VENEZUELA: ATTACKS AGAINST FREEDOM OF EXPRESSION MUST CEASE IMMEDIATELY

14 January 2021

Index: AMR 53/3506/2021

The recent campaigns of stigmatization, harassment, and repression against the media in Venezuela constitute a clear attack against the freedoms of expression and of access to information and infringe upon the important contributions by these organizations to expose human rights violations committed by the Venezuelan authorities. These attacks follow incidents of harassment of other organizations and may be part of a broader campaign against civil society in Venezuela, through which the authorities undermine the work that these groups carry out in defense of human rights.

The media outlet Efecto Cocuyo, community radio channel Fe y Alegría, as well as the National Press Workers Union, VPI TV, and news journal Panorama, among other media outlets, have become the target of stigmatization campaigns and legal scrutiny by the authorities that respond to Nicolás Maduro. According to Venezuelan human rights organization PROVEA, during the first 8 months of the state of emergency declared in response to the pandemic, 66 journalists and media staff have been detained in Venezuela.

Since January 6, 2021, independent media organizations such as Efecto Cocuyo and El Pitazo have been accused, first by pro-government media and later by Venezuelan authorities—including Maduro himself—of advancing foreign "interference" efforts in exchange for international cooperation. At the same time, digital news channel VPI TV was subject to an arduous audit and the seizure of its equipment from its office in Caracas, which provoked the "temporary" closing of its operations. On January 8, daily newspaper Panorama announced on social media that its operations had been closed for five days by the National Integrated Service for the Administration of Customs Duties and Taxes (SENIAT), on the grounds of "incompliance with formal duties and tax obligations." The media organization complied with this order to close.

Other media groups have faced attacks by unknown actors during this same period. One example is the digital newspaper Tal Cual, which on January 8 reported that it had been the target of a 3 hour-long digital attack, during which staff experienced difficulties accessing their own web page.

The government of Nicolás Maduro frequently uses public accusations and other forms of harassment to intimidate and attempt to silence those who criticize the government, express ideas contrary to its policies, or denounce human rights violations—including against humanitarian actors—all of which undermines the right to freedom of expression.

These patterns of harassment amount to serious attacks against the integrity, freedom, and judicial guarantees of human rights defenders and journalists. According to High Commissioner for Human Rights Michelle Bachelet, in Venezuela "journalists and human rights defenders critical of the

government continue to face intimidation and public defamation," and there are clear "restrictions on the freedom of expression," including the "application of legislation against targeted groups, attacks against human rights defenders and the detention of journalists." Human rights violations occur in a systematic and generalized manner in Venezuela, and the United Nations Fact-Finding Mission found "reasonable grounds to believe" that crimes against humanity were committed in Venezuela between 2014 and 2020.

The Venezuelan authorities have a responsibility to prevent such harassment and attacks, and to abstain from encouraging or committing them. The occurrence and recurrence of these types of actions, including the persecution of human rights defenders and journalists, the violation of their freedom of expression or illegal or arbitrary detention, or the eventual criminalization of international support for human rights defenders, may amount to serious human rights violations or crimes under international law.

The below organizations condemn these incidents and firmly demand that authorities under the command of Nicolás Maduro put an end to the harassment and attacks against media outlets, journalists, and human rights defenders. We also request that the authorities guarantee respect for the informative work of these groups and their freedom of expression, as well as their contributions to expose human rights abuses and violations committed in Venezuela.

Signing organizations:

Amnesty International

Conectas

International Commission of Jurists

Human Rights Watch

Washington Office on Latin America (WOLA)