid)

An InSight Crime report refers to the alleged involvement in kidnapping of members of the Venezuelan police as follows:

"In a rare public illustration of the depths of corruption in Venezuela's security forces, authorities arrested 13 members of the investigative police for alleged involvement in kidnapping. As El Nacional reported, the national police detained the members of the investigative police force, known as the CICPC, in a district of Caracas. Those arrested included the CICPC head for that district, a supervisor, and five detectives. Venezuela's attorney general has since said it was 17 people arrested and that there are six other warrants pending. The accused allegedly kidnapped a businessman and demanded 300,000 bolivares (about \$47,000, according to the official exchange rate) in

ransom money, which was paid off in the police station. The kidnap victim was also reportedly held in police offices.” (InSight Crime (16 January 2015) *Venezuela Arrests Police for Kidnapping*)

See also InSight Crime report which states:

“Authorities in Venezuela have arrested eight members of the national police force on suspicion of kidnapping, the latest sign that reform efforts have failed to root out corruption within the country's police. Venezuela's Public Ministry detained eight members of the Bolivarian National Police (PNB) for allegedly kidnapping a businessman in the northern state of Vargas, reported El Universal. The officers are accused of taking the victim into a police vehicle as he was leaving his business on June 5. Witnesses at the scene reported the crime to municipal police in Vargas, which led to the capture of the eight suspects, according to El Nacional. Upon arrest, the officers reportedly claimed that the businessman was assisting them with intelligence operations.” (Insight Crime (10 June 2015) *Arrests of Venezuela Police for Kidnapping Show Limit to Security Reforms*)

An article based on an interview with a professional kidnapper published by the Canadian newspaper National Post states:

“Gonzalez began by explaining ‘the market.’ He targeted Venezuela's middle classes, rather than the rich. Going after the rich invited additional police scrutiny or, worse heavily armed private guards driving armoured vehicles. For the same reasons and because they seldom had Venezuelan bank accounts that could be quickly emptied, it did not make economic sense to kidnap foreigners. There was also the likely complication that ‘when a foreign government gets involved, the police here really start asking questions,’ he said. Before deciding whether to kidnap someone, gang members followed their movements closely for about a month to understand how and where they lived, worked and played. This was not only to figure out the best time and place to grab them, but also to find out whether their kin were likely to be able to cough up a ransom of 100,000 to 200,000 bolivars (about US\$300 to US\$600 on the black market, US\$16,000 to \$32,000 at the official exchange rate).” (National Post (16 March 2015) *Kidnap and murder on the bloody streets of Caracas: ‘If the families don’t pay up, we eliminate that person’*)

This response was prepared after researching publicly accessible information currently available to the Research and Information Unit within time constraints. This response is not and does not purport to be conclusive as to the merit of any particular claim to refugee status or asylum. Please read in full all documents referred to.

#### **References:**

BBC News (14 April 2014) *Venezuelan Globovision journalist Nairobi Pinto freed*

<http://www.bbc.com/news/world-latin-america-27027372>

(Accessed 25 June 2015)

The Independent (10 October 2013) *Taking no prisoners in the kidnap capital of the world: On the streets of Caracas with an elite police squad*  
<http://www.independent.co.uk/news/world/americas/taking-no-prisoners-in-the-kidnap-capital-of-the-world-on-the-streets-of-caracas-with-an-elite-police-squad-8872390.html>

(Accessed 25 June 2015)

Insight Crime (10 June 2015) *Arrests of Venezuela Police for Kidnapping Show Limit to Security Reforms*  
<http://www.insightcrime.org/news-briefs/arrests-venezuela-police-kidnapping-reforms>

(Accessed 25 June 2015)

InSight Crime (15 January 2015) *Venezuela Arrests Police for Kidnapping*  
<http://www.insightcrime.org/news-briefs/venezuela-arrests-police-for-kidnapping>

(Accessed 25 June 2015)

InSight Crime (11 July 2014) *Venezuela Kidnapping Figures Mask True Scale of Problem*  
<http://www.insightcrime.org/news-briefs/venezuela-kidnapping-figures-mask-true-scale-of-problem>

(Accessed 25 June 2015)

National Post (16 March 2015) *Kidnap and murder on the bloody streets of Caracas: 'If the families don't pay up, we eliminate that person'*  
<http://news.nationalpost.com/news/kidnap-and-murder-on-the-bloody-streets-of-caracas-if-the-families-dont-pay-up-we-eliminate-that-person>

(Accessed 25 June 2015)

Overseas Security Advisory Council (OSAC) (19 February 2015) *Venezuela 2015 Crime and Safety Report*  
<https://www.osac.gov/pages/ContentReportDetails.aspx?cid=17137>

(Accessed 25 June 2015)

US Department of State (25 June 2015) *2014 Country Reports on Human Rights Practices*  
<http://www.state.gov/documents/organization/236936.pdf>

(Accessed 26 June 2015)

US Department of State (20 August 2013) *Venezuela: Country Specific Information*  
<http://travel.state.gov/content/passports/english/country/venezuela.html>

(Accessed 25 June 2015)

### **Sources Consulted:**

BBC News

Electronic Immigration Network

European Country of Origin Information Network

Google  
Immigration and Refugee Board of Canada  
InSight Crime  
Lexis Nexis  
Overseas Security Advisory Council  
Refugee Documentation Centre Query Database  
UNHCR Refworld  
US Department of State