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Punished for Seeking Change

Killings, Enforced Disappearances, and Arbitrary Detention Following Venezuela's 2024 Election



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Following Venezuela's 2024 Election**

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Summary

On July 28, 2024, Venezuelans turned out to vote in large numbers despite more than a decade of systematic repression and human rights violations under President Nicolás Maduro.

Hours after polls closed, the Electoral Council declared that Maduro had been re-elected, with over 51 percent of the vote. The United Nations Electoral Technical Team and the Carter Center, which observed the elections, said the process lacked transparency and integrity, and questioned the declared result. The Carter Center said that the precinct-level tally sheets published by the opposition, which seemed to indicate that opposition candidate Edmundo González had won, were reliable and “authentic.” The Electoral Council failed to release the official tally sheets and did not conduct the required audits or citizen verification processes mandated by law.

Thousands of protesters took to the streets in demonstrations, most of them peaceful, demanding a transparent and fair counting of the votes. They were met with brutal repression.

This report—based on 100 interviews with victims, their relatives, eyewitnesses, and members of human rights groups, and on analysis and verification of more than 90 videos and photographs—documents human rights violations committed against protesters, bystanders, opposition leaders, and critics during the protests and over the months that followed. It implicates Venezuelan authorities and pro-government armed groups known as “colectivos” in widespread abuses, including killings of protesters and bystanders, enforced disappearances of opposition party members and foreign nationals, arbitrary detention and prosecution of children and others, and torture and ill-treatment of detainees.

Human Rights Watch received credible reports of 25 killings during protests across the country immediately after the elections. Most of these killings occurred on July 29 and 30, with most victims being under the age of 40 and from low-income neighborhoods. Credible evidence gathered by Human Rights Watch points to the involvement of Venezuelan security forces in some of these killings. In other cases, “colectivos” appear to be responsible.

These “colectivo” groups played a key role in suppressing demonstrations. Security forces initially sought to control or disperse protests by setting up barricades, using tear gas, and carrying out arrests. When demonstrations persisted, “colectivo” members would arrive—often armed—to intimidate or attack protesters.

Since the election, over 2,000 people have been detained in connection with protests, political opposition activities, and human rights work. Many have been arrested for participating in demonstrations, expressing criticism of the government, or supporting the opposition. Prosecutors charged hundreds of people with broadly defined offenses, such as “incitement to hatred,” “resistance to authority,” and “terrorism,” which carry severe sentences of up to 30 years.

Those arrested have often faced proceedings riddled with abuses. Authorities have frequently denied arresting people they had in fact detained or refused to disclose the whereabouts of detainees to their relatives, subjecting them to enforced disappearances as defined under international law. This has forced families to search for their loved ones in multiple detention centers—and even morgues—for days or weeks. Many detainees have been held incommunicado and deprived of visits for extended periods, some from the day of their arrest. Most have not been allowed to see a lawyer of their choice, despite requests from them or their families, while others have never met with their court-appointed public defender while detained. Detainees have been repeatedly denied access to their legal case files. Many were charged in virtual and group hearings that further undermined their due process rights.

Security forces arrested Sofía Sahagún Ortiz, a Spanish-Venezuelan citizen, on October 23 when she was boarding a plane at the Caracas airport. The family’s lawyer went to the Attorney General’s Office and the Ombudsperson’s Office asking officials for information on her whereabouts, but authorities denied the request for information. In mid-December, she was allowed to call her family and told them she was being held in a police center in Caracas. In January, the Ombudsperson’s Office informed Sahagún Ortiz’s family that in December she had been taken before an anti-terrorism judge, in a virtual hearing, and that the following day she had been transferred to Helicoide, Venezuela’s Bolivarian National Intelligence Service (Servicio Bolivariano de Inteligencia Nacional, SEBIN) headquarters, in Caracas. At time of writing, she remained detained, facing several charges, including “financing of terrorism.”

Venezuela's Attorney General's Office claims that roughly 2,000 people detained following the elections have been released. Many have been forced to sign documents prohibiting them from disclosing information about their arrest or legal proceedings. In some cases, they were also compelled to record videos stating that their rights were respected during their detention.

Security officers in black uniforms took Estuardo Pérez Olmedo (pseudonym), a community human rights defender, from his home in early August. They told him they were following a "presidential order." Over four months, he was transferred between six detention centers, enduring harsh conditions, including lack of access to water, food, and medicine. Security forces pressured him to falsely accuse opposition figures of organizing protests. In November, he learned he was being accused of setting fires during protests that took place on July 29 and 30 near his home. He denied any involvement in these events. He was charged with terrorism and incitement to hatred. Upon his release in December, he was forced to sign a document saying that his rights had not been violated. The criminal investigation against him remains open.

The post-electoral crackdown has forced elected officials, local authorities, campaign coordinators, polling station workers, human rights defenders, and journalists to leave the country. Many are seeking protection abroad, where they face asylum systems in Latin America that are plagued with delays, and stalled resettlement proceedings to the United States.

A decade since Maduro took office, domestic and international efforts to protect human rights in Venezuela are at a critical juncture. While most governments have criticized Maduro's power grab, repression in Venezuela has reached new heights.

Years of varying international and domestic policies towards Venezuela—from "maximum pressure" under the first administration of President Donald J. Trump in the United States to government and opposition talks supported by the Biden administration that help lead to the 2024 elections—have failed to produce a transition to democratic, rights-respecting governance. In the context of increased global crises, past failures risk future paralysis: a turning away from initiatives to protect rights in Venezuela and a normalization of grave human rights violations, unfair elections, and political repression.

The current Trump administration is seeking migration cooperation and the release of detained American citizens from Maduro, including through diplomatic engagement and sectoral sanctions. Some recent statements and decisions adopted by the administration show worrying indications that the US government intends to prioritize these goals over broader efforts to promote human rights and the rule of law in Venezuela. Given the diplomatic weight of the United States in the region and the increasing backlash against migration across Latin America, other governments are likely to adopt similar approaches, deprioritizing principled policies toward Venezuela. Simultaneously, Colombia and other countries bordering Venezuela may feel the need to seek Maduro's cooperation on a varying range of issues, including security.

Maduro is likely to use such short-term cooperation to try to legitimize his power grab. That would only set the stage for increased repression in Venezuela and a new outflow of Venezuelans, with new refugees and migrants joining the millions of others who have left the country in the last decade.

Instead of giving up on human rights in Venezuela, governments in Latin America, Europe, and the United States should build on the admittedly insufficient results achieved so far. The July 2024 election and its aftermath deprived the government of any credible democratic legitimacy and helped spur renewed global condemnation of Maduro's abuse of power. This is thanks in large part to brave efforts of Venezuelans who risked—and often suffered—grave human rights violations, including many whose stories are documented in this report.

A central issue is that, to date, foreign and domestic efforts have failed to make a dent in Maduro's domestic carrot-and-stick incentives that reward abusive authorities and security forces, making them loyal to the government, while punishing, torturing, and forcing into exile critics, opponents, and even security force members who support democracy and human rights.

To disrupt these incentives, foreign governments should fully support existing accountability efforts against perpetrators of human rights atrocities in Venezuela—including by imposing carefully-designed targeted sanctions and supporting the continued work of the Independent International Fact-Finding Mission on the Bolivarian Republic of Venezuela (IFFM), established by the UN Human Rights Council, and the International

Criminal Court (ICC), whose prosecutor is investigating potential crimes against humanity in Venezuela. This support also requires defending the work and independence of the ICC, particularly in light of recent Trump administration sanctions targeting the court.

They should also explore ways to encourage or pressure governments that assist Venezuela in its repression to end such activity. This includes the Cuban government, which according to evidence compiled by the FFM, has “trained, advised and participated in intelligence and counter-intelligence” with counterparts at Venezuela’s General Directorate of Military Counterintelligence (Dirección General de Contrainteligencia Militar, DGCIM) and provided training to the SEBIN.

Foreign governments should also use their engagement with the Maduro government as leverage to secure verifiable, even if gradual or stepwise, improvements in human rights—particularly the release of people, both nationals and foreigners, who have been forcibly “disappeared” or arbitrarily detained.

Importantly, foreign governments should expand support for Venezuelan civil society groups, independent journalists, and others advocating for democracy and rights. They should also urgently expand protections for those forced to leave the country due to persecution and other forms of abuse. In particular, the administration of President Trump should reinstate key sources of support that were suspended as part of the United States’ larger rollback of foreign assistance. It should also consider reinstating the Temporary Protected Status (TPS) and resettlement programs for vetted Venezuelans fleeing abuses in their country. Latin American and European governments should help address financing gaps and expand their efforts to protect Venezuelans who flee.

With 8 million Venezuelans abroad, the rights crisis in Venezuela remains arguably the most consequential in the Western Hemisphere. The region cannot give up on the plight of Venezuelans and their struggle for democracy and human rights.

Methodology

This report builds on Human Rights Watch’s prior reporting on post-electoral repression in Venezuela in 2024. It includes new evidence on human rights violations, as well as updates on cases Human Rights Watch reported on in the immediate aftermath of the elections.¹

In researching post-electoral repression in Venezuela, Human Rights Watch interviewed 101 people, including victims, relatives, witnesses, human rights defenders, journalists, and other local sources. Many other relatives, witnesses, and others declined to be interviewed because they feared government retaliation. Human Rights Watch conducted phone interviews with sources in Venezuela between July 2024 and April 2025, and in-person interviews with Venezuelans who fled the country after July 28, 2024.

Most of those interviewed spoke to researchers on condition of anonymity. As a result, relevant citations omit details that could possibly lead to their identification. Certain details about cases or the individuals involved, including imagery (blurred or otherwise), have also been withheld when Human Rights Watch believed that publishing the information might put someone at risk.

Before each interview, Human Rights Watch informed participants of the purpose of the interview, its voluntary nature, and how the information would be used. We obtained verbal consent from each interviewee. They did not receive any compensation, benefit, or other incentives for speaking with us. When appropriate, Human Rights Watch provided contact information for organizations offering legal or counseling services.

Additionally, Human Rights Watch analyzed and verified 76 videos and 17 photographs connected to the post-election repression. These included imagery of people who had been killed and injured, or of protests or other relevant events found on social media platforms or sent directly to researchers by people close to the victims, organizations, and journalists involved. Where possible, researchers confirmed the exact locations where the photographs or videos were captured; used information such as shadows, weather

¹ See “Venezuela: Brutal Crackdown on Protesters, Voters,” Human Rights Watch news release, September 4, 2024, <https://www.hrw.org/news/2024/09/04/venezuela-brutal-crackdown-protesters-voters>.

patterns, and upload times to determine the time of day they were captured; and consulted with forensic pathologists, who analyzed visible injuries, and arms experts, who analyzed the weapons that were seen or heard in the content. Human Rights Watch has preserved the footage.

Human Rights Watch researchers also reviewed seven death certificates of people killed in the protests and other documentation related to arrests and criminal proceedings.

Background

A Decade of Unfair Elections

Weeks after Hugo Chávez’s death in 2013, his vice president and hand-picked successor, Nicolás Maduro, was elected president with 50.6 percent of the vote compared to 49.1 percent for opposition candidate Henrique Capriles, according to Venezuelan electoral authorities.² The Supreme Court of Justice (Tribunal Supremo de Justicia, TSJ) and the National Electoral Council (Consejo Nacional Electoral, CNE) rejected appeals filed by Capriles challenging the results.³ Controversy over the results led to demonstrations and counter-demonstrations. Security forces used excessive force on protesters and carried out arbitrary detentions. At least nine people were killed and dozens injured.⁴

The Inter-American Court of Human Rights ruled in 2024 that the Venezuelan government had compromised the integrity of the 2014 election by abusing state resources to favor Maduro and that in doing so, it had violated Capriles’ right to equal competition and Venezuelans’ right to freely choose their leader.⁵

² Human Rights Watch, *World Report 2014* (New York: Human Rights Watch, 2014), Venezuela chapter, <https://www.hrw.org/world-report/2014/country-chapters/venezuela>; Virginia López and Jonathan Watts, “Nicolás Maduro declared Venezuela election winner by thin margin,” *The Guardian*, April 15, 2013, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2013/apr/15/nicolas-maduro-wins-venezuela-election> (accessed February 21, 2025).

³ Human Rights Watch, *World Report 2014* (New York: Human Rights Watch, 2014), Venezuela chapter, <https://www.hrw.org/world-report/2014/country-chapters/venezuela>; Abraham Zamorano, “Venezuelan justice rejects Capriles’ appeal, what’s next?” (“Justicia venezolana rechaza la impugnación de Capriles, ¿y ahora qué?”), *BBC News Mundo*, August 8, 2013, https://www.bbc.com/mundo/noticias/2013/08/130808_venezuela_elecciones_impugnacion_inadmission_tsj_capriles_az (accessed February 21, 2025).

⁴ See, for example, Human Rights Watch letter to Mr. Maina Kiai, UN Special Rapporteur on the rights to freedom of peaceful assembly and of association, Mr. Frank La Rue, UN Special Rapporteur on the promotion and protection of the right to freedom of opinion and expression, Mr. Juan Méndez, UN Special Rapporteur on torture and other cruel, inhuman or degrading treatment, and Members of the UN Working Group on Arbitrary Detention, July 11, 2013, “Letter to the UN about post-electoral violence in Venezuela,” <https://www.hrw.org/news/2013/07/11/letter-un-about-post-electoral-violence-venezuela>; “Venezuela: Respect Free Speech and Assembly,” Human Rights Watch news release, April 17, 2013, <https://www.hrw.org/news/2013/04/17/venezuela-respect-free-speech-and-assembly>.

⁵ Inter-American Court of Human Rights, *Capriles Case*, Judgment of October 10, 2024, Inter-Am Ct. H.R., (Ser. C) No. 541 (2024), https://www.corteidh.or.cr/docs/casos/articulos/seriec_541_esp.pdf (accessed February 21, 2025), paras. 143-144.

After 16 years of legislative dominance by Chavismo—the political movement created by Chávez—the opposition coalition, Unitary Platform, secured a majority in the National Assembly in 2015.⁶ But in 2017, Maduro convened a pro-government Constituent Assembly and granted it sweeping powers that extended beyond constitutional reform.⁷ This move, which undermined the authority of the opposition-led National Assembly, triggered mass protests, with tens of thousands of Venezuelans taking to the streets to oppose the government’s actions.⁸

In 2018, Maduro declared victory in an early presidential election, marked by low levels of participation. The disqualification of numerous opposition candidates drove the opposition to call for a boycott of the elections.⁹ The CNE reported that Maduro had secured 67.8 percent of the vote, followed by opposition candidate Henri Falcón with 21 percent.¹⁰ The election drew widespread criticism for failing to meet international

⁶ See, for example, “Opposition in Venezuela obtains historic victory in the parliamentary elections” (“Oposición en Venezuela obtiene histórica victoria en las elecciones parlamentarias”), *BBC News Mundo*, December 7, 2015, https://www.bbc.com/mundo/noticias/2015/12/151204_venezuela_parlamentarias_oposicion_chavismo_dp (accessed January 6, 2025); “Elections in Venezuela: Venezuela’s opposition wins legislative elections and ends 16 years of Chavista majority” (“Elecciones en Venezuela La oposición de Venezuela gana las elecciones legislativas y acaba con 16 años de mayoría chavista”), *RTVE*, December 7, 2015, <https://www.rtve.es/noticias/20151207/venezuela/1268460.shtml> (accessed January 6, 2025); “Chavista offensive after the opposition’s victory in the National Assembly” (“Ofensiva chavista tras el triunfo de la oposición en la Asamblea Nacional”) *RFI*, December 16, 2015, <https://www.rfi.fr/es/americas/20151216-ofensiva-chavista-tras-el-triunfo-de-la-oposicion-en-la-asamblea-nacional> (accessed January 6, 2025).

⁷ “Venezuela’s President Maduro calls for new constituent body,” *BBC News*, May 2, 2017, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-latin-america-39775092> (accessed January 6, 2025); Tamara Taraciuk Broner (Human Rights Watch), “Venezuela: The Constituent Assembly Sham,” commentary, Human Rights Watch dispatch, July 31, 2017, <https://www.hrw.org/news/2017/07/31/venezuela-constituent-assembly-sham>.

⁸ José Miguel Vivanco and Tamara Taraciuk Broner (Human Rights Watch), “Why We Oppose Maduro’s Constituent Assembly,” commentary, *Semana*, July 26, 2017, <https://www.hrw.org/news/2017/07/26/why-we-oppose-maduros-constituent-assembly>; Human Rights Watch, *World Report 2019* (New York: Human Rights Watch, 2019), Venezuela chapter, <https://www.hrw.org/world-report/2019/country-chapters/venezuela>; “Venezuela: Video Footage Exposes Brutal Repression,” Human Rights Watch news release, July 21, 2017, <https://www.hrw.org/news/2017/07/21/venezuela-video-footage-exposes-brutal-repression>.

⁹ See, for example, “Maduro is re-elected president with record abstention and amid allegations of fraud” (“Maduro se reelige como presidente con una abstención récord y en medio de denuncias de fraude”), *El País*, May 22, 2018, https://elpais.com/internacional/2018/05/20/america/1526851862_285873.html (accessed January 6, 2025); “Chavista Supreme Court prohibits the opposition from participating in the elections together” (“El Supremo chavista prohíbe a la oposición ir unida en las elecciones”), *El País*, January 26, 2018, https://elpais.com/internacional/2018/01/25/america/1516914621_807027.html (accessed January 6, 2025); “Venezuela opposition banned from running in 2018 election,” *BBC News*, December 11, 2017, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-latin-america-42304594> (accessed January 6, 2025); United States Department of State, “Department of State statement on Elections in Venezuela,” February 8, 2018, <https://cl.usembassy.gov/department-state-statement-elections-venezuela/> (accessed January 6, 2025).

¹⁰ See, for example, “Elections in Venezuela: Nicolás Maduro wins the presidential election according to the National Electoral Council and Henri Falcón questions the results” (“Elecciones en Venezuela: Nicolás Maduro gana las presidenciales según el

standards of fairness and transparency. Governments around the world rejected the results,¹¹ while observers documented irregularities.¹²

Prior to Maduro's inauguration in early 2019, hundreds of thousands of Venezuelans took to the streets again. Opposition leader and head of the National Assembly Juan Guaidó declared himself interim president during a mass rally.¹³ Over 50 governments recognized Guaidó as the "legitimate president" of Venezuela,¹⁴ but Maduro rejected calls for new elections.

In 2021, an independent EU electoral mission monitoring the November local elections reported that political opponents had been arbitrarily disqualified from running for office, that there had been unequal access to the media, and that lack of judicial independence and of respect for the rule of law had undermined the election's impartiality and transparency.¹⁵ The report laid out 23 recommendations to ensure free and fair elections in

Consejo Nacional Electoral y Henri Falcón cuestiona el resultado"), *BBC News Mundo*, May 21, 2018, <https://www.bbc.com/mundo/noticias-america-latina-44192065> (accessed January 6, 2025); "Venezuela's Maduro Wins Boycotted Elections Amid Charges Of Fraud," *NPR*, May 21, 2018, <https://www.npr.org/sections/thetwo-way/2018/05/21/612918548/venezuelas-maduro-wins-boycotted-elections-amid-charges-of-fraud> (accessed January 6, 2025); "Henri Falcón rechaza el resultado que proclama a Maduro y llama a organizar nuevas elecciones" ("Henri Falcón rejects the results that proclaim Maduro winner and calls for organizing new elections"), *El País*, May 21, 2018, https://elpais.com/internacional/2018/05/20/america/1526840397_319633.html (accessed January 6, 2025).

¹¹ See, for example, Organization of American States (OAS) Permanent Council, Resolution on the Situation in Venezuela, January 10, 2019, https://www.oas.org/en/media_center/press_release.asp?sCodigo=E-001/19 (accessed January 6, 2025); Lima Group Declaration news release 002/19, January 4, 2019, <https://cancilleria.gob.ar/es/actualidad/noticias/declaracion-del-grupo-de-lima> (accessed January 6, 2025); Vice President Mike Pence Archived (@VP45), post to X, May 21, 2018, <https://x.com/VP45/status/998595802774867968> (accessed January 10, 2025).

¹² See, for example, Venezuelan Electoral Observatory (Observatorio Electoral Venezolano, OEV), *Irregularities report 2018: The elections on May 20 are neither free nor impartial (Part 1) (Informe de irregularidades 2018: Las elecciones del próximo 20 de mayo no son libres ni imparciales (Parte 1))*, May 2018, <https://oevenezolano.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/05/Informe-Presidenciales-2018-Parte-I-2018.pdf> (accessed January 13, 2025).

¹³ Ana Vanessa Herrero, "Juan Guaidó is sworn in as interim president of Venezuela" ("Juan Guaidó se juramenta como presidente encargado de Venezuela"), *New York Times*, January 23, 2019, <https://www.nytimes.com/es/2019/01/23/espanol/america-latina/venezuela-protestas-maduro-guaido.html> (accessed January 13, 2025); "Venezuela: Arrests, Killings in Anti-Government Protests," Human Rights Watch news release, January 25, 2019, <https://www.hrw.org/news/2019/01/25/venezuela-arrests-killings-anti-government-protests>; Human Rights Watch, *Venezuela's Humanitarian Emergency: Large-Scale UN Response Needed to Address Health and Food Crises* (New York: Human Rights Watch, 2019), <https://www.hrw.org/report/2019/04/04/venezuelas-humanitarian-emergency/large-scale-un-response-needed-address-health>.

¹⁴ "More than 50 countries recognize Juan Guaidó as interim president of Venezuela" (Más de 50 países reconocen a Juan Guaidó como presidente encargado de Venezuela), *Transparencia Venezuela*, February 8, 2019, <https://transparenciave.org/mas-de-50-paises-reconocen-a-juan-guaido-como-presidente-encargado-de-venezuela/> (accessed February 21, 2025).

¹⁵ "Venezuela: EU Elections Report Flags Rights Barriers," Human Rights Watch news release, February 24, 2022, <https://www.hrw.org/news/2022/02/24/venezuela-eu-elections-report-flags-rights-barriers>.

Venezuela. These included measures to establish transparent, non-political, and merit-based selection of judges and to abolish the comptroller general's authority to strip citizens of their political rights through an administrative procedure arbitrarily used against political opponents. The report also recommended strengthening the CNE's enforcement authority, especially in relation to the use of government resources in electoral campaigns and campaign coverage by state-owned media.¹⁶

The 2024 Election

On October 17, 2023, the Venezuelan opposition parties, allied under the Unitary Platform, and the Maduro government signed the Barbados Agreement as part of a negotiation that started in Mexico in 2021.¹⁷ They agreed to honor political parties' right to choose their presidential candidates and to hold a presidential election in the second half of 2024, among other election-related measures.¹⁸

The United States government, then under the Biden administration, agreed to temporarily lift certain sanctions on Venezuela in exchange for a commitment to hold free and fair elections.¹⁹ The US also released Alex Saab, a Colombian businessman and close Maduro ally who had been indicted in the US for money laundering. However, the Maduro government's failure to live up to its obligations under the Barbados Agreement prompted the US to reimpose some of the sanctions in January and April 2024.²⁰

¹⁶ European Union Election Observation Mission to Venezuela, "Final Report: Venezuela Regional and Municipal Elections 21 November 2021," February 22, 2022, https://www.eeas.europa.eu/sites/default/files/eu_eom_ven_2021_fr_en.pdf (accessed January 13, 2025), pp. 41-42.

¹⁷ "Mexico hosts negotiations and dialogue between the Government and the Unitary Platform of Venezuela" ("México es anfitrión de la negociación y diálogo entre el Gobierno y la Plataforma Unitaria de Venezuela"), Mexican Ministry of Foreign Affairs news release, August 13, 2021, <https://www.gob.mx/sre/articulos/mexico-es-anfriton-de-la-negociacion-y-dialogo-entre-el-gobierno-y-la-plataforma-unitaria-de-venezuela-280812> (accessed February 17, 2025).

¹⁸ Government of Venezuela and Unitary Platform of Venezuela, "Partial Agreement on the Promotion of Political Rights and Electoral Guarantees for all" ("Acuerdo Parcial sobre la Promoción de Derechos Políticos y Garantías Electorales para todos"), October 17, 2023, <https://www.regjeringen.no/contentassets/ac03d5655a8448e0a9653cd95d5c7978/garantias-electorales.pdf> (accessed January 13, 2025).

¹⁹ "In Response to Electoral Roadmap, Treasury Issues New Venezuela General Licenses," US Department of the Treasury news release, October 18, 2023, <https://home.treasury.gov/news/press-releases/jy1822> (accessed January 13, 2025).

²⁰ Matthew Miller, "Venezuela: Sanctions Actions and Supporting Democracy," US Department of State press statement, January 30, 2024, <https://2021-2025.state.gov/venezuela-sanctions-actions-and-supporting-democracy/> (accessed January 13, 2025); "Venezuela Sanctions Relief: Expiration of General License 44," US Department of State press statement, April 17, 2024, <https://2021-2025.state.gov/venezuela-sanctions-relief-expiration-of-general-license-44/> (accessed January 13, 2025); "US reimposes sanctions on Venezuela as hope for democracy crumbles," *The Guardian*, April 18, 2024, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2024/apr/17/us-reimposes-venezuela-sanctions> (accessed January 13, 2025).

On February 28, 2024, the National Assembly signed a National Agreement outlining general principles, a proposed electoral schedule, and an expansion of “electoral guarantees” for the 2024 presidential election.²¹ Members of the Unitary Platform were left out of the consultation process.²² On March 5, 2024, the CNE announced that the presidential election would be held on July 28.²³

In the lead-up to the election, Venezuelan authorities took renewed steps to undermine the fairness of the process. The government-controlled National Assembly replaced all 15 members of the CNE with government-aligned people. Authorities also arbitrarily arrested political opponents, disqualified opposition candidates, and replaced the leadership of opposition political parties.²⁴

In late October 2023, Maria Corina Machado won a primary election organized by the opposition with more than 90 percent of the vote.²⁵ However, in January 2024, the TSJ upheld a June 2023 decision by the Comptroller’s General’s Office to disqualify her, as well as opposition leader Henrique Capriles, from running for office.²⁶

²¹ National Assembly of Venezuela, National Agreement on General Principles, Calendar and Expansion of Electoral Guarantees: Presidential Elections 2024 (Acuerdo Nacional sobre principios generales, calendario y ampliación de garantías electorales: elecciones presidenciales 2024), February 28, 2024, <https://www.asambleanacional.gob.ve/storage/documentos/documentos/acuerdo-nacional-elecciones-presidenciales-2024-20240229004343.pdf> (accessed February 17, 2025).

²² Ibid.; See also Florantonia Singer, “With no election date set, Venezuela’s political conflict drags on,” *El País*, March 1, 2024, <https://english.elpais.com/international/2024-03-01/with-no-election-date-set-venezuelas-political-conflict-drags-on.html> (accessed January 13, 2025).

²³ “Elections in Venezuela will be held on July 28” (“Elecciones en Venezuela se realizarán el próximo 28 de julio”), video clip, YouTube, March 5, 2024, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=XkAgIPs_fHE (accessed January 13, 2025).

²⁴ See Human Rights Watch, *World Report 2024* (New York: Human Rights Watch, 2024), Venezuela chapter, <https://www.hrw.org/world-report/2024/country-chapters/venezuela#08e2f9>; “Venezuela: Repression Mars Key Upcoming Election,” Human Rights Watch news release, July 25, 2024, <https://www.hrw.org/news/2024/07/25/venezuela-repression-mars-key-upcoming-election>; “Venezuela: Increased Threats to Free Elections,” Human Rights Watch news release, June 22, 2023, <https://www.hrw.org/news/2023/06/22/venezuela-increased-threats-free-elections>; “Venezuela: Rulings Threaten Free and Fair Elections,” Human Rights Watch news release, July 7, 2020, <https://www.hrw.org/news/2020/07/07/venezuela-rulings-threaten-free-and-fair-elections>; Inter-American Commission on Human Rights (IACHR), *Venezuela: Serious Human Rights Violations in Connection with the Elections*, December 27, 2024, <https://www.oas.org/en/iachr/reports/pdfs/2025/Report-Venezuela-seriousHHRR-violations-connections-elections.pdf> (accessed February 17, 2025), pp. 14-25.

²⁵ Comisión Nacional de Primaria VE (@cnprimariave), post to X, October 25, 2023, <https://x.com/cnprimariave/status/1717028044030816498> (accessed January 13, 2025).

²⁶ Carolina Alcalde, “Venezuela: TSJ ratifies the removal of opposition candidate María Corina Machado” (“Venezuela: TSJ ratifica inhabilitación de candidata opositora María Corina Machado”), *Voz de América*, January 26, 2024, <https://www.vozdeamerica.com/a/tribunal-supremo-venezuela-ratifica-inhabilitacion-henrique-capriles/7459127.html> (accessed January 13, 2025); Venezuelan Comptroller General’s Office, Document No. DGPE-23-08-00-008, June 27, 2024,

Machado then sought to nominate Corina Yoris, a university professor, to run in her place, but the electoral authority blocked Yoris' candidacy.²⁷ In March 2024, the electoral authority allowed Edmundo González, a former diplomat, to register for the Democratic Unity Roundtable (Mesa de la Unidad Democrática, MUD), a coalition of opposition parties.²⁸

Repression ahead of the elections was severe, with authorities arbitrarily detaining 142 people between July 1 and 27, according to the local civil society organization Foro Penal.²⁹ Among them was prominent security expert and human rights defender Rocío San Miguel, who was detained in February 2024 and remained behind bars at time of writing.³⁰ Others detained included leaders of and people who worked or volunteered for Machado's party, Vente Venezuela, such as her security chief Milciades Avila.³¹

Venezuelan authorities also harassed perceived opposition supporters, including by closing or fining restaurants or hotels used by Machado and González, and detaining people who provided logistical support, such as sound equipment, for their rallies.³²

<https://es.scribd.com/document/656364196/Comunicacion-de-la-Contraloria> (accessed February 27, 2025); María Corina Machado (@MariaCorinaYA), post to X, July 14, 2015, <https://x.com/mariacorinaya/status/621052075233964037> (accessed February 27, 2025).

²⁷ "Corina Yoris could not register her candidacy: 'They are curtailing the rights of millions of Venezuelans; these are very dark hours'" ("Corina Yoris no pudo inscribir su candidatura: 'Están cercenando el derecho a millones de venezolanos; son horas muy oscuras'"), *CNN Español*, March 25, 2024, <https://cnnespanol.cnn.com/2024/03/25/corina-yoris-conclusiones-entrevista-oris/> (accessed January 13, 2025); "IACHR: the State of Venezuela must ensure the political participation of the opposition in the presidential elections, without arbitrariness," IACHR news release, April 5, 2024, https://www.oas.org/en/iachr/jsForm/?File=/en/iachr/media_center/preleases/2024/067.asp (accessed February 17, 2025).

²⁸ Vente Venezuela (@VenteVenezuela), post to X, April 20, 2024, <https://x.com/VenteVenezuela/status/1781509462425002005> (accessed January 13, 2025).

²⁹ Foro Penal, *Special Report on Political Repression in Venezuela: July, August and September 2024 Pre- and Post-Electoral Situation*, November 30, 2024, https://foropenal.com/wp-content/uploads/2024/12/FP_REPORTE-JUL_AGO_SEP_-Ingles-2024_2401201-comprimido.pdf (accessed January 13, 2025), p. 4.

³⁰ "Venezuela: The Government's Escalating Repression and Attempts at Evading Scrutiny Face Resounding Condemnation from International Civil Society," statement by international human rights organizations, February 16, 2024, <https://www.hrw.org/news/2024/02/16/venezuela-governments-escalating-repression-and-attempts-evading-scrutiny-face>.

³¹ Vente Venezuela (@VenteVenezuela), post to X, July 17, 2024, <https://x.com/VenteVenezuela/status/1813512568440504622> (accessed January 13, 2025); "Venezuela opposition leader's security chief arrested days before election," *Reuters*, July 17, 2024, <https://www.reuters.com/world/americas/security-chief-venezuelan-opposition-leader-machado-arrested-days-before-2024-07-17/> (accessed January 13, 2025).

³² "Venezuela: Repression Mars Key Upcoming Election," Human Rights Watch news release; UN Human Rights Council, Detailed findings of the independent international factfinding mission on the Bolivarian Republic of Venezuela, UN Doc. A/HRC/57/CRP.5 (2024), <https://www.ohchr.org/sites/default/files/documents/hrbodies/hrcouncil/sessions-regular/session57/advance-versions/a-hrc-57-crp-5-en.pdf> (accessed March 3, 2025), para. 49.

“Colectivos,” criminal groups, and other armed groups reportedly intimidated opposition candidates and voters during the electoral campaign, particularly in border and mining areas.³³

In May, the CNE withdrew an invitation to the European Union to observe the elections, a move that contradicted the Barbados Agreement.³⁴ On July 17, in response to an invitation from the opposition, a group of European Parliament members agreed to send an electoral delegation to monitor the electoral process, but they were stopped upon arrival at the airport and deported.³⁵ Only two international election monitors were allowed into the country: the United Nations Electoral Technical Team and the Carter Center.³⁶

Voter registration was also restricted. Authorities mandated resident visas to register to vote from abroad, leaving only 69,212 of nearly five million eligible Venezuelan voters living abroad registered.³⁷ And just two days before election day, the Venezuelan government closed its border with Colombia, where nearly three million Venezuelans live.³⁸

³³ Venezuela Investigative Unit, “How Maduro’s Criminal Regime Is Tilting the Venezuela Elections,” *InSight Crime*, July 25, 2024, <https://insightcrime.org/news/how-maduro-criminal-regime-is-tilting-t-venezuela-elections/> (accessed January 13, 2025).

³⁴ Cneesvenezuela (@cneesvzla), post to X, May 28, 2024, <https://x.com/cneesvzla/status/1795574699856195983> (accessed January 13, 2025); European Parliament, “Parliamentary question - E-001299/2024(ASW): Answer given by High Representative/Vice-President Borrell i Fontelles on behalf of the European Commission,” June 24, 2024, https://www.europarl.europa.eu/doceo/document/E-9-2024-001299-ASW_EN.html (accessed January 13, 2025).

³⁵ EPP Group (@EPPGroup), post to X, July 17, 2024, <https://x.com/EPPGroup/status/1813570762848231714> (accessed January 13, 2025); “The Venezuelan government prevents several international delegations from entering the country,” (“El Gobierno venezolano impide la entrada al país de varias delegaciones internacionales”), *Swissinfo*, July 27, 2024, <https://www.swissinfo.ch/spa/el-gobierno-venezolano-impide-la-entrada-al-pa%C3%ADs-de-varias-delegaciones-internacionales/85143236> (accessed March 31, 2025).

³⁶ “The UN will deploy a Panel of electoral experts in Venezuela” (“La ONU desplegará un Panel de expertos electorales en Venezuela”), UN news release, June 25, 2024, <https://news.un.org/es/story/2024/06/1530796> (accessed January 13, 2025); “Carter Center to Deploy Electoral Mission for Venezuela’s Presidential Election,” The Carter Center news release, June 21, 2024, <https://www.cartercenter.org/news/pr/2024/venezuela-o62124.html> (accessed January 13, 2025).

³⁷ The Carter Center, *Observation of the 2024 Presidential Election in Venezuela – Final Report*, July 2024, https://www.cartercenter.org/resources/pdfs/news/peace_publications/election_reports/venezuela/venezuela-final-report-2025.pdf (accessed February 27, 2025), p. 16; CEPAZ, *Limited rights: Violations of electoral participation of Venezuelans abroad (Derechos limitados: Vulneraciones a la participación electoral de las personas venezolanas en el exterior)*, July 23, 2024, <https://ce paz.org/wp-content/uploads/2024/07/Derechos-limitados.pdf> (accessed January 13, 2025); “Venezuela Must Ensure the Right to Vote of Venezuelans Who Live Outside the Country Whatever their Migration Status, IACHR Says,” IACHR news release, June 18, 2024, https://www.oas.org/en/iachr/jsForm/?File=/en/iachr/media_center/preleases/2024/141.asp (accessed February 17, 2025).

³⁸ “Venezuelan government closes borders and puts other measures into effect ahead of Sunday’s presidential elections” (“Gobierno de Venezuela cierra fronteras y pone en vigor otras medidas previo a las elecciones presidenciales del domingo”), *CNN Español*, July 26, 2024, <https://cnnespanol.cnn.com/2024/07/26/gobierno-venezuela-cierra-fronteras-medidas-elecciones-presidenciales-orix> (accessed February 19, 2025); UNHCR, “Venezuela: Global Appeal 2025 situation overview,”

Election Day

Venezuelans voted in the presidential election in large numbers. Over 59 percent of registered voters participated, despite a backdrop of intimidation and repression.³⁹ UN experts found the electoral environment was “largely peaceful” and “logistically well organized.”⁴⁰

Observers, the media, and social media users reported restrictions on access to some polling stations as well as last-minute changes.⁴¹

Observers from the Carter Center also identified “ruling party checkpoints in the vicinity of voting centers,” known as *puntos rojos*.⁴² In most cases, the checkpoints were used to record who had voted, according to the Venezuelan Electoral Observatory’s (Observatorio Electoral Venezolano, OEV) monitoring.⁴³

Although the Carter Center said that voting took place in a “generally civil manner,” it also reported violent incidents linked to altercations or protests around polling centers, and intimidation by pro-government groups.⁴⁴

November 2024, <https://reporting.unhcr.org/sites/default/files/2024-11/Venezuela%20-%20Situation%20Overview.pdf> (accessed January 13, 2025).

³⁹ UN Panel of Experts, “Interim Report: Venezuelan Presidential Elections 28 July 2024,” August 9, 2024, https://news.un.org/en/sites/news.un.org/en/files/atoms/files/Interim_Report_PoE_Venezuela_090824.pdf (accessed January 13, 2025), pp. 1-2.

⁴⁰ Ibid., p. 1; See also OEV, *Second preview of results on the observation of the 2024 presidential election (Segundo avance de resultados sobre la observación de la elección presidencial 2024)*, August 2024, <https://oevenezolano.org/wp-content/uploads/2024/08/segundo-avance-de-resultados-1.pdf> (accessed January 13, 2025), p. 1; “Carter Center Statement on Venezuela Election,” July 30, 2024, The Carter Center press statement, https://www.cartercenter.org/news/pr/2024/venezuela-073024.html?mc_cid=d3d3890a8c (accessed January 13, 2025); See also OEV, *Preview of results: observation of the 2024 presidential election (Avance de resultados: observación de la elección presidencial 2024)*, July 2024, <https://oevenezolano.org/2024/07/avance-de-resultados-observacion-de-la-eleccion-presidencial-2024/> (accessed January 13, 2025).

⁴¹ “Carter Center Statement on Venezuela Election,” The Carter Center press statement; OEV, *Second preview of results on the observation of the 2024 presidential election*, p. 5; Noticias Telemundo, post to Facebook, July 26, 2024, <https://www.facebook.com/watch/?v=1477865206200815> (accessed January 13, 2025); Aime Nogal Méndez (@anogal), post to X, July 27, 2024, <https://x.com/anogal/status/1816980662655525199> (accessed January 13, 2025).

⁴² “Carter Center Statement on Venezuela Election,” The Carter Center press statement.

⁴³ OEV, *Preview of results: observation of the 2024 presidential election*.

⁴⁴ The Carter Center, *Observation of the 2024 Presidential Election in Venezuela – Final Report*, p. 31; “Carter Center Statement on Venezuela Election,” The Carter Center press statement; OEV, *Second preview of results on the observation of the 2024 presidential election*, p. 5.

“Colectivos” reportedly intimidated opposition voters and observers at polling stations in some parts of the country.⁴⁵ For example, multiple witnesses told Human Rights Watch that around 3 a.m., armed motorcyclists, who they believed to be “colectivos,” arrived at polling stations in San Antonio, Táchira state, on the border with Colombia, firing shots into the air to intimidate voters who had been queuing since early hours to vote.⁴⁶ Two witnesses said that initially, barricades of the Directorate of Strategic and Tactical Actions of the Bolivarian National Police (Dirección de Acciones Estratégicas y Tácticas de la Policía Nacional Bolivariana, DAET) blocked their access to get closer to one polling station, but between 6 and 7 a.m., DAET officers removed the barricades, allowing the motorcyclists to approach the station, and intimidate voters.⁴⁷

The Aftermath

Six hours after polls closed, Venezuela’s CNE declared that Maduro had won the election with just over 51 percent of the vote.⁴⁸ The CNE did not release and still has not released the tally sheets from the election, nor conducted the audits or citizen verification processes required by law.⁴⁹ On August 22, the Electoral Chamber of the TSJ—which lacks

⁴⁵ Human Rights Watch interviews with people in exile who participated in the July 28 elections, January 30–February 4, 2025; Joaquín Sánchez Mariño, “Chavista groups went to intimidate a voting center but didn’t succeed: ‘They no longer intimidate us’” (“Los colectivos chavistas fueron a intimidar a un centro de votación pero no lo lograron: ‘Ya no nos amedrentan más’”), *Infobae*, July 28, 2024, https://www.infobae.com/venezuela/2024/07/28/los-colectivos-chavistas-fueron-a-intimidar-a-un-centro-de-votacion-pero-no-lo-lograron-ya-no-nos-amedrentan-mas/?mc_cid=d3d3890a8c (accessed January 13, 2025); “One death and several injuries reported due to an attack by Chavista groups during the vote audit in the state of Táchira (“Reportan un muerto y varios heridos por un ataque de colectivos chavistas durante la auditoría de los votos en el estado Táchira”), *Infobae*, July 28, 2024, <https://www.infobae.com/venezuela/2024/07/29/reportan-un-muerto-y-varios-heridos-por-un-ataque-de-colectivos-chavistas-durante-la-auditoria-de-los-votos-en-el-estado-tachira/> (accessed January 13, 2025).

⁴⁶ Human Rights Watch interviews with people who fled Venezuela after July 28, January and February 2025.

⁴⁷ Human Rights Watch interviews with two people who were outside the polling station on July 28, February 4, 2025.

⁴⁸ El Nacional (@elnacionalweb), post to Instagram, July 29, 2024, https://www.instagram.com/reel/C9_i-gYNUkV/?img_index=elnacionalweb (accessed January 13, 2025).

⁴⁹ See National Electoral Council of Venezuela, General Regulations of the Organic Law on Electoral Processes (Reglamento General de la Ley Orgánica de Procesos Electorales), January 18, 2013, <https://oevenezolano.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/06/Reglamento-General-LOPRE.pdf> (accessed April 14, 2025), art. 437; National Assembly of Venezuela, Organic Law on Electoral Processes (Ley Orgánica de Procesos Electorales), August 12, 2009, <https://www.asambleanacional.gob.ve/storage/documentos/leyes/ley-organi-20220131131037.pdf> (accessed April 11, 2025), arts. 156–163; See also “Venezuela Presidential Election: International Organizations Call on Authorities to Guarantee Transparency,” news release by international human rights organizations, July 30, 2024, <https://www.hrw.org/news/2024/07/30/venezuela-presidential-election-international-organizations-call-authorities>; OEV, *Second preview of results on the observation of the 2024 presidential election*, pp. 6–7; See also The Carter Center, *Observation of the 2024 Presidential Election in Venezuela – Final Report*, p. 35; Derechos Humanos de Venezuela en Movimiento, *Human Rights Crisis in Venezuela around the installation of a de facto government (10)* (*Nicolás Maduro’s red book*) (*Crisis de Derechos Humanos en Venezuela alrededor de la instalación de un gobierno de facto (10E)* (*El libro rojo de Nicolás Maduro*)), February 17,

independence from the executive⁵⁰—validated the CNE’s results.⁵¹

The United Nations Electoral Technical Team and the Carter Center said the process lacked transparency and integrity and questioned the announced results.⁵² The opposition said it collected around 85 percent of the total precinct-level tally sheets from the election, which according to the Carter Center were “authentic.”⁵³ The Carter Center reported that those tally sheets showed González had won decisively with approximately 67 percent of the vote, and described the results announced by the CNE as “statistically impossible.”⁵⁴

Following the electoral council’s announcement on July 29, thousands of protesters took to the streets in largely peaceful demonstrations demanding a fair vote count. Only 7 percent of all post-election protests involved violence, according to the Venezuelan Observatory of

2025, <https://ddhhenmovimiento.info/2025/02/17/el-libro-rojo-de-nicolas-maduro/#descarga> (accessed March 3, 2025), pp. 16-17.

⁵⁰ See, for example, European Union Election Observation Mission to Venezuela, “Final Report: Venezuela Regional and Municipal Elections 21 November 2021,” pp. 14-15; IACHR, *Annual Report 2023, Chapter IV.b: Venezuela*, December 2023, https://www.oas.org/en/iachr/docs/annual/2023/chapters/IA2023_Cap_4B_Venezuela_ENG.PDF (accessed February 24, 2025), para. 4; UN Human Rights Council, Independence of the justice system and access to justice in the Bolivarian Republic of Venezuela, including for violations of economic and social rights, and the situation of human rights in the Arco Minero del Orinoco region, UN Doc. A/HRC/44/54 (2020), <https://docs.un.org/A/HRC/44/54> (accessed February 24, 2025), para. 66; International Criminal Court (ICC), Pre-trial Chamber I: Situation in the Bolivarian Republic of Venezuela, No. ICC-02/18, November 1, 2022, https://www.icc-cpi.int/sites/default/files/CourtRecords/CR2022_06554.PDF (accessed February 24, 2025), para. 151.

⁵¹ Tribunal Supremo de Justicia (TSJ) de la República Bolivariana de Venezuela (@tsj_venezuela), post to Instagram, August 22, 2024, https://www.instagram.com/p/C_-CFYHSoee/?img_index=3 (accessed February 17, 2025).

⁵² UN Panel of Experts, “Interim Report: Venezuelan Presidential Elections 28 July 2024,” August 9, 2024, https://news.un.org/en/sites/news.un.org/en/files/atoms/files/Interim_Report_PoE_Venezuela_090824.pdf (accessed January 13, 2025), para. 13; “Carter Center Statement on Venezuela Election,” The Carter Center press statement.

⁵³ Resultados Elecciones Presidenciales – Venezuela 2024, webpage, [n.d.], <https://resultadosconvzla.com/> (accessed January 13, 2025); The Carter Center, *Observation of the 2024 Presidential Election in Venezuela – Final Report*, pp. 36-37; UN Panel of Experts, “Interim Report: Venezuelan Presidential Elections 28 July 2024,” para. 12; “Jennie Lincoln: There is no evidence of alleged hacking in Venezuela” (“Jennie Lincoln: No existe ninguna evidencia de supuesto hackeo en Venezuela”), video clip, YouTube, August 12, 2024, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=soaQUkfUVvc> (accessed January 13, 2025); “Carter Center shows at the OAS what it claims are the tally sheets of the presidential elections in Venezuela” (“Centro Carter muestra en la OEA las que asegura son las actas electorales de las elecciones presidenciales de Venezuela”), *CNN Español*, October 2, 2024, <https://cnnespanol.cnn.com/2024/10/02/centro-carter-muestra-oea-actas-elecciones-venezuela-orix> (accessed January 13, 2025).

⁵⁴ The Carter Center, *Observation of the 2024 Presidential Election in Venezuela – Final Report*, pp. 36-37; “Carter Center shows at the OAS what it claims are the tally sheets of the presidential elections in Venezuela” (“Centro Carter muestra en la OEA las que asegura son las actas electorales de las elecciones presidenciales de Venezuela”), *CNN Español*, October 2, 2024, <https://cnnespanol.cnn.com/2024/10/02/centro-carter-muestra-oea-actas-elecciones-venezuela-orix> (accessed January 13, 2025).

Social Conflict (Observatorio Venezolano de Conflictividad Social, OVCS).⁵⁵ The OVCS also found that over 900 protests took place over the next 48 hours, most of them in low-income neighborhoods traditionally supportive of Chavismo.⁵⁶

The government responded with what it called “Operation Knock Knock”⁵⁷—an effort to intimidate, harass, and repress critics and protesters across the country, particularly in low-income areas.⁵⁸ Authorities established checkpoints, known in Venezuela as “alcabalas,” across the country and security forces stopped and often extorted people.⁵⁹ At the checkpoints and through random stops on the streets, security forces inspected people’s phones and other belongings.⁶⁰ High-level authorities, including Maduro, urged Venezuelans to report critics and opposition leaders through smartphone apps, such as the government-developed VenApp.⁶¹ Security and intelligence agencies posted messages

⁵⁵ Venezuelan Observatory of Social Conflict (Observatorio Venezolano de Conflictividad Social, OVCS), *Social conflict in Venezuela in 2024 (Conflictividad Social en Venezuela en 2024)*, February 2025, <https://www.observatoriodeconflictos.org.ve/oc/wp-content/uploads/2025/02/INFORMEOVCS-ANUAL2024-1.pdf> (accessed April 13, 2025), p. 21.

⁵⁶ OVCS, “Repression of the poor in Venezuela” (“Represión a los pobres en Venezuela”), August 14, 2024, <https://www.observatoriodeconflictos.org.ve/actualidad/represion-a-los-pobres-en-venezuela> (accessed February 17, 2025); OVCS, *Social conflict in Venezuela in 2024*, p. 20; Human Rights Watch phone interview with Marco Ponce from OVCS, March 7, 2025.

⁵⁷ The term, which refers to repressive actions carried out by state security forces, had already been used during 2017 protests, which the government severely repressed. See, for example, Odell Lopez, “Cabello threatens raids through ‘Operation knock knock’” (“Cabello amenaza con allanamientos a través de la «Operación tun tun»”), *Efecto Cocuyo*, May 17, 2017, <https://efectococuyo.com/politica/cabello-amenaza-con-allanamientos-a-traves-de-la-operacion-tun-tun/> (accessed February 26, 2025).

⁵⁸ OVCS, “Social conflict in Venezuela during July 2024” (“Conflictividad social en Venezuela durante julio de 2024”), August 23, 2024, <https://www.observatoriodeconflictos.org.ve/tendencias-de-la-conflictividad/conflictividad-social-en-venezuela-durante-julio-de-2024> (accessed February 25, 2025).

⁵⁹ Human Rights Watch phone interview with a Venezuelan lawyer, January 22, 2025; Human Rights Watch interview with a person who traveled to and from Caracas after the July 28 elections, February 1, 2025; Human Rights Watch phone interview with a member of a human rights organization, February 25, 2025; Human Rights Watch interviews with people who fled Venezuela after July 28, January and February 2025; Human Rights Watch phone interviews with people detained after July 28 and later released and their families, January - April 2025.

⁶⁰ Human Rights Watch phone interview with a member of a Venezuelan organization, December 20, 2024; Human Rights Watch phone interviews with people detained after July 28 and later released and their families, January - April 2025; Human Rights Watch interviews with people who fled Venezuela after July 28, January and February 2025.

⁶¹ Roison Figuera, “Maduro asks to report opponents who have ‘attacked the people’ in VenApp” (“Maduro pide denunciar en la VenApp a opositores que hayan «agredido al pueblo»”), *TalCual*, July 30, 2024, <https://talcualdigital.com/maduro-pide-denunciar-en-la-venapp-a-opositores-que-hayan-agredido-al-pueblo/> (accessed February 25, 2025); Elyangelica González (@ElyangelicaNews), post to X, July 31, 2024, <https://x.com/ElyangelicaNews/status/1818473533615337571> (accessed February 25, 2025); Access Now, Open letter on technology-enabled political violence in Venezuela, letter from international human rights organizations, August 5, 2024, last updated August 19, 2024, <https://www.accessnow.org/press-release/open-letter-technology-enabled-political-violence-venezuela/> (accessed February 25, 2025). On July 31, Android and Apple app stores removed VenApp, but people who had downloaded them on their phones beforehand still have access to them.

and arrest videos on social media to instill fear, using eerie music from the horror film *A Nightmare on Elm Street* and visual effects reminiscent of horror movies. The videos also displayed the text “Operation Knock Knock, no crying” alongside the logos of the Ministry of the Interior and security forces.⁶²

“Colectivos” assisted in these efforts, repressing protests,⁶³ intimidating people in low-income communities,⁶⁴ and apparently marking the homes of critics and members of the opposition with intimidating graffiti.⁶⁵

Between August and November, the government-controlled National Assembly also passed legislation severely restricting the work of civil society groups and criminalizing with up to 30 years in prison people who advocate for sanctions, whether targeted or broad, in Venezuela.⁶⁶

⁶² See, for example, DCDO_COJEDS (@dcdo_cojedes), post to TikTok, August 1, 2024, https://www.tiktok.com/@dcdo_cojedes/video/7398191452498513157 (accessed February 26, 2025); Douglas Rico (@douglasricovzla), post to Instagram, August 6, 2024, <https://www.instagram.com/p/C-T9XPalOUz/> (accessed February 26, 2025); “The chilling video with which the Maduro regime frightens Venezuelans and mocks leader María Oropesa and the opposition” (“El escalofriante video con el que el régimen de Maduro atemoriza a los venezolanos y se burla de la dirigente María Oropesa y de la oposición”), *Infobae*, August 8, 2024, <https://www.infobae.com/venezuela/2024/08/08/el-escalofriante-video-con-el-que-el-regimen-de-maduro-atemoriza-a-los-venezolanos-y-se-burla-de-la-dirigente-maria-oropeza-y-de-la-oposicion/> (accessed February 27, 2025).

⁶³ During the 2014 protests, Human Rights Watch documented instances where security forces stood by idly as “colectivos” attacked protesters, or left an area shortly before they attacked. In other incidents, we found compelling evidence of uniformed security forces and pro-government groups attacking protesters side by side. In 2020, the UN Independent International Fact-Finding Mission on the Bolivarian Republic of Venezuela also found that during past protests “colectivos were in some cases involved in crowd control or violations in coordination with the state armed forces and/or upon the instruction of state political leaders.” See Human Rights Watch, *Punished for Protesting: Rights Violations in Venezuela’s Streets, Detention Centers, and Justice System* (Human Rights Watch: New York, 2014), <https://www.hrw.org/report/2014/05/05/punished-protesting/rights-violations-venezuelas-streets-detention-centers-and>, pp. 12-15 and 79-90; UN Human Rights Council, Detailed findings of the independent international factfinding mission on the Bolivarian Republic of Venezuela, UN Doc. A/HRC/45/CRP.11 (2020), https://www.ohchr.org/sites/default/files/Documents/HRBodies/HRCouncil/FFMV/A_HRC_45_CRP.11.pdf (accessed February 25, 2025), para. 224.

⁶⁴ See, for example, OVCS, “Social conflict in Venezuela in 2024” (“Conflictividad Social en Venezuela en 2024”), February 6, 2025, <https://www.observatoriodeconflictos.org.ve/tendencias-de-la-conflictividad/conflictividad-social-en-venezuela-en-2024> (accessed February 25, 2025); Derechos Humanos de Venezuela en Movimiento, *Human Rights Crisis in Venezuela around the installation of a de facto government (10)* (Nicolás Maduro’s red book), pp. 62-64.

⁶⁵ Human Rights Watch interviews with people who fled Venezuela after July 28, January and February 2025; Photographs VENPHO001 and VENPHO002 (copies on file with Human Rights Watch); See also IACHR, *Venezuela: Serious Human Rights Violations in Connection with the Elections*, December 27, 2024, <https://www.oas.org/en/iachr/reports/pdfs/2025/Report-Venezuela-seriousHRRR-violations-connections-elections.pdf> (accessed February 26, 2025), para. 82.

⁶⁶ See National Assembly of Venezuela, Law on Oversight, Regularization, Operations, and Financing of Non-Governmental Organizations and Non-Profit Social Organizations, September 16, 2024, <https://avisavenezuela.org/wp-content/uploads/GACETA-6855.pdf> (accessed February 25, 2025); National Assembly of Venezuela, Simón Bolívar Organic Law against the Imperialist Blockade and in Defense of the Bolivarian Republic of Venezuela, November 29, 2024,

On January 10, 2025, Jorge Rodríguez, president of the government-controlled National Assembly, swore in Maduro as president.⁶⁷

http://spgoin.imprentanacional.gob.ve/cgi-win/be_alex.cgi?Documento=To28700050673/o&Nombrebd=spgoin&CodAsocDoc=3870&Sesion=118849449 (accessed February 25, 2025), art. 1.

⁶⁷ Margareth Cornivel, “Legislative Branch swears in Nicolás Maduro as President of the Republic 2025-2031” (“Poder Legislativo juramenta a Nicolás Maduro como presidente de la República 2025-2031”), National Assembly of Venezuela, January 10, 2025, <https://www.asambleanacional.gob.ve/noticias/poder-legislativo-juramenta-a-nicolas-maduro-como-presidente-de-la-republica-2025-2031> (accessed February 22, 2025); “Nicolás Maduro is sworn in as president of Venezuela” (“Nicolás Maduro juramenta como presidente de Venezuela”), video clip, YouTube, January 10, 2025, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=QvavOcqwE4I> (accessed February 22, 2025).

Killings During the Protests

Human Rights Watch received credible reports of 25 killings in the context of protests. Researchers received these reports from independent local groups, including Foro Penal, Justicia Encuentro y Perdón, Monitor de Víctimas, and Venezuelan Program for Education and Action on Human Rights (Programa Venezolano de Educación Acción en Derechos Humanos, Provea), or discovered them on social media. The people killed included 24 protesters or bystanders, as well as one member of the Bolivarian National Guard (Guardia Nacional Bolivariana, GNB). Most were killed as protests peaked on July 29 and 30, 2024. Most—22 of the 25—were under the age of 40 and mostly from low-income neighborhoods.⁶⁸

Eight cases were reported in Caracas District, mostly in the low-income neighborhoods of El Valle and Antímano. Seven occurred during the same protests in San Jacinto, Maracay, Aragua state. The remaining cases occurred in Bolívar, Carabobo, Lara, Miranda, Portuguesa, Táchira, Yaracuy, and Zulia states.

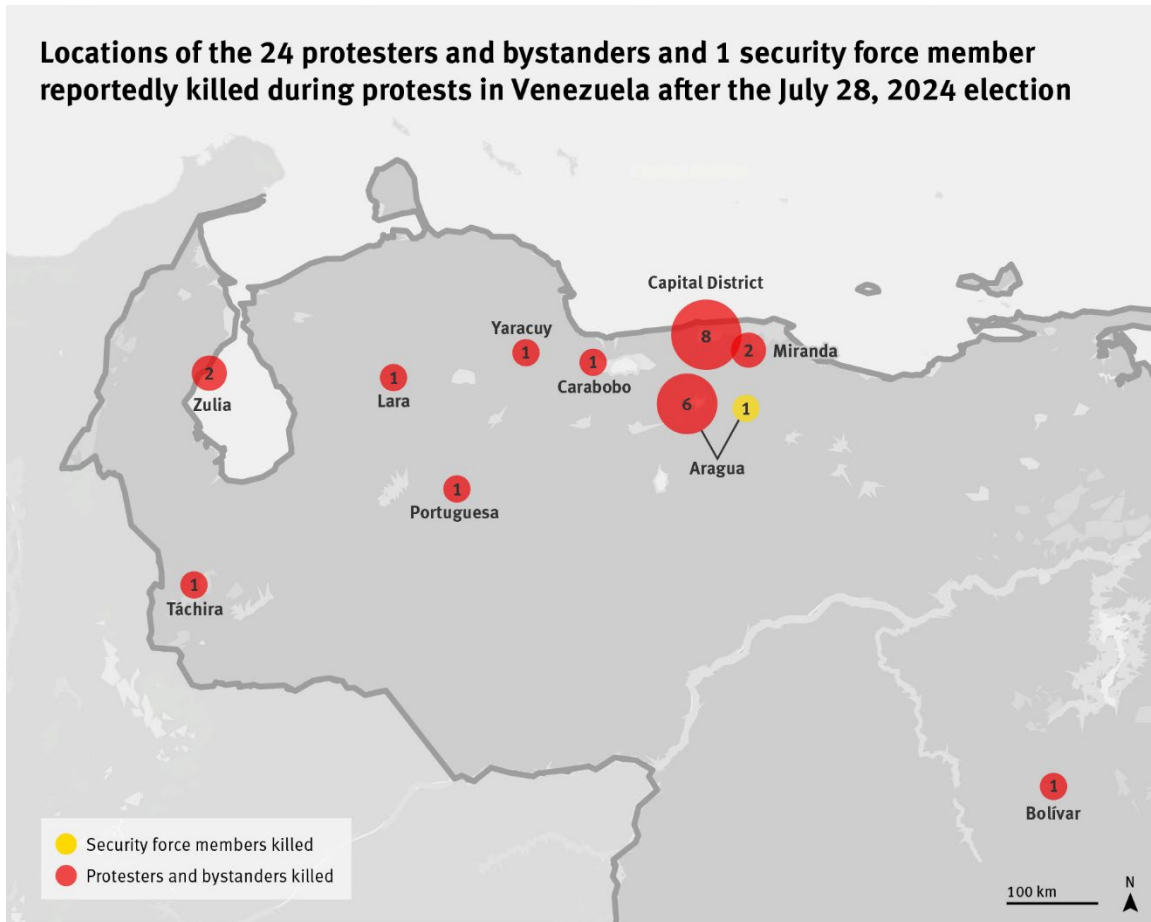
Venezuela's Attorney General Tarek William Saab said on multiple occasions that 28 people had died “at the hands of violent demonstrators.”⁶⁹ He also claimed that the deaths could be attributed to groups supporting Edmundo González's candidacy, known as “comanditos.”⁷⁰

Evidence presented in this report implicates security forces, including the GNB and the national police (Policía Nacional Bolivariana, PNB) in some killings. In other cases, pro-government armed “colectivo” groups appear to be responsible.

⁶⁸ See also UN Human Rights Council, Detailed findings of the independent international factfinding mission on the Bolivarian Republic of Venezuela, UN Doc. A/HRC/57/CRP.5 (2024), <https://www.ohchr.org/sites/default/files/documents/hrbodies/hrcouncil/sessions-regular/session57/advance-versions/a-hrc-57-crp-5-en.pdf> (accessed February 24, 2025), paras. 520-575.

⁶⁹ See, for example, Juan Francisco Alonso, “‘They use human rights to damage our image, because we are not part of the orbit of the centers of power’: Tarek William Saab, attorney general of Venezuela” (“‘Usan los derechos humanos para dañar nuestra imagen, porque no formamos parte de la órbita de los centros de poder’: Tarek William Saab, fiscal general de Venezuela”), *BBC News Mundo*, February 5, 2025, <https://www.bbc.com/mundo/articles/c1we5p4dp9do> (accessed February 17, 2025); “Venezuelan prosecutor reiterates that 28 people were ‘murdered’ by opposition groups” (“Fiscalía venezolana reitera que 28 personas fueron ‘asesinadas’ por grupos de la oposición”), *Swissinfo.ch*, December 2, 2024, <https://www.swissinfo.ch/spa/fiscal%25%22asesinadas%22-por-grupos-de-la-oposici%25%22b3n/88438311> (accessed February 17, 2025).

⁷⁰ Diario La Verdad (@diariolaverdad), post to Instagram, December 2, 2024, <https://www.instagram.com/diariolaverdad/reel/DDFsm4tSnDA/> (accessed February 17, 2025).



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Human Rights Watch found that in many cases security forces initially sought to control or disperse protests by setting up barricades, deploying tear gas, and carrying out arrests. When demonstrations persisted, “colectivo” members would arrive—often armed—to intimidate or attack protesters.⁷¹

Selected Cases

Rancés Daniel Yzarra Bolívar and Jesús Gregorio Tovar Perdomo (Aragua State, July 29)

Rancés Daniel Yzarra Bolívar, a 30-year-old civil engineer who worked in a food truck, took part in protests in the San Jacinto neighborhood, in Maracay, Aragua state, on July 29. He

⁷¹ Human Rights Watch phone interview with witnesses, journalists and human rights organizations, August 2024 to February 2025. Human Rights Watch obtained and verified videos showing instances of coordination between apparent “colectivo” members and security forces during protests in Güigüe city, Carabobo State, and in Caracas. Videos VENVIDoo1, VENVIDoo2, VENVIDoo3 (copies on file with Human Rights Watch).



Rancés Daniel Yzarra Bolívar, Aragua State, Venezuela. © Private

lived in a social housing complex that had recurring power outages. A relative of Yzarra Bolívar said that he had been hopeful about the elections and participated in the protests because of “frustration with the lack of change.”⁷²

Jesús Gregorio Tovar Perdomo, 21, worked with his father at the local market in Maracay. His relatives described him as a calm boy who did not speak much.⁷³

On the morning of July 29, people in the San Jacinto neighborhood of Maracay, a city approximately 80 kilometers to the west of Caracas, banged pots and pans from their homes, protesting a power outage and the announced electoral result.⁷⁴ At around 2:30 p.m., protesters took to the streets marching

toward the Maracay Obelisk, a landmark in the city around 200 meters from the 42nd Parachute Infantry Brigade’s compound.⁷⁵ Human Rights Watch verified three videos of thousands of protesters around the Obelisk. Two of the videos, filmed from a high building, were posted to Facebook on July 29 and recorded between 1:45 and 3 p.m. based on shadow analysis. The third, estimated to have been filmed around 2 p.m., shows crowds singing the Venezuelan national anthem and waving flags.⁷⁶

⁷² Human Rights Watch phone interview with a relative of Yzarra Bolívar, August 5, 2024.

⁷³ Human Rights Watch phone interview with a relative of Tovar Perdomo, August 5, 2024; Audio message from a relative of Tovar Perdomo sent to Human Rights Watch by a source close to Tovar Perdomo on August 13, 2024 (copy on file with Human Rights Watch).

⁷⁴ Human Rights Watch phone interview with a relative of Yzarra Bolívar, August 5, 2024; Human Rights Watch phone interview with a witness present at the protest on July 29, August 24, 2024; See also Carmen Elisa Pecorelli (@celisapecorelli), post to Instagram, July 29, 2024, <https://www.instagram.com/celisapecorelli/reel/C-Aw739Og6O/> (accessed February 27, 2025).

⁷⁵ Human Rights Watch phone interview with a relative of Yzarra Bolívar, August 5, 2024; Human Rights Watch phone interview with a witness present at the protest on July 29, August 24, 2024.

⁷⁶ Videos VENVIDoo4, VENVIDoo5, VENVIDoo6 (copies on file with Human Rights Watch).

Dozens of people approached the military compound and called for soldiers to come out and join the protest, a witness said. A soldier asked them to leave. Some left but others stayed. About half an hour later, the GNB arrived.⁷⁷

A video uploaded to Instagram by a journalist and verified by Human Rights Watch shows GNB officers arriving at around 5 p.m.⁷⁸ In the video, officers equipped with riot gear on motorcycles, accompanied by a riot control vehicle, advance down Avenue 2 West and form a blockade in front of the military compound. Protesters, some on motorcycles and others on foot, are seen protesting peacefully, chanting “freedom, freedom,” close to the entrance. Four other videos Human Rights Watch analyzed show people protesting peacefully near the same entrance.⁷⁹



Jesús Gregorio Tovar Perdomo, Aragua State, Venezuela. © Private

A six-minute video posted to Instagram almost half an hour later by a journalist and verified by Human Rights Watch shows a cloud of smoke coming from two locations in the vicinity of the military compound. A voice off-camera says it is 5:37 p.m. and that GNB officers are using tear gas to disperse protesters.⁸⁰ Human Rights Watch geolocated the video approximately 150 meters from the compound.

⁷⁷ Human Rights Watch phone interview with a witness present at the protest on July 29, August 24, 2024.

⁷⁸ Video VENVID007 (copy on file with Human Rights Watch).

⁷⁹ Videos VENVID012, VENVID067, VENVID068, VENVID070 (copies on file with Human Rights Watch).

⁸⁰ Video VENVID008 (copy on file with Human Rights Watch).

A journalist told Human Rights Watch that after the GNB attempted to disperse protesters, some threw rocks and burned police motorcycles in retaliation. In one verified video, protesters are seen throwing Molotov cocktails in the direction of the military compound.⁸¹

At approximately 6 p.m., a bullet hit Yzarra Bolívar on the left side of his chest, a relative said.⁸² Human Rights Watch analyzed and geolocated four videos showing Yzarra Bolívar injured.⁸³ In one verified video, taken by a journalist at 5:50 p.m. and posted to Instagram 20 minutes later, two protesters are seen carrying Yzarra Bolívar to a location approximately 150 meters from the military compound. Other protesters are heard shouting “they killed him.” The video subsequently shows three other protesters carrying him to the back of a white van, which drives away.⁸⁴

Yzarra Bolívar’s death certificate, which Human Rights Watch reviewed, says that he died of acute hemorrhagic shock due to the perforation of organs in his thoracic cavity.⁸⁵

Human Rights Watch analyzed and geolocated a video sent directly to researchers showing another protester, Tovar Perdomo, who was severely injured in the same protest.⁸⁶ In the video, taken on Avenue Bolívar approximately 25 meters from the military compound, a group of protesters are seen frantically placing an unconscious man on a motorcycle. Three gunshots are heard and at least one uniformed man with a riot shield is seen in the background. The camera then zooms in on the man’s left waist to show a large open wound. A distinctive tattoo on his left forearm matches a picture of Tovar Perdomo sent to Human Rights Watch by a relative.⁸⁷

⁸¹ Human Rights Watch phone interview with a journalist present at the protest on July 29, August 24, 2024; Video VENVID009 (copy on file with Human Rights Watch).

⁸² Human Rights Watch phone interview with a relative of Yzarra Bolívar, August 5, 2024.

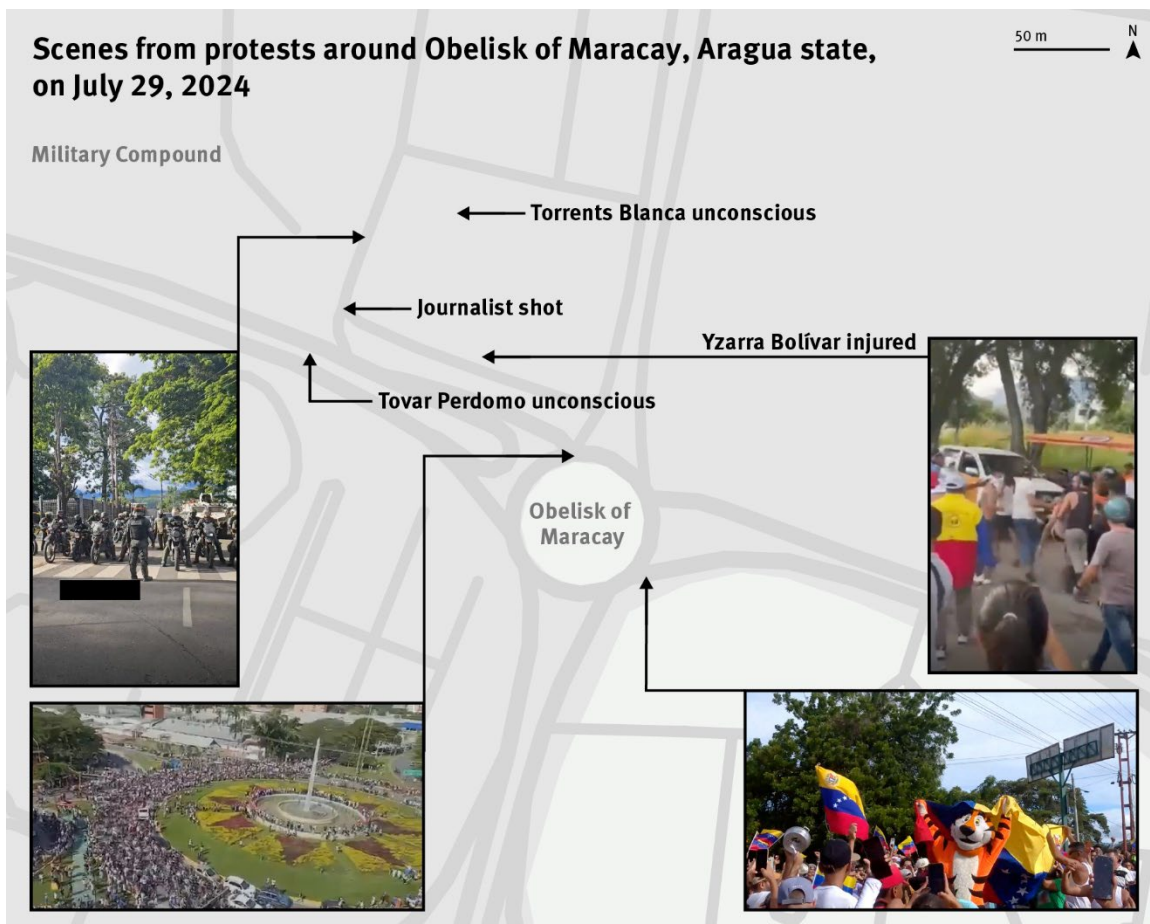
⁸³ Videos VENVID010, VENVID011, VENVID013, VENVID069 (copies on file with Human Rights Watch).

⁸⁴ Video VENVID069 (copy on file with Human Rights Watch).

⁸⁵ Yzarra Bolívar’s death certificate issued on July 29, 2024 (copy on file with Human Rights Watch).

⁸⁶ Video VENVID014 (copy on file with Human Rights Watch).

⁸⁷ Photograph VENPHO003 (copy on file with Human Rights Watch).



Bottom right image: A screenshot from a video shared with Human Rights Watch shows peaceful protesters waving flags. Source: 2024 Jesús Romero. Bottom left image: A screenshot from a video posted at 4:59 p.m. shows protesters around the Maracay Obelisk. Source: Unknown. Top left image: A screenshot from a video posted at 6:04 p.m. shows GNB officers equipped with riot gear forming a blockade in front of the military compound. Source: Unknown. Top right image: A screenshot from a video posted at 7:08 p.m. shows a wounded Yzarra Bolívar being carried by protesters to a white van. Source: Unknown.

The Independent Forensic Expert Group (IFEG) of the International Rehabilitation Council for Torture Victims (IRCT) reviewed a video of Tovar Perdomo's wound and concluded that it was likely caused either by a high-velocity gunshot or a gunshot at close range.⁸⁸

In another video uploaded to X on July 29, a shirtless man is lying still and face down on the ground on Avenue Bolívar, approximately 166 meters from the military compound.⁸⁹ A

⁸⁸ Analysis received from members of the Independent Forensic Expert Group (IFEG), an international group of 42 distinguished forensic experts coordinated by the International Rehabilitation Council for Torture Victims (IRCT), August 2024.

⁸⁹ Video VENVIDo15 (copy on file with Human Rights Watch).

group of protestors, some on motorcycles and others on foot with one carrying a GNB riot shield seemingly to guard himself, move towards the shirtless man, trying to help him. A large group of GNB officers are seen approximately 135 meters away, at the intersection of the avenue and the military compound. The two videos appear to have been taken around the same time due to the presence of uniformed personnel and the matching clothing worn by one of the protestors. Human Rights Watch was not able to determine the identity of the man lying in the road.

Human Rights Watch also reviewed evidence regarding the death of José Antonio Torrents Blanca, a First Sergeant in the GNB, during the same protest. On July 30, GNB Commander General Elio Estrada announced the death of Torrents Blanca on X, calling him a “victim of the violence unleashed by fascist groups.”⁹⁰

Human Rights Watch verified a video sent directly to researchers showing GNB officers carrying a seemingly unconscious person in a military uniform. A voice off-camera says, “They got Torrente.” The video was filmed in what appears to be a parking lot approximately 50 meters in front of the brigade, with smoke plumes in the background matching the approximate location of fires seen in other videos.⁹¹ A lightly blurred video uploaded to X on July 30 shows a group of GNB officers putting the unconscious person on the back of a motorcycle in the same location shown in the previous video.⁹² The exact time of both videos and the circumstances of the officer’s death could not be determined.

Human Rights Watch received reports that four other people died from injuries inflicted during the same protest in Maracay: Anthony David Moya Mantía, Jesús Ramón Medina Perdomo, Gabriel Ramos Pacheco, and Andrés Alfonso Ramírez Castillo. Local human rights groups who documented the cases told Human Rights Watch that they all apparently died from wounds caused by firearms.⁹³

⁹⁰ M/G Elio Estrada Paredes (@ElioEstrada18), post to X, July 30, 2024, <https://x.com/ElioEstrada18/status/1818326858087198867> (accessed March 5, 2025).

⁹¹ Video VENVIDo16 (copy on file with Human Rights Watch).

⁹² Video VENVIDo17 (copy on file with Human Rights Watch).

⁹³ See, for example, “There are now 24 victims of homicide in Venezuela’s post-election repression” (“Ya son 24 las víctimas de homicidio de la represión postelectoral en Venezuela”), *Runrun.es*, August 27, 2024, <https://runrun.es/monitor-de-victimas/563504/ya-son-24-las-victimas-de-homicidio-de-la-represion-postelectoral-en-venezuela/> (accessed February 23, 2025).

The National Survey of Hospitals, a group of healthcare workers that monitors health issues in Venezuela, reported that about 50 people injured in the Maracay protests arrived at three hospitals between July 29 and August 1.⁹⁴ Human Rights Watch analyzed and geolocated four videos in which eight people can be seen bleeding from injuries or being carried by protesters.⁹⁵ Some of the patients, both those injured or killed, had gunshot wounds, the group said.

Two people who knew the victims, and a witness present during the protest, said that many protesters were wounded by shots coming from inside the military compound.⁹⁶

Human Rights Watch verified a video recorded by a local journalist who was shot in his stomach and right leg during the protests.⁹⁷ In the video, recorded in front of the military compound, facing the entrance, three gunshots are heard. After the final shot is heard, the journalist lowers the camera and no longer films the protest scene. With the camera lens pointing at the ground, he stops by a tree, where several people approach him, appearing to express concern for his well-being. The journalist told Human Rights Watch the video was filmed at approximately 5:30 p.m.⁹⁸

Walter Loren Páez Lucena (Lara State, August 4)

Walter Loren Páez Lucena, a 29-year-old father of two, joined a group of protesters in Carora, Lara State, on July 30.

The night before, protesters on motorcycles gathered outside the local office of the ruling United Socialist Party of Venezuela (Partido Socialista Unido de Venezuela, PSUV), as seen in three videos posted to Instagram and X in the early morning of July 30.⁹⁹ In one video, a protester climbs to the first floor of the building to remove an election poster of Maduro as

⁹⁴ Encuesta Nacional de Hospitales (@ENHVzla), post to X, August 2, 2024, <https://x.com/ENHVzla/status/1819205448735584676> (accessed February 23, 2025).

⁹⁵ Videos VENVIDo14, VENVIDo72, VENVIDo73 and VENVIDo74 (copies on file with Human Rights Watch).

⁹⁶ Human Rights Watch phone interview with a relative of Yzarra Bolívar, August 5, 2024; Audio message from a relative of Tovar Perdomo sent to Human Rights Watch by a source close to Tovar Perdomo on August 13, 2024 (copy on file with Human Rights Watch); Human Rights Watch phone interview with a witness present at the protest on July 29, August 24, 2024.

⁹⁷ Video VENVIDo18 (copy on file with Human Rights Watch).

⁹⁸ Human Rights Watch phone interview with a journalist present at the protest on July 29, August 24, 2024.

⁹⁹ Videos VENVIDo19, VENVIDo20, VENVIDo21 (copies on file with Human Rights Watch).

others cheer. Another protester is seen spray-painting “Hasta cuándo?” (“Until when?”) on the wall of the building.

The next day, protesters gathered peacefully near Francisco de Miranda Avenue, close to Ambrosio Oropeza Square. A journalist and a witness said that the demonstration remained peaceful, a claim supported by six videos posted to Facebook verified by Human Rights Watch showing protesters waving flags, banging pots and pans, and chanting.¹⁰⁰ A photograph posted at 12:58 p.m., captioned with a time of 11:40 a.m., shows hundreds gathered peacefully near the square.¹⁰¹

According to police records reviewed by Human Rights Watch, Páez Lucena was shot and injured at approximately 2 p.m. close to the local office of the PSUV, five blocks from the Ambrosio Oropeza Square.¹⁰² Several sources, including an eyewitness present at the scene, confirmed the approximate time of the events.¹⁰³

His mother and cousin reported to the police that the protest had remained peaceful until the gunfire began.¹⁰⁴ A witness also said that protesters reacted only after Páez Lucena was shot and the GNB had left. “Imagine you’re protesting peacefully, and [from the PSUV office] they open fire on you while the GNB just stands there watching. That enrages you,” he said.¹⁰⁵

A video posted to Facebook by Carora TV in the afternoon, consisting of four clips, shows protesters peacefully gathered while dozens of GNB officers with riot shields stand in a line a few meters away outside the PSUV office.¹⁰⁶ Shadows suggest this was filmed at around 2 p.m.—the time that Páez Lucena was shot. The second clip in the video shows

¹⁰⁰ Human Rights Watch phone interview with a journalist who covered the protests, August 7, 2024; Human Rights Watch phone interview with a witness present at the protest, January 28, 2025; Videos VENVIDo22, VENVIDo23, VENVIDo24, VENVIDo25, VENVIDo26, VENVIDo27 (copies on file with Human Rights Watch).

¹⁰¹ Photograph VENPHOo04 (copy on file with Human Rights Watch).

¹⁰² Police records on the homicide investigation concerning the death of Páez Lucena (copy on file with Human Rights Watch).

¹⁰³ Human Rights Watch phone interview with a journalist who covered the protests, August 7, 2024; Human Rights Watch interview with a well-informed source about Páez Lucena’s case, January 22, 2025; Human Rights Watch phone interview with Javier Oropeza, January 23, 2025; Human Rights Watch phone interview with a witness present at the protest, January 28, 2025.

¹⁰⁴ Police records on the homicide investigation concerning the death of Páez Lucena (copy on file with Human Rights Watch).

¹⁰⁵ Human Rights Watch phone interview with a witness present at the protest, January 28, 2025.

¹⁰⁶ Video VENVIDo28 (copy on file with Human Rights Watch).

GNB officers in riot gear and at least eight motorcycles with drivers dressed in black wearing black helmets. In the third clip, a man's watch reads 12:50 p.m. as protesters on motorbikes drive approximately 100 meters from the office on Riera Silva Street. Another video posted to Instagram in the evening and filmed at the same location between 3:30 and 4 p.m., according to shadow analysis, shows protesters, some running, moving west. A small fire is burning in the middle of the road.¹⁰⁷

As the situation escalated, videos showed worsening conditions outside the PSUV office in the afternoon and evening, before nightfall at 7:30 p.m. In one video a lone GNB officer seems to be trying to talk with some protesters, some with their faces covered, as another protester a few meters away throws objects towards the direction of the office, shattering nearby windows.¹⁰⁸ A video posted online by the state governor of Lara shows protesters throwing objects at GNB officers.¹⁰⁹

Testimonies, news reports, a firefighter's report reviewed by Human Rights Watch, and videos and photographs posted to Facebook, Instagram, and X indicate that protesters set fire to the PSUV office, damaging the building and at least a dozen motorcycles.¹¹⁰

Multiple videos circulated in the days following, most prominently videos shared by a reporter with the state-owned broadcaster *VTV CANAL*. These show several injured people in civilian clothing, and one being attacked with kicks, stone blocks, and a machete.¹¹¹

¹⁰⁷ Video VENVIDo29 (copy on file with Human Rights Watch).

¹⁰⁸ Video VENVIDo30 (copy on file with Human Rights Watch).

¹⁰⁹ Video VENVIDo31 (copy on file with Human Rights Watch).

¹¹⁰ Human Rights Watch phone interview with a journalist who covered the protests, August 7, 2024; Human Rights Watch interview with a well-informed source about Páez Lucena's case, January 22, 2025; Human Rights Watch phone interview with Javier Oropeza, January 23, 2025; Human Rights Watch phone interview with a witness present at the protests, January 28, 2025; Report No. 002-204 from the Fire Department, Station Dtgdo. (F) Nelson Antonio Hernández Pérez, Carora, Lara State, July 31, 2024 (copy on file with Human Rights Watch); "PSUV and Radio Comunitaria Venceremos headquarters in Carora attacked and destroyed" ("Atacada y destrizada sede del PSUV y Radio Comunitaria Venceremos en Carora"), *Partido Socialista Unido de Venezuela (PSUV)*, July 31, 2024, <http://www.psuv.org.ve/temas/noticias/atacada-y-destrizada-sede-psuv-y-radio-comunitaria-venceremos-carora/> (accessed February 17, 2025); VPItv (@VPITV), post to X, July 31, 2024, <https://x.com/VPITV/status/1818453811771359508?lang=es> (accessed February 17, 2025); "PSUV and Radio Comunitaria Venceremos headquarters in Carora attacked and destroyed" (Atacada y destrizada sede del PSUV y Radio Comunitaria Venceremos en Carora), *El Informador Venezuela*, July 31, 2024, <https://elinformadorve.com/31/07/2024/destacada/atacada-y-destrizada-sede-del-psuv-y-radio-comunitaria-venceremos-en-carora/> (accessed February 17, 2025); Videos VENVIDo30, VENVIDo32, VENVIDo33, VENVIDo34, and photographs VENPHOo05, VENPHOo06, VENPHOo07, VENPHOo08, VENPHOo09, VENPHOo10, VENPHOo11, VENPHOo12 (copies on file with Human Rights Watch).

¹¹¹ Videos VENVIDo35, VENVIDo36, VENVIDo37, VENVIDo38 (copies on file with Human Rights Watch).

Human Rights Watch could not match the location of these videos to the PSUV office and could not confirm that they are from this incident.

After being injured, Páez Lucena received initial treatment at the Policlínica in Carora but was sent home. As his condition worsened, he returned to the clinic, where doctors recommended immediate surgery, but due to financial constraints, his family transferred him to the public hospital, Hospital Central Universitario ‘Antonio María Pineda,’ in Barquisimeto—an hour and a half away by car—where he underwent surgery on August 3.¹¹²

His partner, María de los Ángeles Lamedá Méndez, was arrested that night as she left the hospital to buy medical supplies for Páez Lucena. According to statements to the police from Páez Lucena’s mother and cousin, a prosecutor informed Páez Lucena at around 1 a.m. that his wife had been detained. At around 7 a.m. on August 4, Páez Lucena died in the hospital.¹¹³

Police records and a death certificate indicate that Páez Lucena died of sepsis caused by peritonitis originating from a gunshot wound.¹¹⁴ An independent forensic expert reviewed Páez Lucena’s autopsy and concluded that the wounds could have been caused by a weapon firing ammunition coinciding with the type of bullet shells found at the scene.¹¹⁵

Before his death, Páez Lucena told his mother that hooded men with covered faces had been shooting from the roof of the PSUV office.¹¹⁶ According to the police’s ballistic analysis bullet shells were found on the upper floor of the building, making it safe to say that the shooting occurred from there.¹¹⁷

¹¹² Police records on the homicide investigation concerning the death of Páez Lucena (copy on file with Human Rights Watch); Human Rights Watch interview with a well-informed source about Páez Lucena’s case, January 22, 2025.

¹¹³ Police records on the homicide investigation concerning the death of Páez Lucena (copy on file with Human Rights Watch).

¹¹⁴ Ibid.; Páez Lucena’s death certificate issued on August 4, 2024 (copy on file with Human Rights Watch).

¹¹⁵ Analysis received from an independent forensic expert, April 2025.

¹¹⁶ Police records on the homicide investigation concerning the death of Páez Lucena (copy on file with Human Rights Watch).

¹¹⁷ Ibid.



Top left image: GNB officers in riot gear stationed outside the PSUV office at approximately 2:00 p.m. Top right image: Protesters, some running, move westward at around 3:30–4:00 p.m. A small fire is visible in the middle of the road. Bottom image: Protesters on motorbikes ride approximately 100 meters from the PSUV office along Riera Silva Street at 12:50 p.m. Image source: Carora TV. Satellite imagery: © Airbus 2025. Google Earth. Graphic © Human Rights Watch

Lameda Méndez was released in late December but remains under investigation for alleged terrorism and incitement to hatred.¹¹⁸ A source close to the family told Human Rights Watch that Lameda Méndez did not participate in the protest held on July 30.¹¹⁹

Carlos Oscar Porras (Miranda State, July 29)

On July 29, Carlos Oscar Porras also known as “Bigote,” a soccer coach and father of two, participated in a protest in the town of Guarenas in Miranda State.

A journalist who covered the protests in Guarenas on July 29 and 30 told Human Rights Watch that demonstrations began spontaneously at around 10:30 - 11 a.m. on the 29th and

¹¹⁸ See Movimiento Vinotinto (@movinotinto), post to X, December 29, 2024, <https://x.com/movinotinto/status/1873226221204717578> (accessed February 23, 2025); “The persecution of the relative of a victim who has already died” (“La persecución contra el familiar de una víctima que ya falleció”), *Runrun.es*, November 2, 2024, <https://runrun.es/el-megafono/ddhh-olvidados/567236/la-persecucion-contra-el-familiar-de-una-victima-que-ya-fallecio/> (accessed February 23, 2025).

¹¹⁹ Human Rights Watch interview with a well-informed source about Páez Lucena’s case, January 22, 2025.

were peaceful.¹²⁰ People banged pots and pans in low-income neighborhoods of Guarenas. The protesters initially gathered along the Guarenas-Guatire Intercommunal Avenue but later moved through the city, reaching areas such as Trapichito, Menca de Leoni, and La



Carlos Oscar Porras, Miranda State, Venezuela.
© Private

Vaquera, where Porras protested, according to his aunt.

According to the journalist, at around 6 p.m. GNB officers began intimidating protesters in La Vaquera in an effort to disperse them.¹²¹ A video sent to and verified by Human Rights Watch shows a white light armored vehicle with GNB markings turning on to Calle Oeste leading to La Vaquera as a group of people on motorbikes continue to drive on the main road.¹²² As the vehicle approaches, a smoke cloud consistent with tear gas is visible near the protesters. The protesters flee while at least one throws an object in the direction of the armored vehicle. In the video, a man wearing gray pants and a white shirt runs from behind a tree. Porras's aunt identified the man as her nephew.¹²³ His clothes also match those Porras is seen wearing in

another video.¹²⁴ The low position of the sun in the sky and illuminated headlamps of the armored vehicle suggest it was recorded around 6 p.m. When the security force vehicle approaches, the sound of a detonation can be heard in the background.

¹²⁰ Human Rights Watch phone interview with a journalist who covered the protests on July 29 and 30, August 16, 2024.

¹²¹ Ibid.

¹²² Video VENVIDo39 (copy on file with Human Rights Watch).

¹²³ Human Rights Watch phone interview with Paola Vezga, Porras' aunt, December 16, 2024.

¹²⁴ Video VENVIDo40 (copy on file with Human Rights Watch).

In another video posted to X on July 29 at 9:27 p.m., recorded at night from an apartment building on the same street, protesters are seen confronting security forces and throwing Molotov cocktails.¹²⁵

A third video sent directly to researchers, filmed from a high floor of an apartment building in La Vaquera at night, shows a man in clothes matching the gray pants and white shirt worn by Porras walking slowly north along Calle Oeste along with a few other protesters nearby. A group of security forces are seen in the middle of the road surrounded by riot shields 170 meters north of Porras, close to the main road.¹²⁶ A shot is heard eight seconds into the video, the video flashes back to the protester who is now on the ground. At 0:24 of the video, a brief flash of orange light is visible near the shields, followed by a gunshot sound. A voice in the video says: “Look, they are shooting.” At 0:38, another louder shot is heard, and the same voice exclaims: “They shot ‘Bigote,’ they shot him.” Given the distance between security forces and protesters at the time of the shooting, Human Rights Watch determined that the shots were not fired from handguns or less-lethal weapons in this incident.



Satellite imagery: © Airbus 2025. Google Earth. Graphic © Human Rights Watch

¹²⁵ Video VENVIDO41 (copy on file with Human Rights Watch).

¹²⁶ Video VENVIDO42 (copy on file with Human Rights Watch).

Human Rights Watch could not confirm if Porras was the person referred to in the video, although the nickname matches. Another video posted to X on July 30 shows a man, identified by his aunt as Porras, lying on the ground.¹²⁷ Some people attempt to treat a wound on his body by ripping open his shirt.

Isaías Jacob Fuenmayor González (Zulia State, July 29)¹²⁸

Isaías Jacob Fuenmayor González, 15, left his home in San Francisco, Zulia state, late in the morning of July 29 to practice a dance with his friends for a friends' upcoming 15th birthday party, his sister told Human Rights Watch.¹²⁹ On his way home, she said, Fuenmayor González joined friends who were participating in a demonstration near the Mathías Lossada High School, which had served as a polling station. A video sent to researchers and verified by Human Rights Watch shows Fuenmayor González walking among protesters, midway between the dance rehearsal site and his home.¹³⁰ The video was filmed late in the day as indicated by light in the sky fading to the west.



Isaías Jacob Fuenmayor González, Zulia State, Venezuela. © Private

A journalist who was present told Human Rights Watch that Bolivarian National Guard (Guardia Nacional Bolivariana, GNB) members on motorbikes repeatedly rode into the crowd to try to disperse the protest at different times during that afternoon.¹³¹ Human

¹²⁷ Video VENVIDo40 (copy on file with Human Rights Watch); Human Rights Watch phone interview with Paola Vezga, Carlos Porras' aunt, August 6, 2024.

¹²⁸ This and the following cases in this section were previously published in "Venezuela: Brutal Crackdown on Protesters, Voters," Human Rights Watch news release, September 4, 2024, <https://www.hrw.org/news/2024/09/04/venezuela-brutal-crackdown-protesters-voters>.

¹²⁹ Human Rights Watch phone interview with Noemi Fuenmayor, Fuenmayor González's sister, August 12, 2024.

¹³⁰ Video VENVIDo43 (copy on file with Human Rights Watch).

¹³¹ Human Rights Watch phone interview with a journalist present at the protest on July 29, August 13, 2024.

Rights Watch verified two videos that, in line with the journalist’s report, show GNB members using their motorbikes to disperse protesters.¹³² By analyzing shadows, Human Rights Watch found that one of the videos, posted to X at 6:35 p.m., was recorded around 4:10 p.m. The journalist also said that some protesters threw rocks at the local office of the PSUV, located in front of the high school.¹³³

The journalist, local media, and human rights groups say that “colectivo” members attacked protesters after the GNB’s initial clash with demonstrators.¹³⁴ Some time after 7:30 p.m., a bullet hit Fuenmayor González in the neck. Two videos filmed at night, which Human Rights Watch verified and geolocated to a corner of the high school, in front of the PSUV local office, show a boy carrying a clearly injured Fuenmayor González to a motorcycle.¹³⁵



Fuenmayor González's route on July 29 in San Francisco, Zulia state, as he made his way home from a dance practice before encountering a protest and later being shot. Image: © Airbus 2024. Google Earth. Graphic © Human Rights Watch

¹³² Videos VENVIDo75 and VENVIDo76 (copies on file with Human Rights Watch).

¹³³ Human Rights Watch phone interview with a journalist present at the protest on July 29, August 13, 2024.

¹³⁴ Human Rights Watch phone interview with a journalist present at the protest on July 29, August 13, 2024.

¹³⁵ Videos VENVIDo44 and VENVIDo45 (copies on file with Human Rights Watch).

He was taken on the motorcycle to the nearby Doctor Manuel Noriega Trigo Hospital, where he died. His death certificate, which Human Rights Watch reviewed, indicates that he died due to blood loss caused by a gunshot wound to his neck.¹³⁶

“I want justice for my brother,” Fuenmayor González’s sister told Human Rights Watch. “He was a child who did not deserve to die, a child who was just beginning to live.”¹³⁷

*Anthony Enrique García Cañizalez and Olinger Johan Montaña López
(Caracas District, July 29)*

On the afternoon of July 29, Anthony Enrique García Cañizalez, a 20-year-old student, left his home in El Valle, Caracas district, to bring food to a family member in the Supreme Commander Hugo Chávez Maternity Hospital, his aunt told Human Rights Watch.¹³⁸ As he was returning home, García Cañizalez encountered a protest near the Abigail González School, which had served as a polling station.

Olinger Johan Montaña López, 23, a barber from El Valle, took part in another protest that same day, close to the Simoncito Libertador School, according to a Facebook video geolocated by Human Rights Watch, approximately 750 meters northeast of the Abigail González School.¹³⁹ Montaña López was passionate about music. He composed and performed his own songs under the artistic name “Saffary,” according to his posts on



Anthony Enrique García Cañizalez, Caracas, Venezuela. © Private

¹³⁶ Fuenmayor González’s death certificate issued on July 29, 2024 (copy on file with Human Rights Watch).

¹³⁷ Human Rights Watch phone interview with Noemi Fuenmayor, Fuenmayor González’s sister, August 12, 2024.

¹³⁸ Human Rights Watch phone interview with Yudamaris Trujillo, García Cañizalez’s aunt, August 6, 2024.

¹³⁹ Video VENVIDo77 (copy on file with Human Rights Watch).

social media.¹⁴⁰ “It is better to die in battle than to die in misery,” Montaña López posted on his social media that day.¹⁴¹

Human Rights Watch verified three videos filmed northeast of the Abigail González School, around Bolívar Square, that show GNB members dispersing the protest, including by throwing tear gas or smoke grenades, and shooting kinetic impact projectiles from riot guns.¹⁴² In one of the videos, filmed at night, a person identifying themselves as a journalist, says that it is 7:32 p.m. (nighttime began at 7:14 p.m. that day). Protesters are seen throwing what appear to be rocks at security officers, as the security officers throw what appear to be tear gas or smoke grenades, and fire unidentified types of weapons in another direction off camera.



Olinger Johan Montaña López, Caracas, Venezuela. © Private

Two videos geolocated by Human Rights Watch just 200 meters northwest of the Abigail González School, filmed at night, show a group of people carrying an injured person, whom Human Rights Watch identified as Montaña López, and a group of people around another injured person on the road nearby.¹⁴³ A video shared on social media platforms shows a shirtless man covered in blood as a group of people pick him up.¹⁴⁴ García Cañizalez’s aunt identified the man as her nephew.¹⁴⁵ Human Rights Watch

¹⁴⁰ Saffary El'Fresa's Facebook page, <https://www.facebook.com/saffary.sef> (accessed February 22, 2025); Saffary (@saffaryelfresa), Instagram profile, <https://www.instagram.com/saffaryelfresa/> (accessed February 22, 2025).

¹⁴¹ Alexander Angel, post to Facebook, July 30, 2024, <https://www.facebook.com/photo/?fbid=122129399930305011&set=ecnf.100038676772512> (accessed February 22, 2025); Human Rights Watch phone interview with a source close to Montaña López, August 12, 2024.

¹⁴² Videos VENVIDo46, VENVIDo47 and VENVIDo48 (copies on file with Human Rights Watch).

¹⁴³ Videos VENVIDo49 and VENVIDo50 (copies on file with Human Rights Watch).

¹⁴⁴ Video VENVIDo51 (copy on file with Human Rights Watch).

¹⁴⁵ Human Rights Watch phone interview with Yudamaris Trujillo, García Cañizalez's aunt, August 6, 2024.

geolocated the video and confirmed it had been filmed in the same location as the other two videos.

García Cañizalez’s aunt told researchers he was shot at around 8:30 p.m. on his way home, 400 meters away from his house.¹⁴⁶ Montaña López had stopped replying to messages around 8:40 p.m., a source said.¹⁴⁷

García Cañizalez died that day at Coche Hospital. His death certificate says that he died due to massive internal hemorrhaging caused by gunshot wounds.¹⁴⁸ “He was a young boy, with a zest for life, which was taken away from him,” his aunt said.¹⁴⁹

Montaña López was also taken to Coche Hospital, where he died. His death certificate says he died due to penetrating thoracic trauma caused by a gunshot wound.¹⁵⁰

Aníbal José Romero Salazar (Caracas District, July 29)

On July 29, Aníbal José Romero Salazar, a 24-year-old construction worker, known to his friends as “Pimpina,” took part in a protest in Carapita, a low-income neighborhood in Antímano, Caracas.

Human Rights Watch verified two videos filmed in quick succession posted to X at 4:43 p.m. and 4:53 p.m. These show protesters on Intercommunal Avenue, 300 meters southwest of the Carapita metro station, peacefully chanting and banging pots and pans, while passing motorbikes honk their horns. In one video, a group of men are standing at a bus stop and a nearby structure.¹⁵¹ Using weather data, Human Rights Watch confirmed that the videos were filmed between 2:30 p.m. and when they were posted.

¹⁴⁶ Ibid.

¹⁴⁷ Human Rights Watch phone interview with a source close to Montaña López, August 12, 2024.

¹⁴⁸ García Cañizalez’s death certificate issued on July 29, 2024 (copy on file with Human Rights Watch).

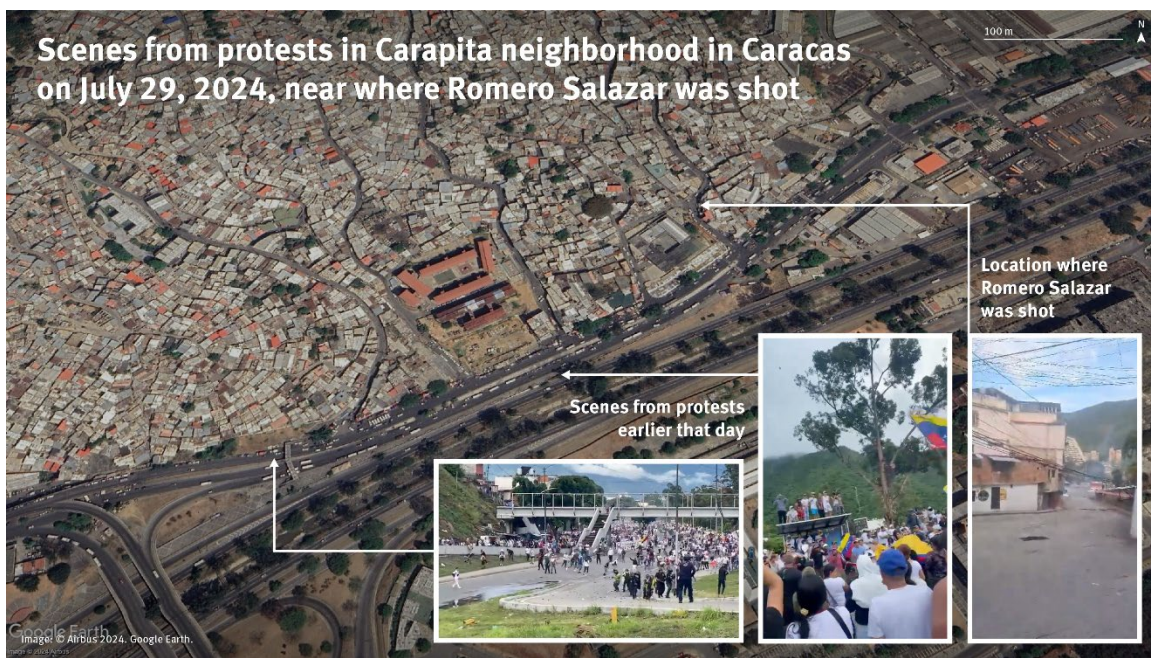
¹⁴⁹ Human Rights Watch phone interview with Yudamaris Trujillo, García Cañizalez’s aunt, August 6, 2024.

¹⁵⁰ Montaña López’s death certificate issued on July 29, 2024 (copy on file with Human Rights Watch).

¹⁵¹ Videos VENVIDo52 and VENVIDo53 (copies on file with Human Rights Watch).

A third video posted to TikTok at 5:31 p.m. on July 29 shows hundreds of protesters by a nearby pedestrian bridge filmed that afternoon.¹⁵² Dozens of protesters can be seen throwing objects at police officers in dark uniforms and others with yellow vests are shielding themselves and running away. Other officers appear to be firing their weapons at protesters.

Around 7 p.m., a bullet hit Romero Salazar on the right side of his forehead. A photograph posted to X at 7:45 p.m. on July 29 and reviewed by Human Rights Watch shows this wound.¹⁵³ He was about 230 meters from the protesters on Intercommunal Avenue.



Center image: Screenshot from a video posted at 4:53 p.m. of protesters peacefully chanting on Intercommunal Avenue. Left image: Screenshot from a video posted at 5:31 p.m. that shows hundreds of protesters, dozens of whom are throwing objects at police officers who are shielding themselves. Other officers appear to be firing their weapons. Right image: A screenshot from a video posted at 7:35 p.m. shows a wounded Romero Salazar being carried by protesters after he was shot. Screenshots: Sources: Unknown. Satellite imagery: © Airbus 2024. Google Earth. Graphic © Human Rights Watch

¹⁵² Video VENVIDO54 (copy on file with Human Rights Watch).

¹⁵³ Photograph VENPHO013 (copy on file with Human Rights Watch).

Human Rights Watch reviewed an audio message sent by a witness to a local human rights organization.¹⁵⁴ The witness, who said he was at the protest with Romero Salazar, said that when Romero Salazar was injured, police officers from the Directorate of Strategic and Tactical Actions (Dirección de Acciones Estratégicas y Tácticas, DAET) were shooting firearms at protesters near a local church.¹⁵⁵ A video uploaded to TikTok and taken approximately 100 meters south of where Romero Salazar was shot shows an armed person wearing dark clothing with white letters on his back, consistent with DAET uniforms.¹⁵⁶

A video posted to YouTube on August 2 filmed from a nearby building, which Human Rights Watch verified, shows the 21 seconds before Romero Salazar was shot and some seconds following.¹⁵⁷ Romero Salazar is outside the church with a group of protesters, holding what appears to be a homemade shield. A gunshot is heard, and Romero Salazar falls. Another video filmed in the same location, which was shared on X at 7:35 p.m. on July 29, shows protesters carrying a wounded Romero Salazar.¹⁵⁸

The witness, whose audio Human Rights Watch reviewed, said that police officers did not allow protesters to take Romero Salazar to the hospital.¹⁵⁹ A video filmed after dark shows Romero Salazar lying wounded in the back of a truck that is not moving.¹⁶⁰ Eventually protesters were able to take him to the nearby Pérez Carreño Hospital, where he died.

During a news conference on July 31, Maduro showed a social media post that referred to Romero Salazar's death and said it was "fake news." Maduro claimed that Romero Salazar had confessed that his death had been faked, and as proof, he showed a video of a man stating that his own death was simulated.¹⁶¹

¹⁵⁴ Audio message from a witness sent to Human Rights Watch by a local human rights organization on August 1, 2024 (copy on file with Human Rights Watch).

¹⁵⁵ Ibid.

¹⁵⁶ Video VENVIDo55 (copy on file with Human Rights Watch).

¹⁵⁷ Video VENVIDo56 (copy on file with Human Rights Watch).

¹⁵⁸ Video VENVIDo57 (copy on file with Human Rights Watch).

¹⁵⁹ Audio message from a witness sent to Human Rights Watch by a local human rights organization on August 1, 2024 (copy on file with Human Rights Watch).

¹⁶⁰ Video VENVIDo58 (copy on file with Human Rights Watch).

¹⁶¹ See Cazadores de Fake News (@cazamosfakenews), post to X, August 2, 2024, <https://x.com/cazamosfakenews/status/1819361722848911749> (accessed February 23, 2025).

However, Human Rights Watch established that Maduro’s claim that Romero Salazar was not dead is demonstrably false; the name used by the man in the video Maduro showed, and the location at which he claimed the incident happened, did not match Romero Salazar’s case. A local human rights organization that assisted Romero Salazar’s family also confirmed that the person in the video shown by Maduro is not Romero Salazar.¹⁶²

Yorgenis Emiliano Leyva Méndez (Miranda State, July 30)

On July 30, Yorgenis Emiliano Leyva Méndez, 35, participated in protests by motorcyclists against the electoral results in Ambrosio Plaza, Miranda state. The protest in Guarenas was largely peaceful, a media worker who covered the protest told Human Rights Watch. “The most violent thing I saw was people tearing down electoral propaganda from Maduro and burning it,” they said.¹⁶³

Human Rights Watch verified a video of the protest taken at 4 p.m., according to its caption, and posted an hour later to Instagram.¹⁶⁴ The video shows a group of people chanting peacefully and carrying flags on the Guarenas-Guatire Intercommunal Avenue, 7.5 kilometers from Plaza Bolívar. Later, the protest moved toward Guarenas, the media worker said. Witnesses said, and a video reviewed by Human Rights Watch showed, that at around 5:50 p.m. a group of people on motorbikes yelling and blaring their horns were protesting around Plaza Bolívar.¹⁶⁵ In the video Leyva Méndez is seen on a motorcycle among the group.

The square was guarded by municipal police and armed men whom local people described as belonging to the “colectivo” Los Tupamaros, according to a media worker who covered the protest.¹⁶⁶ That afternoon pro-Maduro mayor Freddy Rodríguez had published a post on Instagram saying that “revolutionary forces” were “activated” to “defend” the city.¹⁶⁷ The previous day, a group of at least three unidentified men had thrown a Molotov cocktail in

¹⁶² Human Rights Watch phone interview with a member of a local human rights organization, August 23, 2024.

¹⁶³ Human Rights Watch phone interview with a media worker present at the protest on July 30, August 16, 2024.

¹⁶⁴ Video VENVIDo59 (copy on file with Human Rights Watch).

¹⁶⁵ Human Rights Watch phone interview with a witness present at the protest on July 30, August 16, 2024; Video VENVIDo60 (copy on file with Human Rights Watch).

¹⁶⁶ Human Rights Watch phone interview with a media worker present at the protest on July 30, August 16, 2024.

¹⁶⁷ Freddy Rodríguez (@freddyarrodriguez), post to Instagram, July 30, 2024, <https://www.instagram.com/p/C-DoyB5v6Ah/?hl=es> (accessed February 27, 2025).

the city's main square, Plaza Bolívar. Human Rights Watch analyzed and geolocated a video of the incident.¹⁶⁸

Around 6:30 p.m., a bullet hit Leyva Méndez near Plaza Bolívar. His death certificate, which Human Rights Watch reviewed, indicates that he suffered internal hemorrhaging from a gunshot wound that lacerated his femoral artery.¹⁶⁹

Human Rights Watch verified a video that shows Leyva Méndez wounded, his clothes stained with blood, being carried by two people and placed on a motorcycle, approximately 100 meters from Plaza Bolívar, where the Mayor's Office building is located.¹⁷⁰ In the video, people are heard saying that the shot came from the nearby Mayor's Office building. A journalist who covered the protest also said that people were shot from there.¹⁷¹



Satellite Image: © Airbus 2024. Google Earth. Graphic © Human Rights Watch

¹⁶⁸ Video VENVIDo61 (copy on file with Human Rights Watch).

¹⁶⁹ Leyva Méndez's death certificate issued on July 31, 2024 (copy on file with Human Rights Watch).

¹⁷⁰ Video VENVIDo62 (copy on file with Human Rights Watch).

¹⁷¹ Human Rights Watch phone interview with a journalist present at the protest on July 30, August 16, 2024.

Enforced Disappearances and Pervasive Abuse in Detention

While the exact number remains unclear, over 2,000 people have been detained in connection with protests and political opposition since the July 28 elections.

According to the local group Foro Penal, at least 2,062 people were arrested between July 28 and December 31, with the largest number of detentions taking place between July 28 and the first two weeks of August.¹⁷² Maduro said in early August that 2,229 people, who he described as “terrorists” and “criminals,” had been detained.¹⁷³

While the vast majority of arrests took place between July and August, arbitrary detentions continued as the protests waned, especially in the days immediately before inauguration day when Foro Penal documented roughly 50 arbitrary arrests.¹⁷⁴

Maduro and Attorney General Saab have repeatedly said that those arrested were responsible for violent acts, terrorism, and other crimes.¹⁷⁵ However, Human Rights Watch has found evidence that people were detained for what should be protected activities such as participating in protests, criticizing the government, or taking part in political

¹⁷² Foro Penal, *Special Report on Political Repression in Venezuela 2024 (Reporte especial sobre la represión política en Venezuela 2024)*, February 24, 2025, https://foropenal.com/wp-content/uploads/2025/02/FP_REPORTE-ANUAL-2024_250224_compressed.pdf (accessed April 14, 2025), p. 6.

¹⁷³ “The number of arrests in Venezuela's presidential protests rises to 2,229, says Maduro” (“Suben a 2.229 los detenidos en protestas tras las presidenciales en Venezuela, dice Maduro”), video clip, YouTube, August 7, 2024, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ooOFY2S5Q8o> (accessed February 17, 2025); See also “Venezuela: Ongoing arbitrary detentions, disproportionate use of force fuelling climate of fear, Türk warns,” OHCHR news release, August 13, 2024, <https://www.ohchr.org/en/press-releases/2024/08/venezuela-ongoing-arbitrary-detentions-disproportionate-use-force-fuelling> (accessed February 23, 2025).

¹⁷⁴ Alfredo Romero (@alfredoromero), post to X, January 10, 2025, <https://x.com/alfredoromero/status/1877737338211541476> (accessed February 17, 2025); See also “Venezuela Fact-Finding Mission condemns recent arrests ahead of presidential inauguration,” OHCHR news release, January 9, 2025, <https://www.ohchr.org/en/press-releases/2025/01/venezuela-fact-finding-mission-condemns-recent-arrests-ahead-presidential> (accessed February 17, 2025).

¹⁷⁵ “The number of arrests in Venezuela's presidential protests rises to 2,229, says Maduro” (“Suben a 2.229 los detenidos en protestas tras las presidenciales en Venezuela, dice Maduro”), video clip, YouTube, August 7, 2024, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ooOFY2S5Q8o> (accessed February 17, 2025); 800 Noticias (@800Noticias), post to X, July 30, 2024, https://x.com/800Noticias_/status/1818396147440132603 (accessed February 23, 2025); Vicepresidencia Sectorial CITES (@vs_cites), post to Instagram, July 30, 2024, https://www.instagram.com/vs_cites/p/C-DfCtau6ro/?img_index=2 (accessed February 23, 2025); Ministerio Público venezolano (@MinpublicoVEN), post to X, July 30, 2024, <https://x.com/MinpublicoVEN/status/1818306905581752371?lang=es> (accessed February 23, 2025).

opposition, and were then detained arbitrarily or pursuant to proceedings that did not afford meaningful due process.

Enforced Disappearances

In most of the cases Human Rights Watch documented, security forces did not show detainees an arrest warrant at the moment of their arrest; and several people were detained by hooded men who failed to present themselves as members of security forces. Relatives often learned of the arrests only through witnesses, acquaintances with ties to security forces, or anonymous tips.¹⁷⁶

Authorities often denied the arrests had happened or refused to provide information on detainees' whereabouts to relatives and others, in what amounted to enforced disappearances under international law.¹⁷⁷

In addition, judges frequently failed to rule on *habeas corpus* requests in a timely manner or denied them on unreasonable grounds, such as claiming that relatives bore the burden of identifying the particular branch of the security forces responsible for the arrest.¹⁷⁸

¹⁷⁶ Human Rights Watch phone interview with Martha Tineo, Justicia, Encuentro, y Perdón (JEP), January 8, 2025; Human Rights Watch phone interview with a Venezuelan lawyer, January 22, 2025; Human Rights Watch phone interview with members of Provea, February 7, 2025; Human Rights Watch phone interview with Sairam Rivas, the Committee for the Freedom of Political Prisoners in Venezuela (Comité por la Libertad de los Presos Políticos, CLIPPVE), February 11, 2025; Human Rights Watch phone interview with Orlando Moreno, Vente Venezuela Human Rights Committee, February 12, 2025; Human Rights Watch phone interviews with people detained after July 28 and later released and their families, January - April 2025.

¹⁷⁷ Under international human rights law, an “enforced disappearance” is a situation where authorities detain a person and then refuse to acknowledge their fate or whereabouts, which places them outside the protection of the law. Enforced disappearances are a grave violation of rights guaranteed under a range of international human rights instruments. See, for example, UN Working Group on Enforced or Involuntary Disappearances, “About enforced disappearance,” webpage, [n.d.], <https://www.ohchr.org/en/special-procedures/wg-disappearances/about-enforced-disappearance> (accessed April 7, 2025). For years, Human Rights Watch and others have documented the practice of short-term enforced disappearances targeting political opponents and their relatives in Venezuela. See, for example, “Venezuela: Confirm Whereabouts of Disappeared Oil Executive,” Human Rights Watch news release, March 25, 2020, <https://www.hrw.org/news/2020/03/25/venezuela-confirm-whereabouts-disappeared-oil-executive>; UN Human Rights Council, Report of the Working Group on Enforced or Involuntary Disappearances, UN Doc. A/HRC/42/40 (2019), <https://documents.un.org/doc/undoc/gen/g19/229/25/pdf/g1922925.pdf?OpenElement> (accessed February 17, 2025); “Experts urge Venezuela to comply with international law to prevent irreparable harm to victims of enforced disappearance,” IACHR news release, February 28, 2025, https://www.oas.org/en/IACHR/jsForm/?File=/en/iachr/media_center/PReleases/2025/045.asp&utm_content=country-ven&utm_term=class-dc (accessed March 3, 2025).

¹⁷⁸ Human Rights Watch phone interview with a Venezuelan lawyer, January 22, 2025; Human Rights Watch phone interview with members of Provea, February 7, 2025; Human Rights Watch phone interview with Sairam Rivas, CLIPPVE, February 11, 2025; Human Rights Watch phone interview with Venezuelan lawyer working for a human rights group, March 7, 2025.

Relatives looked for their missing loved ones in multiple detention centers, and even in morgues, for days or weeks.¹⁷⁹ Often, they were only able to confirm the detainees' whereabouts through other prisoners or because prison officers accepted belongings they brought for their family member—which many saw as a tacit acknowledgement that the person was detained in that prison.¹⁸⁰ Yet in early April, Foro Penal said there were still 62 people whose fate or whereabouts remained unknown.¹⁸¹

Rafael Tudares Bracho

Hooded individuals intercepted Rafael Tudares Bracho, Edmundo González's son-in-law, on January 7 when he was taking his 7- and 8-year-old children to school. According to a written account by the family shared with Human Rights Watch, the hooded men violently pulled Tudares Bracho from his vehicle and left the children on the street.¹⁸²

Mariana González, Tudares Bracho's wife, undertook multiple efforts to locate him. She visited detention centers in Caracas and its surroundings, but authorities denied her requests for information. At one of these centers, a guard allowed Mariana González to leave clothes for Tudares Bracho. Yet when she returned, officials said that he was never held there. On one occasion, security officers told her that Tudares Bracho was held in the Rodeo I prison, but when she arrived at the prison, guards denied he was there.

In February, González learned that Tudares Bracho had been brought before a judge on January 10 and charged with treason, conspiracy with foreign governments, and criminal association, in "complicity" with Edmundo González. However, in early March authorities told her the hearing had been held on February 18, more than a month after the detention.

Mariana González learned that authorities assigned Tudares Bracho a public defender, despite his family's efforts to secure a lawyer of their choice. According to González, the

¹⁷⁹ Human Rights Watch phone interview with Sairam Rivas, CLIPPVE, February 11, 2025; Human Rights Watch phone interviews with people detained after July 28 and later released and their families, January - April 2025.

¹⁸⁰ Ibid.; Human Rights Watch phone interview with Orlando Moreno, Vente Venezuela Human Rights Committee, February 12, 2025.

¹⁸¹ Foro Penal (@ForoPenal), post to X, April 10, 2025, <https://x.com/ForoPenal/status/1910294969278988598> (accessed April 10, 2025).

¹⁸² Unless otherwise noted, this case is based on two written accounts shared by Tudares Bracho's family (copy on file with Human Rights Watch).

public defender was not present at the hearing where Tudares was charged, and authorities refused to share his name with the family.

“Being my father’s son-in-law is not a crime,” González wrote.

Sofía María Sahagún Ortiz

Security officers arrested Sofía María Sahagún Ortiz, a Venezuelan-Spanish citizen, on October 23 when she was boarding a plane at the Caracas airport directed to Madrid.¹⁸³ Sahagún Ortiz’s family said she texted her husband saying she had made it through passport control. Her relatives learned the next day that she had not been allowed to board the plane, but they were not informed of what happened to her next. Her family has repeatedly asked Venezuelan authorities to look for her and disclose whether she has been detained.

After she was disappeared, police officers repeatedly appeared at her family’s home and harassed relatives and acquaintances asking questions about the family, her husband told Human Rights Watch. Her husband and children moved out of their house and, days later, fled Venezuela.

On October 30, the family’s lawyer went to the Attorney General’s Office and the Ombudsperson’s Office asking officials to investigate Sahagún Ortiz’s case.¹⁸⁴ Prosecutors refused to open their own investigation, the family’s lawyer told Human Rights Watch. According to judicial documents reviewed by Human Rights Watch, prosecutors transferred the case to the Scientific, Penal, and Criminalistic Investigative Service Corps (Cuerpo de Investigaciones Científicas, Penales y Criminalísticas, CICPC), a branch of the police charged with carrying out forensic investigations.¹⁸⁵

¹⁸³ Unless otherwise noted, this case is based on a Human Rights phone interview with Sahagún Ortiz’s husband and lawyer, December - April, 2025. See also “Venezuela: Reveal Whereabouts of Disappeared Woman,” Human Rights Watch news release, December 12, 2024, <https://www.hrw.org/news/2024/12/12/venezuela-reveal-whereabouts-disappeared-woman>.

¹⁸⁴ Complaint filed by Sahagún Ortiz’s husband with the Ombudsperson’s Office on October 30, 2024 (copy on file with Human Rights Watch); Complaint filed by Sahagún Ortiz’s husband with the Attorney General’s Office on October 30, 2024 (copy on file with Human Rights Watch).

¹⁸⁵ Internal referral document issued by the Attorney General’s Office to the Special Victims Division of the Scientific, Penal, and Criminalistic Investigative Service Corps (CICPC) on October 30, 2024 (copy on file with Human Rights Watch).

On December 19, 2024—that is, 57 days after her arrest—Sahagún Ortiz was allowed to call her husband and her brother. She told them that she had been detained at the airport on October 23, and that she was being held in the National Police’s Center for Protection and Control of Detained People, in El Valle, Caracas.¹⁸⁶

The next day, her lawyers visited the police center to deliver her toiletries, food, and clothes. Police officers at the center said she had been transferred but did not say where and gave her lawyers the personal items that Sahagún Ortiz was carrying the day of her arrest.

On January 31, 2025, the Ombudsperson’s Office informed Sahagún Ortiz’s family that on December 19 she had a virtual hearing before an anti-terrorism judge, and that the following day she had been transferred to Helicoide, Venezuela’s Bolivarian National Intelligence Service (Servicio Bolivariano de Inteligencia Nacional, SEBIN) headquarters, in Caracas.

On February 3, her lawyers went to the Helicoide to ask about her. An authority informed them that she was being held in that detention center, but was not allowed to receive visits, make phone calls, or hire a lawyer. In early April, she was allowed to see a visitor for the first time.

At time of writing, she remained detained, facing several charges, including “financing of terrorism.”

Nahuel Gallo

Nahuel Gallo, 33, is a first corporal in the Argentine Gendarmerie—a federal force—who worked at the Los Libertadores border crossing, between Argentina and Chile.¹⁸⁷ In December 2024, Gallo planned a trip to Venezuela to visit his wife, María Alexandra Gómez, who is Venezuelan, and their two-year-old son.

Initially, Gallo planned to arrive in Venezuela in August on a commercial flight from Panama City, Gómez said. Yet the flights were cancelled after Venezuela cut ties with

¹⁸⁶ Human Rights Watch phone interview with Sahagún Ortiz’s husband, December 6, 2024.

¹⁸⁷ Unless otherwise noted, this case is based on a Human Rights phone interview with María Alexandra Gómez, Gallo’s wife, April 3, 2025.

Panama due to criticism regarding the elections. Gallo eventually decided to fly to Colombia and cross the border by land. “He was very excited about the trip. It was the first time in his life that he was leaving Argentina and taking an international flight,” Gómez told Human Rights Watch.

On December 8, Gallo crossed the Colombian exit checkpoint in Cúcuta in a taxi. When he arrived in Venezuela, he texted Gómez saying that Venezuelan officials at the border wanted to interview him. “We didn’t see anything strange about it. It seemed like a fairly normal procedure to enter a country,” she said. Gómez did not hear back from him for a couple of hours. At 11 a.m., he called Gómez from the taxi driver’s phone, saying that Venezuelan authorities were going to interview him again. He also said that he “had no more money.” The taxi driver later told Gómez that men in a black car with a General Directorate of Military Counterintelligence (Dirección General de Contrainteligencia Militar, DGCIM) logo had taken Gallo.

In December, Attorney General Saab said that Gallo had been charged with conspiracy, terrorism, financing terrorism, and illicit association for belonging to a group that “attempted to carry out a series of destabilizing and terrorist actions.”¹⁸⁸ In January, Maduro publicly commented on the case, claiming that Gallo had plans to kill Vice President Delcy Rodríguez.¹⁸⁹ Yet, to date, Gallo’s family has not received information from authorities about any court hearings, nor on where he is being held.

On January 2, Venezuelan media outlets published some photos and a video of Gallo wearing a blue prison uniform. Gómez believes the photos were taken inside the Rodeo I prison. But when she arrived at the prison, guards told her that Gallo was not held there.

¹⁸⁸ Natasha Niebieskikwiat, “The Venezuelan regime revealed that the Argentine gendarme ‘is detained in Caracas’” (“El régimen venezolano reveló que el gendarme argentino ‘está detenido en Caracas’”), *Clarín*, December 29, 2024, https://www.clarin.com/politica/regimen-venezolano-revelo-gendarme-argentino-detenido-caracas_o_j9HC6pQzFh.html (accessed April 13, 2025); Ministerio Público Venezuela (@mpublicove), post to Instagram, December 27, 2024, <https://www.instagram.com/p/DEFZSXcpRvC/> (accessed April 13, 2025).

¹⁸⁹ See, for example, Diario Huarpe, post to Facebook, January 7, 2025, <https://www.facebook.com/reel/1525705354810826> (accessed April 13, 2025); Facundo Chaves, “Maduro said the Argentine gendarme wanted to kill Venezuela’s vice president, and the government rejected the bizarre accusation” (“Maduro dijo que el gendarme argentino quería matar a la vicepresidenta de Venezuela y el Gobierno rechazó la insólita acusación”), *Infobae*, January 7, 2025, <https://www.infobae.com/politica/2025/01/07/maduro-dijo-que-el-gendarme-argentino-queria-matar-a-la-vicepresidenta-de-venezuela-y-el-gobierno-rechazo-la-insolita-acusacion/> (accessed April 13, 2025).

“I live in anguish and despair,” Gómez said. “I sleep with the phone on my chest in case someone calls to give me information about my husband.”

Despite multiple requests, the Argentine government has not been allowed consular visits or been informed about Gallo’s whereabouts.¹⁹⁰

Incommunicado Detention and Charges of “Terrorism” and “Hatred”

Many detainees, including 33 cases documented by Human Rights Watch, have been held in incommunicado detention for days, weeks, or even months, in violation of international human rights standards.¹⁹¹ While most detainees appear to have been allowed to receive visits, some detainees have been prohibited from receiving visits since the moment of their arrest.¹⁹²

Most detainees have been denied the right to legal representation by a private lawyer of their choice, even when they or their families have explicitly requested one.¹⁹³ They have been appointed a public defender, but some never spoke to their defender while detained. They have also been consistently denied access to their case files.¹⁹⁴

Authorities have used two laws that allow draconian penalties to carry out many of the detentions.¹⁹⁵ In particular:

¹⁹⁰ “Arbitrary detention and forced disappearance of Nahuel Gallo: Argentina files complaint with the International Criminal Court,” Argentina’s Ministry of Foreign Affairs, International Trade and Worship news release, January 2, 2025, <https://www.cancilleria.gob.ar/en/announcements/news/arbitrary-detention-and-forced-disappearance-nahuel-gallo-argentina-files> (accessed April 13, 2025).

¹⁹¹ See UN Human Rights Committee, General comment No. 35, Article 9 of the ICCPR: Liberty and security of person, UN Doc. CCPR/C/GC/35 (2014), <https://docs.un.org/en/CCPR/C/GC/35> (accessed February 19, 2025), para. 56.

¹⁹² Human Rights Watch phone interview with Sairam Rivas, CLIPPVE, February 11, 2025; Human Rights Watch phone interview with Orlando Moreno, Vente Venezuela Human Rights Committee, February 12, 2025; Human Rights Watch phone interviews with people detained after July 28 and later released and their families, January - April 2025.

¹⁹³ Ibid.; Human Rights Watch phone interview with Martha Tineo, JEP, January 8, 2025; Human Rights Watch phone interview with a Venezuelan lawyer, January 22, 2025; Human Rights Watch phone interview with a member of a human rights organization, January 24, 2025; Human Rights Watch phone interview with members of Provea, February 7, 2025; Human Rights Watch phone interview with Venezuelan lawyer working for a human rights group, March 7, 2025.

¹⁹⁴ Ibid.

¹⁹⁵ Human Rights Watch documented the use of charges related to these laws in at least 25 cases. Venezuelan organizations told Human Rights Watch that people detained after July 28 face at least one charge based on these laws.

- The 2017 Law Against Hatred, which was enacted by the Constituent Assembly, imposes sentences of 10 to 20 years for anyone who publicly “promotes, encourages, or incites hatred, discrimination, or violence.”¹⁹⁶
- The 2012 Law Against Organized Crime and Terrorism Financing imposes sentences ranging from 25 to 30 years for terrorist acts intended to intimidate a population or committed with the aim of “severely destabilizing or destroying the fundamental political, constitutional, economic, or social structures of a country or an international organization.”¹⁹⁷

Human Rights Watch documented several cases where detainees have been charged in virtual hearings with judges in Caracas, sometimes in groups, which undermines defendants’ right to access a hearing where the evidence and arguments against them are analyzed in an individualized and fair manner.¹⁹⁸ Such group proceedings are inappropriate because they make it harder for judges, prosecutors, and public defenders to adequately assess or present evidence and arguments pertaining to individual cases.

As of April 7, Foro Penal reported that 896 people the group described as “political prisoners” remained behind bars.¹⁹⁹ The Attorney General’s Office reported on March 3 that 2,006 people arrested in relation to the post-July 28 events had been released.²⁰⁰ According to the office, these releases resulted from a review of pre-trial detention which, under Venezuelan law, judges can replace with less restrictive measures such as house

¹⁹⁶ National Assembly of Venezuela, Constitutional Law Against Hatred, for Peaceful Coexistence and Tolerance (Ley Constitucional Contra el Odio, por la Convivencia Pacífica y la Tolerancia), November 10, 2017, <https://www.asambleanacional.gob.ve/leyes/sancionadas/ley-constitucional-contra-el-odio-por-la-convivencia-pacifica-y-la-tolerancia> (accessed February 22, 2025), art. 20.

¹⁹⁷ National Assembly of Venezuela, Organic Law Against Organized Crime and Terrorism Financing (Ley Orgánica contra la Delincuencia Organizada y Financiamiento al Terrorismo, LOCDOT), April 30, 2012, <https://www.asambleanacional.gob.ve/leyes/sancionadas/ley-organica-contra-la-delincuencia-organizada-y-financiamiento-al-terrorismo> (accessed February 17, 2025), arts. 4, 52 and 53.

¹⁹⁸ Human Rights Watch phone interview with Martha Tineo, JEP, January 8, 2025; Human Rights Watch phone interview with a Venezuelan lawyer, January 22, 2025; Human Rights Watch phone interview with a member of a human rights organization, January 24, 2025; Human Rights Watch phone interview with members of Provea, February 7, 2025; Human Rights Watch phone interview with Sairam Rivas, CLIPPVE, February 11, 2025; Human Rights Watch phone interview with Orlando Moreno, Vente Venezuela Human Rights Committee, February 12, 2025; Human Rights Watch phone interview with Venezuelan lawyer working for a human rights group, March 7, 2025; Human Rights Watch phone interviews with people detained after July 28 and later released and their families, January - April 2025.

¹⁹⁹ Foro Penal (@ForoPenal), post to X, April 10, 2025, <https://x.com/ForoPenal/status/1910294969278988598> (accessed April 10, 2025).

²⁰⁰ Ministerio Público Venezuela (@mpublicove), post to Instagram, March 3, 2025, <https://www.instagram.com/p/DGvRr3YpYOb/> (accessed March 5, 2025).

arrest, periodic court reporting, and prohibitions on leaving the country or attending certain meetings.²⁰¹

However, the people released from detention continue to be under criminal investigation. A person released in December told Human Rights Watch, “I am out of jail now, but to them, I am still a terrorist. Every day I fear they will come and lock me up again.”²⁰²

Additionally, people who have been released and their lawyers have said that many of those released were required to sign a document saying they would not disclose information about their case or arrest and, in some cases, to record a video indicating that their rights were respected during their detention.²⁰³

Many of those released say they have been required to appear before courts in Caracas, which handle cases involving the crime of “terrorism.”²⁰⁴ Many people released said they missed the required appearances because they lacked the means or money for the long journey to the capital.²⁰⁵

Torture, Ill-Treatment, and Prison Conditions

²⁰¹ See, for example, Ministerio Público Venezuela (@mpublicove), post to Instagram, January 25, 2025, <https://www.instagram.com/p/DFQNV2qpsB8/> (accessed February 19, 2025); Ministerio Público Venezuela (@mpublicove), post to Instagram, January 6, 2025, <https://www.instagram.com/p/DEFXJjVJoRi/> (accessed February 19, 2025); Ministerio Público Venezuela (@mpublicove), post to Instagram, December 30, 2024, <https://www.instagram.com/p/DEN4dJ1j16/> (accessed February 19, 2025); Ministerio Público Venezuela (@mpublicove), post to Instagram, December 24, 2024, <https://www.instagram.com/p/DD8E1EQJNYJ/> (accessed February 19, 2025); Ministerio Público Venezuela (@mpublicove), post to Instagram, December 23, 2024, <https://www.instagram.com/p/DD7QcBOJX-l/> (accessed February 19, 2025); Ministerio Público Venezuela (@mpublicove), post to Instagram, December 20, 2024, <https://www.instagram.com/p/DDz7ez1p6Y6/> (accessed February 19, 2025); National Assembly of Venezuela, Decree with Rank, Value and Force of Law of the Organic Code of Criminal Procedure (Decreto con Rango, Valor y Fuerza de Ley del Código Orgánico Procesal Penal), June 15, 2012, https://www.oas.org/juridico/PDFs/mesicic4_ven_cod_org_proc_penal.pdf (accessed February 19, 2025), art. 242.

²⁰² Human Rights Watch phone interview with a person detained after July 28 and later conditionally released, February 18, 2025.

²⁰³ Human Rights Watch phone interview with Martha Tineo, JEP, January 8, 2025; Human Rights Watch phone interview with a Venezuelan lawyer, January 22, 2025; Human Rights Watch phone interview with members of Provea, February 7, 2025; Human Rights Watch phone interview with Sairam Rivas, CLIPPVE, February 11, 2025; Human Rights Watch phone interview with Orlando Moreno, Vente Venezuela Human Rights Committee, February 12, 2025; Human Rights Watch phone interview with Venezuelan lawyer working for a human rights group, March 7, 2025; Human Rights Watch phone interviews with people detained after July 28 and later released and their families, January - April 2025.

²⁰⁴ Ibid.

²⁰⁵ Human Rights Watch phone interviews with people detained after July 28 and later released and their families, January – April 2025.

The human rights organization Provea documented 2,224 victims of cruel, inhuman, or degrading treatment in 2024, including beatings, lack of medical care, and food deprivation. The organization reported an 88.1 percent increase in such cases compared to 2023, particularly in prisons and police stations after July 28. Provea also recorded 9 cases of torture involving 60 victims, most of whom were “political prisoners” held in Rodeo I prison.²⁰⁶

Human Rights Watch documented 12 cases of ill-treatment, some of which may amount to torture. Particularly serious incidents entailed beatings, electric shocks, asphyxiation, and solitary confinement.²⁰⁷ The targets were most often individuals who are actual or perceived critics of the government, and in several cases those inflicting the abuse sought to extract information about opposition members or force confessions regarding alleged involvement in violent acts.²⁰⁸

Detainees and relatives of people detained told Human Rights Watch that in some cases people were subjected to electric shocks and asphyxiation with bags.²⁰⁹ Two individuals who were detained between July and January reported seeing burn-like marks on the ribs and arms of other detainees.²¹⁰ The mother of a detained 15-year-old boy said that her son was subjected to electric shocks, which, she believed, caused him to suffer seizures.²¹¹

²⁰⁶ Written information shared by members of Provea detailing their findings for the organization’s 2024 Annual Report, April 14, 2025 (copy on file with Human Rights Watch).

²⁰⁷ See also UN Human Rights Council, Detailed findings of the independent international factfinding mission on the Bolivarian Republic of Venezuela, UN Doc. A/HRC/57/CRP.5 (2024), <https://www.ohchr.org/sites/default/files/documents/hrbodies/hrcouncil/sessions-regular/session57/advance-versions/a-hrc-57-crp-5-en.pdf> (accessed February 26, 2025), paras. 673-677.

²⁰⁸ Torture and cruel, inhuman, and degrading treatment, as defined under international human rights law, are acts “intentionally inflicted” to obtain information or a confession, or to punish, intimidate and coerce. See Convention against Torture and Other Cruel, Inhuman or Degrading Treatment or Punishment (“Convention against Torture”), adopted December 10, 1984, G.A. res. 39/46, annex, 39 U.N. GAOR Supp. (No. 51) at 197, U.N. Doc. A/39/51 (1984), entered into force June 26, 1987, art. 1.

²⁰⁹ For previous investigations by Human Rights Watch on the use of electric shocks against detainees see Foro Penal and Human Rights Watch, *Crackdown on Dissent: Brutality, Torture, and Political Persecution in Venezuela* (Human Rights Watch: New York, 2017), <https://www.hrw.org/report/2017/11/29/crackdown-dissent/brutality-torture-and-political-persecution-venezuela>

²¹⁰ Human Rights Watch phone interview with a person detained after July 28 and later conditionally released, February 26, 2025; Human Rights Watch phone interview with a person detained after July 28 and later conditionally released, February 28, 2025.

²¹¹ Human Rights Watch phone interview with the mother of a 15-year-old child detained after July 28, February 19, 2025.

Human Rights Watch also documented the use of punishment cells. Five former detainees told Human Rights Watch that guards placed them—or threatened to place them—in punishment cells commonly known as “little tigers”²¹² (tigritos in Spanish)—tiny, overcrowded and dark cells where detainees are held in isolation for several hours or even days.²¹³ One detainee said he slept standing up due to the lack of space, with around 30 people packed into a 2 x 3 meter area.²¹⁴

A detainee described a cell known as “Adolfo’s bed” (la cama de Adolfo in Spanish) in Tocarón prison, “a kind of garbage closet” no bigger than “a washing machine box” where he had to always remain crouched. “It’s a hole,” he said. “It only has a door. It’s completely dark, so you lose track of time. If you need to go to the bathroom, you have no choice but to do it right there.”²¹⁵ Another referred to being stripped of his clothes and placed in a punishment zone in Rodeo I.²¹⁶

Some detainees and their families told Human Rights Watch that detainees were beaten and subjected to other physical abuses by security forces, both during transfers and at

²¹² Previous investigations by Human Rights Watch found that “tigritos” were used to hold detainees and that their name comes from either the size of the cell—so small that only a tiger could fit inside—or from the unbearable stench inside these overcrowded spaces, comparable to that of a tiger’s cage. Foro Penal and Human Rights Watch, *Crackdown on Dissent: Brutality, Torture, and Political Persecution in Venezuela* (Human Rights Watch: New York, 2017), <https://www.hrw.org/report/2017/11/29/crackdown-dissent/brutality-torture-and-political-persecution-venezuela>, pp. 24, 29 and 50. See more about punishment cells in Venezuela: OVP, “There are up to three torture rooms in the Santa Ana 1 and 2 prison” (“Hasta tres cuartos de tortura tienen en la cárcel de Santa Ana 1 y 2”), April 29, 2024, <https://oveprisiones.com/hasta-tres-cuartos-de-tortura-tienen-en-la-carcel-de-santa-ana-1-y-2/> (accessed February 24, 2025); Inter-American Court of Human Rights, *Díaz Peña Case*, Judgement of June 26, 2012, Inter-Am.Ct.H.R., (Ser. C) No. 244 (2012), https://www.corteidh.or.cr/docs/casos/articulos/seriec_244_ing.pdf (accessed February 24, 2025), paras. 52-54.

²¹³ Human Rights Watch phone interview with a person detained after July 28 and later conditionally released, February 12, 2025; Human Rights Watch phone interview with a person detained after July 28 and later conditionally released, February 18, 2025; Human Rights Watch phone interview with a person detained after July 28 and later conditionally released, February 19, 2025; Human Rights Watch phone interview with a person detained after July 28 and later conditionally released, February 25, 2025; Human Rights Watch phone interview with a person detained after July 28 and later conditionally released, February 28, 2025.

²¹⁴ Human Rights Watch phone interview with a person detained after July 28 and later conditionally released, February 25, 2025.

²¹⁵ Human Rights Watch phone interview with a person detained after July 28 and later conditionally released, February 18, 2025; See also Norberto Paredes, “‘They put you in a room without oxygen until you can’t breathe’: the punishment cells in Venezuela denounced by those arrested for ‘terrorism’ after the elections” (“‘Te meten en un cuarto sin oxígeno hasta que no puedas respirar’: las celdas de castigo en Venezuela que denuncian los detenidos por ‘terrorismo’ tras las elecciones”), *BBC News Mundo*, December 6, 2024, <https://www.bbc.com/mundo/articles/crln6wre8o1o> (accessed February 24, 2025).

²¹⁶ Human Rights Watch phone interview with a person detained after July 28 and later released, March 25, 2025.

detention centers, leaving visible injuries such as bruises, broken bones, and fractures.²¹⁷ Some detainees reported seeing guards beat detainees' hands with their batons through the bars of cells. Others mentioned witnessing the “mata chivo,” a blow to the back of the neck that stuns or knocks someone unconscious, or punches to the upper central part of the abdomen, just below the rib cage.²¹⁸

Some detainees said that security officers forced them to strip in public when they received uniforms, especially during transfers to Tocarón and Tocuyito prisons, and beat and insulted them as they changed clothes. Their heads were shaved.²¹⁹

Former detainees described prison conditions marked by overcrowding, poor access to water, food, and basic health services.

In September, the Venezuelan Prisons Observatory (Observatorio Venezolano de Prisiones, OVP), a human rights group, estimated that given the size of the cells and the number of detainees held in them, each detainee had less than 1 square meter of personal space to sleep and move inside their cell.²²⁰

²¹⁷ Human Rights Watch phone interviews with people detained after July 28 and later released and their families, January - April 2025.

²¹⁸ Human Rights Watch phone interview with a person detained after July 28 and later conditionally released, February 25, 2025; Human Rights Watch phone interview with a person detained after July 28 and later conditionally released, February 28, 2025; Human Rights Watch phone interview with a person detained after July 28 and later released, March 25, 2025.

²¹⁹ Human Rights Watch phone interview with a person detained after July 28 and later conditionally released, February 12, 2025; Human Rights Watch phone interview with a person detained after July 28 and later conditionally released, February 18, 2025; Human Rights Watch phone interview with a person detained after July 28 and later conditionally released, February 19, 2025; Human Rights Watch phone interview with a person detained after July 28 and later conditionally released, February 25, 2025; Human Rights Watch phone interview with a person detained after July 28 and later conditionally released, February 28, 2025; Human Rights Watch phone interview with a person detained after July 28 and later released, March 25, 2025.

²²⁰ OVP, “Women detained in post-election protests survive without water and crammed into small cells” (“Sin agua y hacinadas en pequeñas celdas sobreviven mujeres detenidas en protestas postelectorales”), August 15, 2024, <https://oveprisiones.com/sin-agua-y-hacinadas-en-pequenas-celdas-sobreviven-mujeres-detenidas-en-protestas-postelectorales/> (accessed February 20, 2025); OVP, “Detention conditions for those detained in post-election protests are alarming” (“Son alarmantes las condiciones de reclusión de detenidos en protestas postelectorales”), August 22, 2024, <https://oveprisiones.com/son-alarmanentes-las-condiciones-de-reclusion-de-detenidos-en-protestas-postelectorales/> (accessed February 20, 2025); OVP, “Infographic | Venezuelan prisoners live in less space than their own feet occupy” (“Infografía | Presos venezolanos viven en menos espacio del que ocupan sus propios pies”), September 25, 2024, <https://oveprisiones.com/infografia-presos-venezolanos-viven-en-menos-espacio-del-que-ocupan-sus-propios-pies/> (accessed February 20, 2025); OVP, “Political prisoners survive in Tocarón with 135% overcrowding” (“Con un 135% de hacinamiento sobreviven los presos políticos en Tocarón”), November 11, 2024, <https://oveprisiones.com/con-un-135-de-hacinamiento-sobreviven-los-presos-politicos-en-tocoron/> (accessed April 14, 2025).

Food and water quality was poor across multiple detention centers and the OVP reported that some detainees in Tocuyito prison had as little as two glasses of water per day.²²¹ Detainees told Human Rights Watch that they had been served spoiled food. Others, including one person who lost over 40 kilograms in five months, suffered stomach issues and malnutrition.²²² In other centers, detainees relied on family members for food.²²³

From July to November 2024, the Committee for the Freedom of Political Prisoners in Venezuela (Comité por la Libertad de los Presos Políticos, CLIPPVE) reported that in several prisons, authorities prohibited families from providing medication to detainees.²²⁴ They also failed to inform relatives about their loved one's health issues.²²⁵

At least four people who were detained after July 28 died in custody, including two members of Vente Venezuela. In two cases, the deceased detainees were held in Tocuyito prison, in Carabobo. According to information provided by local organizations and media outlets, the causes of death were related to a lack of timely medical care and ill-treatment.²²⁶ People who died in custody include:

²²¹ Human Rights Watch phone interview with a person detained after July 28 and later conditionally released, February 12, 2025; Human Rights Watch phone interview with a person detained after July 28 and later conditionally released, February 18, 2025; Human Rights Watch phone interview with a person detained after July 28 and later conditionally released, February 19, 2025; Human Rights Watch phone interview with a girl detained after July 28 and later conditionally released, February 19, 2025; Human Rights Watch phone interview with Venezuelan lawyer working for a human rights group, March 7, 2025; See also OVP, "Hell in Tocuyito: Prisoners only have the right to two glasses of water per day" ("El infierno de Tocuyito: Los presos sólo tienen derecho a dos vasos de agua por día"), October 4, 2024, <https://oveprisiones.com/el-infierno-de-tocuyito-los-presos-solo-tienen-derecho-a-dos-vasos-de-agua-por-dia/> (accessed February 20, 2025); CLIPPVE, *Unjust prison, inhumane cells: Report on the prison conditions of political prisoners in Venezuela (Prisión injusta, celdas inhumanas: Informe sobre las condiciones carcelarias de los presos políticos en Venezuela)*, December 2024, <https://provea.org/wp-content/uploads/2024/12/Prision-injusta-celdas-inhumanas-INFORME-SOBRE-LAS-CONDICIONES-CARCELARIAS-DE-LOS-PRESOS-POLITICOS-EN-VENEZUELA-2.pdf> (accessed February 19, 2025), pp. 11-17.

²²² Human Rights Watch phone interview with a person detained after July 28 and later conditionally released, February 12, 2025.

²²³ Human Rights Watch phone interview with Sairam Rivas, CLIPPVE, February 11, 2025; Human Rights Watch phone interviews with people detained after July 28 and later released and their families, January - April 2025; CLIPPVE, *Unjust prison, inhumane cells: Report on the prison conditions of political prisoners in Venezuela*, p. 14.

²²⁴ Ibid, p. 18.

²²⁵ Human Rights Watch phone interview with Sairam Rivas, CLIPPVE, February 11, 2025; Human Rights Watch phone interview with a relative of a person detained after July 28 and later conditionally released, February 15, 2025.

²²⁶ Ibid.; Human Rights Watch phone interview with members of the OVP, April 3, 2025; Letter from Humberto Prado Sifontes, Director of the OVP, to Juanita Goebertus, Americas director at Human Rights Watch, December 18, 2024 (copy on file with Human Rights Watch); Observatorio Venezolano de Prisiones (@oveprisiones), post to X, December 17, 2024, <https://x.com/oveprisiones/status/1869143939875246147> (accessed February 27, 2025); "They denounce the death of Reinaldo Araujo, a member of Vente Venezuela detained since 2024" ("Denuncian muerte de Reinaldo Araujo, miembro de

- Jesús Manuel Martínez Medina, a member of the opposition party Vente Venezuela, who was detained on July 29 in Anzoátegui state. He died on November 14 in a hospital after both of his legs were amputated due to necrosis. According to information provided to Human Rights Watch, he had diabetes.²²⁷
- Jesús Rafael Álvarez, who was arrested along with his wife on August 2 in Bolívar state after the protests. He died on December 12 while detained in Tocuyito prison. According to the OVP his 20-year-old son was never allowed to visit him, as only women were permitted to enter the prison. The son told the OVP and media outlets that his father had been healthy but was beaten in prison, which ultimately led to his death.²²⁸
- Osguald Alexander González Pérez, who was detained with his son on August 1 in Lara state after the post-election protests. He died on December 15 after months of detention at Tocuyito prison. According to the OVP, he had hepatitis, which was not treated promptly.²²⁹
- Reinaldo Araujo, the leader of Vente Venezuela in a parish in Trujillo state, who was detained on January 1. According to information shared with Human Rights

Vente Venezuela detenido desde 2024”), *La Patilla*, February 24, 2025, <https://www.lapatilla.com/2025/02/24/denuncian-muerte-de-reinaldo-araujo-miembro-de-vente-venezuela-detenido-desde-2024/> (accessed February 27, 2025).

²²⁷ Human Rights Watch phone interview with members of the OVP, April 3, 2025; Letter from Humberto Prado Sifontes, Director of the OVP, to Juanita Goebertus, Americas director at Human Rights Watch, December 18, 2024 (copy on file with Human Rights Watch); Gerardo Lemos, “Machado and González denounce the death of Jesús Manuel Martínez Medina in prison, member of the Vente Venezuela party and opposition witness in the July 28 elections” (“Machado y González denuncian el fallecimiento en prisión de Jesús Manuel Martínez Medina, miembro del partido Vente Venezuela y testigo de la oposición de las elecciones del 28 de julio”), *CNN Español*, November 14, 2024, <https://cnnespanol.cnn.com/2024/11/14/machado-gonzalez-fallecimiento-martinez-medina-testigo-elecciones-orix> (accessed February 27, 2025).

²²⁸ Ibid.; OVP, “Son of a political prisoner: ‘My father was punished and killed in Tocuyito prison’” (“Hijo de preso político: ‘A mi papá lo castigaron y lo mataron en la cárcel de Tocuyito’”), December 14, 2024, <https://oveprisiones.com/hijo-de-preso-politico-a-mi-papa-lo-castigaron-y-lo-mataron-en-la-carcel-de-tocuyito/> (accessed February 27, 2025); “The stark testimony of Jesús Álvarez’s son, Maduro’s political prisoner: ‘I came to get my father released, and I’m taking a dead body with me’” (“El crudo testimonio del hijo de Jesús Álvarez, preso político de Maduro: ‘Vine para que me entregaran a mi padre en libertad y me llevo un cuerpo fallecido’”), *InfoBae*, December 14, 2024, <https://www.infobae.com/venezuela/2024/12/14/el-crudo-testimonio-del-hijo-de-jesus-alvarez-preso-politico-de-maduro-vine-para-que-me-entregaran-a-mi-padre-en-libertad-y-me-llevo-un-cuerpo-fallecido/> (accessed April 11, 2025).

²²⁹ Human Rights Watch phone interview with members of the OVP, April 3, 2025; Letter from Humberto Prado Sifontes, Director of the OVP, to Juanita Goebertus, Americas director at Human Rights Watch, December 18, 2024 (copy on file with Human Rights Watch); Observatorio Venezolano de Prisiones (@oveprisiones), post to X, December 17, 2024, <https://x.com/oveprisiones/status/1869143939875246147> (accessed February 27, 2025).

Watch, he had leg issues and heart problems from high blood pressure. He died on February 24, after being transferred to a hospital.²³⁰

Conditions in the Main Detention Sites

Aragua Penitentiary Center, known as Tocarón (Aragua State); and Judicial Internment Center of Carabobo, known as Tocuyito (Carabobo State)

Tocarón is a maximum-security prison located in the south of Aragua state, known for having become the stronghold of the criminal gang Tren de Aragua, a criminal group that controlled the prison and used it as headquarters.²³¹ Tocuyito is the main prison in Carabobo state. In 2023, Venezuelan authorities said they had dismantled “all [the] criminal structures” in these prisons and would physically restructure the detention sites.²³² Human rights organizations still have doubts and concerns about this restructuring.²³³

²³⁰ Gabriel Montenegro, “Trujillo | The health of businessman Reinaldo Araujo, detained since January 23, is deteriorating” (“Trujillo | Se complica la salud del comerciante Reinaldo Araujo detenido desde el 23 de enero”), *Diario Los Andes*, February 21, 2025, <https://diariodelosandes.com/trujillo-se-complica-la-salud-del-comerciante-reinaldo-araujo-detenido-desde-el-23-de-enero/> (accessed April 11, 2025); Written information shared by Vente Venezuela’s Human Rights Committee, February 24, 2025 (copy on file with Human Rights Watch).

²³¹ See, for example, Ronna Rísquez, “The luxury I saw when I entered Tocarón prison, the bunker of the feared Tren de Aragua in Venezuela” (“El lujo que vi cuando entré en la cárcel de Tocarón, el búnker del temido Tren de Aragua en Venezuela”), *BBC News Mundo*, October 3, 2023, <https://www.bbc.com/mundo/articles/cd1vqky75z9o> (accessed February 24, 2025).

²³² Osmay Hernández, “The Venezuelan government assures it has evacuated Tocarón prison, where the tren de Aragua gang had its base” (“El Gobierno de Venezuela asegura que desalojó la cárcel de Tocarón, donde la banda El tren de Aragua tenía su base”), *CNN en Español*, September 22, 2023, <https://cnnespanol.cnn.com/2023/09/20/gobierno-venezuela-asegura-desalojo-carcel-tocoron-banda-el-tren-de-aragua-orix> (accessed February 24, 2025); José Ospina-Valencia, “Tocarón prison take over, a distracting operation?” (“Toma de la cárcel de Tocarón, ¿una operación distractiva?”), *Deutsche Welle*, September 22, 2023, <https://www.dw.com/es/toma-de-la-c%C3%A1rcel-de-tocor%C3%B3n-lucha-contr-el-crimen-u-operaci%C3%B3n-distractiva-del-gobierno-de-venezuela/a-66902440> (accessed February 24, 2025); Jorge Hurtado, “Venezuela: This is how the massive operation at Tocarón prison, controlled by the Aragua Train, took place” (“Venezuela: así fue el masivo operativo en la cárcel Tocarón, controlada por el Tren de Aragua”), *France 24*, September 21, 2023, <https://www.france24.com/es/am%C3%A9rica-latina/20230921-venezuela-realiza-masivo-desalojo-en-la-c%C3%A1rcel-tocor%C3%B3n-controlada-por-el-tren-de-aragua> (accessed February 24, 2025); “More than 1,600 weapons found in government operation in Venezuelan prison” (“Más de 1.600 armas halladas en operativo gubernamental desplegado en una cárcel venezolana”), *Swissinfo*, October 26, 2023, <https://www.swissinfo.ch/spa/m%C3%A1s-de-1-600-armas-halladas-en-operativo-gubernamental-desplegado-en-una-c%C3%A1rcel-venezolana/48928996> (accessed February 25, 2025); “Chavista regime raided a Venezuelan prison and found an ‘impressive amount of weapons’” (“El régimen chavista intervino una cárcel de Venezuela y encontró una ‘impresionante cantidad de armas’”), *Infobae*, October 26, 2023, <https://www.infobae.com/venezuela/2023/10/26/el-regimen-chavista-intervino-una-carcel-de-venezuela-y-encontro-una-impresionante-cantidad-de-armas/> (accessed February 25, 2025); “Venezuelan government ‘completely’ takes over prison with the largest inmate population in the country” (“Gobierno de Venezuela interviene «totalmente» la cárcel con más población reclusa del país”), *Swissinfo*, October 25, 2023, <https://www.swissinfo.ch/spa/gobierno-de-venezuela-interviene-totalmente-la-c%C3%A1rcel-con-m%C3%A1s-poblaci%C3%B3n-reclusa-del-pa%C3%ADs/48925360> (accessed February 25, 2025).

²³³ Human Rights Watch phone interview with members of the OVP, April 3, 2025

In early August 2024, Maduro announced on X that “all fascist criminals” were going to be sent to Tocarón and Tocuyito.²³⁴ Without notifying their relatives, or considering that many lived far away, Venezuelan authorities have transferred hundreds of prisoners to these facilities.²³⁵

The transfers were conducted in heavily guarded buses.²³⁶ A detainee who was held in Tocuyito alleged that security forces subjected him to “brutal treatment” and psychological abuse during his transfer. The detainees were handcuffed with their hands behind their backs, he said, and authorities forced them to lift their arms—causing him significant pain, he said. They also told them they were “terrorists” and “filthy ‘guarimberos’”—a pejorative term used to describe those who participate in opposition protests.²³⁷ Another detainee transferred to Tocarón stated that while they were on route, unaware of their destination, the bus stopped and was surrounded by armed security forces. “We all thought they were going to kill us,” he said. After making them wait for a while, an armed officer stepped onto the bus and, laughing, said, “Chill out, we’re not going to kill you—at least not yet.”²³⁸

Families and released detainees reported overcrowding, restrictions on phone calls and visits, and inadequate detention conditions.²³⁹

²³⁴ Nicolás Maduro (@NicolasMaduro), post to X, August 2, 2024, <https://x.com/NicolasMaduro/status/1819174829746008323> (accessed February 24, 2025).

²³⁵ See, for example, OVP, “More than 700 political prisoners were transported to Tocuyito and Tocarón in uniforms and with shaved heads” (“Rapados y uniformados trasladaron a más de 700 presos políticos hacia Tocuyito y Tocarón”), August 31, 2024, <https://oveprisiones.com/rapados-y-uniformados-trasladaron-a-mas-de-700-presos-politicos-hacia-tocuyito-y-tocoron/> (accessed February 25, 2025); “Venezuelans denounce arbitrary transfer of detainees following protests against Maduro’s electoral fraud” (“Denuncian el traslado arbitrario de los detenidos en Venezuela tras las protestas contra el fraude electoral de Maduro”), *Infobae*, August 30, 2024, <https://www.infobae.com/venezuela/2024/08/31/denuncian-el-traslado-arbitrario-de-los-detenidos-en-venezuela-tras-las-protestas-contra-el-fraude-electoral-de-maduro/> (accessed February 25, 2025); “Venezuela denounces arbitrary transfer of 190 political prisoners arrested following protests over electoral fraud” (“Denuncian el traslado arbitrario de 190 presos políticos en Venezuela detenidos tras las protestas por el fraude electoral”), *Infobae*, December 5, 2024, <https://www.infobae.com/venezuela/2024/12/06/denuncian-el-traslado-arbitrario-de-190-presos-politicos-en-venezuela-detenidos-tras-las-protestas-por-el-fraude-electoral/> (accessed February 25, 2025).

²³⁶ Human Rights Watch phone interview with a person detained after July 28 and later conditionally released, February 19, 2025.

²³⁷ Human Rights Watch phone interview with a person detained after July 28 and later conditionally released, February 12, 2025.

²³⁸ Human Rights Watch phone interview with a person detained after July 28 and later conditionally released, February 19, 2025.

²³⁹ Human Rights Watch phone interviews with people detained after July 28 and later released and their families, January - April 2025.

Boleíta Control Center or Zona 7 (Caracas District)

Originally a building for administrative purposes, Zona 7 is a detention center of the national police (Policía Nacional Bolivariana, PNB) that houses more than 400 detainees in 14 to 16 cells, according to OVP.²⁴⁰ Detention conditions can vary significantly within the facility, with cells in better condition allocated to those who can afford to pay.²⁴¹

Detainees say the basement, known as “underworld” (inframundo in Spanish), is the worst part of the detention center. Two described how the walls “cry” from humidity and overcrowding.²⁴² According to the OVP, as of January 2025, approximately 90 detainees were being held in this cell without ventilation, sunlight, or bathrooms.²⁴³ Detainees held in the basement do not have access to a bathroom and people who were held there said that the cells contain human waste.²⁴⁴ “I’d rather stay one month in Tacorón than one day in Zona 7,” a detainee who was held in both detention facilities told Human Rights Watch.²⁴⁵

Human Rights Watch spoke to people who saw children detained in these cells alongside adults before being transferred to other detention centers.²⁴⁶ The OVP estimates that more than 20 children were held there between the end of July and early August 2024.²⁴⁷

²⁴⁰ OVP, “The underworld of the PNB in Boleíta: A prison without law or humanity” (“El inframundo de la PNB en Boleíta: Un retén sin ley ni humanidad”), January 22, 2025, <https://oveprisiones.com/el-inframundo-de-la-pnb-en-boleita-un-reten-sin-ley-ni-humanidad/> (accessed February 19, 2025).

²⁴¹ OVP, *Underworld: The hidden threat in the Zone 7 dungeons (Inframundo: La amenaza oculta en los calabozos de Zona 7)*, January 2025, <https://oveprisiones.com/inframundo-la-amenaza-oculta-en-los-calabozos-de-zona-7/> (accessed February 19, 2025), pp. 18-19; Human Rights Watch phone interview with a person detained after July 28 and later conditionally released, February 12, 2025.

²⁴² Human Rights Watch phone interview with a person detained after July 28 and later conditionally released, February 12, 2025; Human Rights Watch phone interview with a person detained after July 28 and later conditionally released, February 25, 2025; OVP, *Underworld: The hidden threat in the Zone 7 dungeons*, p. 40.

²⁴³ OVP, “The underworld of the PNB in Boleíta: A prison without law or humanity”; OVP, *Underworld: The hidden threat in the Zone 7 dungeons*, p. 17.

²⁴⁴ Human Rights Watch phone interview with a person detained after July 28 and later conditionally released, February 12, 2025; Human Rights Watch phone interview with a person detained after July 28 and later conditionally released, February 25, 2025.

²⁴⁵ Human Rights Watch phone interview with a person detained after July 28 and later conditionally released, February 25, 2025.

²⁴⁶ Human Rights Watch phone interview with a person detained after July 28 and later conditionally released, February 12, 2025; Human Rights Watch phone interview with a person detained after July 28 and later conditionally released, February 25, 2025.

²⁴⁷ OVP, “The underworld of the PNB in Boleíta: A prison without law or humanity”; OVP, *Underworld: The hidden threat in the Zone 7 dungeons*, p. 16.

Metropolitan Penitentiary Center Yare III (Miranda State)

Yare III is a section of the larger Metropolitan Penitentiary Center complex, where some detainees were sent after the elections. In January, the OVP reported that families of detainees had been denied visits for at least two months and estimated that around 300 detainees were being held in isolation.²⁴⁸ These violations were accompanied by sudden schedule changes for visits.²⁴⁹

Additionally, according to CLIPPVE and the OVP, women visitors have been subjected to invasive searches.²⁵⁰

Helicoide (Caracas District)

The Helicoide is a former mall that functions as SEBIN headquarters as well as a prison holding many political prisoners. Human Rights Watch documented cases of political prisoners being taken to this detention center, held incommunicado, and tortured during the 2017 nationwide protests.²⁵¹ The UN Independent International Fact-Finding Mission on the Bolivarian Republic of Venezuela (FFM) describes it as a detention center with “torture rooms.”²⁵²

At the time of our research, several individuals, most of them linked in some way to the opposition, had been detained in this detention center for months without visits from any outsiders, including family members and lawyers, and without authorities even informing

²⁴⁸ OVP, “Families of prisoners in Yare III denounce isolation and lack of information about their health” (“Familiars de presos en Yare III denuncian aislamiento y falta de información sobre su salud”), January 30, 2025, <https://oveprisiones.com/familiars-de-presos-en-yare-iii-denuncian-aislamiento-y-falta-de-informacion-sobre-su-salud/> (accessed March 6, 2025).

²⁴⁹ OVP, “‘It was horrible, I felt raped without penetration,’ a mother’s story during the Yare III search” (“‘Fue horrible, me sentí violada sin penetración’, el relato de una madre durante la requisa de Yare III”), December 9, 2024, <https://oveprisiones.com/fue-horrible-me-senti-violada-sin-penetracion-el-relato-de-una-madre-durante-la-requisa-de-yare-iii/> (accessed February 25, 2025).

²⁵⁰ Ibid.; Human Rights Watch phone interview with Sairam Rivas from CLIPPVE, February 11, 2025.

²⁵¹ Foro Penal and Human Rights Watch, *Crackdown on Dissent: Brutality, Torture, and Political Persecution in Venezuela* (Human Rights Watch: New York, 2017), <https://www.hrw.org/report/2017/11/29/crackdown-dissent/brutality-torture-and-political-persecution-venezuela>.

²⁵² UN Human Rights Council, The government apparatus, its repressive mechanisms and restrictions on civic and democratic space, Independent international fact-finding mission on the Bolivarian Republic of Venezuela, UN Doc. A/HRC/54/CRP.8 (2023), https://www.ohchr.org/sites/default/files/documents/hrbodies/hrcouncil/sessions-regular/session54/advance-versions/A_HRC_54_CRP.8_EN.pdf (accessed February 25, 2025), para. 244.

their relatives of their whereabouts.²⁵³ Many know their loved ones are detained there because guards have accepted their personal belongings or other detainees have informed them (see “Political Opponents” section below).

Rodeo Prison (Miranda State)

Rodeo is a high-security prison in Miranda state. Human rights groups have reported unsanitary conditions, and say that many detainees there are held in solitary confinement.²⁵⁴

Some of the people arbitrarily detained following the July 2024 elections were held in a section within the prison known as Rodeo I.²⁵⁵ One detainee held there said he was confined to his cell almost all day for 120 days. He said that he and other detainees were at times sent to “punishment zones”—small windowless cells where detainees were held with little to no access to food. He described “psychological torture” by hooded prison guards, who used pseudonyms and shouted at detainees that they would never be allowed out.²⁵⁶

Relatives of people held in Rodeo I are often denied visits. A relative of a member of the opposition held there said that in the few instances they were allowed to visit, DGCIM officers would hood them so they would not see other parts of the facility, and take them

²⁵³ Human Rights Watch phone interviews with families of political opponents detained, January and April 2025;; “Relatives of ‘political prisoners’ in Venezuela ask to be allowed to visit their relatives” (“Familiares de «presos políticos» en Venezuela piden que se permita visitar a sus parientes”), *Swissinfo*, February 11, 2025, <https://www.swissinfo.ch/spa/familiares-de-%22presos-pol%C3%ADticos%22-en-venezuela-piden-que-se-permita-visitar-a-sus-parientes/88861492> (accessed February 25, 2025).

²⁵⁴ “Open Letter Regarding Detention Conditions and Possible Torture At ‘Rodeo I’ Prison,” statement by international human rights organizations, June 25, 2024, <https://www.wola.org/2024/06/open-letter-regarding-detention-conditions-and-possible-torture-at-rodeo-i-prison/> (accessed March 26, 2025).

²⁵⁵ Human Rights Watch phone interview with the relative of a person detained in Rodeo I, March 21, 2025; Human Rights Watch phone interview with Diana Tique, Tique’s sister, March 21, 2025; Human Rights Watch phone interview with David Guillaume, US national detained after July 28 and later released, March 25, 2025; See also, Reynaldo Mozo Zambrano, “More political prisoners transferred to Rodeo I prison, families report” (“Trasladan a más presos políticos a cárcel Rodeo I, informan familiares”), *Efecto Cocuyo*, April 4, 2024, <https://efectococuyo.com/la-humanidad/trasladan-a-mas-presos-politicos-a-carcel-rodeo-i-informan-familiares/> (accessed March 26, 2025); “Rodeo I: the new prison for political prisoners amid allegations of torture and cruel treatment” (“El Rodeo I: nueva cárcel de presos políticos con reclamos de torturas y tratos crueles”), *Correo del Caroní*, June 15, 2024, <https://correodelcaroni.com/sociedad/el-rodeo-i-nueva-carcel-de-presos-politicos-con-reclamos-de-torturas-y-tratos-cruels/> (accessed March 26, 2025).

²⁵⁶ Human Rights Watch phone interview with David Guillaume, US national detained after July 28 and later released, March 25, 2025.

to a room where they could speak briefly with their relatives who they could see through a glass partition.²⁵⁷

Specific Profiles of Victims

Children

According to Foro Penal, at least 176 people aged 14 to 17—that is, children under international law²⁵⁸—were arrested between July 28 and December 31.²⁵⁹ At time of writing, five are still behind bars.²⁶⁰ Most of them have been released, though they remain under criminal investigation.

Relatives of detained children, former detainees, and human rights groups accompanying them told Human Rights Watch that some were held alongside adults.²⁶¹

During the first days following arrest, authorities barred some children from receiving visits, including from their parents or guardians. Some mothers reported that although they were allowed to accompany their children to court, they were not permitted to make regular visits to the detention centers. Some also said that during visits, physical contact with their children was not allowed.²⁶²

Relatives of three children detained told Human Rights Watch that security forces beat and ill-treated their children during detention. They said that, as a result, their children had

²⁵⁷ Human Rights Watch phone interview with the relative of a person detained in Rodeo I, March 21, 2025; See also Sebastiana Barráez, “The terrible conditions Venezuelan political prisoners endure in Rodeo I prison” (“Las terribles condiciones a las que están sometidos los presos políticos venezolanos en la cárcel Rodeo I”), *Infobae*, November 24, 2024, <https://www.infobae.com/venezuela/2024/11/24/las-terribles-condiciones-a-las-que-están-sometidos-los-presos-politicos-venezolanos-en-la-carcel-rodeo-i/> (accessed March 26, 2025); “Rodeo I: an ‘underworld’ where the rights of over 60 political prisoners are violated” (“El Rodeo I: un «inframundo» donde violan derechos a más de 60 presos políticos”), *TalCual*, January 29, 2025, <https://talcualdigital.com/el-rodeo-i-un-inframundo-donde-violan-derechos-a-mas-de-60-presos-politicos/> (accessed March 26, 2025).

²⁵⁸ UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC), adopted November 20, 1989, G.A. Res. 44/25, annex, 44 U.N. GAOR Supp. (No. 49) at 167, U.N. Doc. A/44/49 (1989), entered into force September 2, 1990, art. 1.

²⁵⁹ Foro Penal, *Special Report on Political Repression in Venezuela 2024*, p. 7.

²⁶⁰ Human Rights Watch phone interview with Alfredo Romero, Foro Penal, April 15, 2025.

²⁶¹ Human Rights Watch phone interview with Martha Tineo, JEP, January 8, 2025; Human Rights Watch phone interview with members of Provea, February 7, 2025; Human Rights Watch phone interview with Sairam Rivas, CLIPPVE, February 11, 2025; Human Rights Watch phone interviews with people detained after July 28 and later released and their families, January - April, 2025.

²⁶² Human Rights Watch phone interviews with relatives of detained children, January and February 2025.

bumps on their heads and broken bones including fractured ribs.²⁶³ “He was so badly beaten that I, his mother, could barely recognize him,” one of them said.²⁶⁴

Human Rights Watch also received credible reports that security officers in prison attempted to coerce girls into sexual acts in exchange for protection.²⁶⁵ A 17-year-old girl told Human Rights Watch that male police officers, along with their female colleagues, insinuated to a group of adolescent girls—who were held separately from adults—that they should sleep with them in exchange for favors or assistance.²⁶⁶ The mother of another girl told us a military officer asked her 16-year-old daughter for sex while she was held in a military compound without water or food.²⁶⁷

Like adults, children detained have been accused of terrorism, incitement to hatred, and other crimes carrying long sentences. Many do not understand the gravity or meaning of these charges, as one mother told Human Rights Watch. “My son asked me what it meant to be a terrorist because that’s what the guards kept shouting at him in prison.”²⁶⁸

They have also been denied the right to choose a private lawyer and were instead assigned a public defender. And they have not been allowed to access information or documents related to their cases.

Children detained have suffered severe mental health consequences. Human Rights Watch documented cases of children suffering panic or anxiety attacks requiring hospitalization as well as cases of attempted suicide, sleep problems, and fear of leaving their homes after their release.²⁶⁹

²⁶³ Human Rights Watch phone interview with the mothers of three children aged between 14 and 17 detained after July 28, February 19, 2025; See also Amnesty International, *Venezuela: “He felt he was dead”: Torture against children for political reasons*, November 2024, <https://www.amnesty.org/en/documents/amr53/8783/2024/en/> (accessed February 20, 2025).

²⁶⁴ Human Rights Watch phone interview with the mother of a 15-year-old detained after July 28, February 19, 2025.

²⁶⁵ Human Rights Watch phone interview with the mother of a 16-year-old girl detained after July 28, February 19, 2025; Human Rights Watch phone interview with a 17-year-old girl detained after July 28 and later conditionally released, February 19, 2025.

²⁶⁶ Human Rights Watch phone interview with a 17-year-old girl detained after July 28, February 19, 2025.

²⁶⁷ Human Rights Watch phone interview with the mother of a 16-year-old girl detained after July 28, February 19, 2025.

²⁶⁸ Human Rights Watch phone interview with the mother of a 15-year-old child detained after July 28, February 19, 2025.

²⁶⁹ Human Rights Watch phone interview with a 17-year-old girl detained after July 28 and later conditionally released, February 19, 2025; Human Rights Watch phone interview with the mother of a 16-year-old girl detained after July 28, February 19, 2025; Human Rights Watch phone interview with the mother of a 15-year-old child detained after July 28, February 19, 2025; Human

Political Opponents

According to the human rights committee of Vente Venezuela, 285 individuals affiliated with opposition political parties were detained between November 2023 and April 2025. As of April 10, 185 reportedly remained behind bars, while 100 had been released.²⁷⁰

The majority of those detained belong to Vente Venezuela, but members of other opposition parties, including Primero Justicia, Voluntad Popular, and the Committee for Independent Political Electoral Organization (Comité de Organización Política Electoral Independiente, COPEI), have also been targeted.²⁷¹

Human Rights Watch documented twelve cases where unidentified hooded men or security forces took political opponents from the streets, without showing an arrest warrant.²⁷² In at least six cases, security forces raided their homes following the arrests without showing warrants and seized cars, computers, money, clothing, and other personal items belonging to the detainees or their relatives.²⁷³

In many cases, authorities denied the arrests or information about the whereabouts of those arrested, in what amount to enforced disappearances under international law. In some others, their families and political parties were able to identify an individual's whereabouts only through witnesses, tips from inside the detention centers or because prison guards accepted receiving their personal belongings.²⁷⁴

Rights Watch phone interview with the mother of a child detained after July 28, February 19, 2025; See also OVP, "Imprisoning adolescents causes irreparable damage to their mental health" ("Encarcelar adolescentes causa un daño irreparable a su salud mental"), September 19, 2024, <https://oveprisiones.com/encarcelar-adolescentes-causa-un-dano-irreparable-a-su-salud-mental/> (accessed February 19, 2025).

²⁷⁰ Written information shared by Vente Venezuela's campaign team, April 2025 (copy on file with Human Rights Watch).

²⁷¹ Ibid.

²⁷² Human Rights Watch phone interviews with families of political opponents detained, January and April 2025.

²⁷³ Human Rights Watch phone interview with relatives of political opponents detained, April 11, 2025.

²⁷⁴ Human Rights Watch phone interview with members of Provea, February 7, 2025; Human Rights Watch phone interview with Sairam Rivas, CLIPPVE, February 11, 2025; Human Rights Watch phone interview with Orlando Moreno, Vente Venezuela Human Rights Committee, February 12, 2025; Human Rights Watch phone interviews with families of political opponents detained, January and April 2025.

Many of those arrested are charged with “terrorism” and “incitement to hatred.” They are accused of financing or promoting “destabilizing acts” and conspiring against Maduro's government.

Even when their families and lawyers are made aware of the detainees’ whereabouts, they are often denied visits. In some cases, the only information relatives have received from their loved ones in prison are from brief notes that prison guards read aloud, listing personal items the detainees are allegedly requesting from them.²⁷⁵ According to information provided by CLIPPVE and relatives interviewed by Human Rights Watch, some detainees have not been allowed any visits since the time of their arrest, including 24 detainees held in Helicoide prison, among them are:

- Freddy Superlano, national coordinator of Voluntad Popular, who was detained on July 30.²⁷⁶
- Américo De Grazia, opposition leader from Bolívar state and member of the campaign team, who was detained on August 7.²⁷⁷
- Williams Dávila, leader of the opposition party Acción Democrática, who was detained on August 8.²⁷⁸
- Perkins Rocha, legal coordinator of Vente Venezuela, who was detained on August 27.²⁷⁹

²⁷⁵ Human Rights Watch phone interview with relatives of political opponents detained, April 11, 2025; Human Rights Watch phone interview with Sairam Rivas, CLIPPVE, February 11, 2025; CLIPPVE, *Unjust prison, inhumane cells: Report on the prison conditions of political prisoners in Venezuela (Prisión injusta, celdas inhumanas: Informe sobre las condiciones carcelarias de los presos políticos en Venezuela)*, December 2024, <https://provea.org/wp-content/uploads/2024/12/Prision-injusta-celdas-inhumanas-INFORME-SOBRE-LAS-CONDICIONES-CARCELARIAS-DE-LOS-PRESOS-POLITICOS-EN-VENEZUELA-2.pdf> (accessed February 19, 2025), p. 23.

²⁷⁶ Human Rights Watch phone interview with Aurora Silva, Superlano’s wife, April 11, 2025; IACHR, Resolution 55/2024, Precautionary Measure No. 899-24, Freddy Francisco Superlano Salinas regarding Venezuela, August 26, 2024, https://www.oas.org/en/iachr/decisions/mc/2024/res_55-24_mc_899-24_ve_en.pdf (accessed February 19, 2025).

²⁷⁷ Human Rights Watch phone interview with Rayceida De Grazia, De Grazia’s daughter, April 11, 2025; IACHR, Resolution 51/2024, Precautionary Measure No. 359-16, Américo de Grazia regarding Venezuela, August 17, 2024, https://www.oas.org/en/iachr/decisions/mc/2024/res_51-24_mc_359-16_ve_en.pdf (accessed February 19, 2025).

²⁷⁸ IACHR, Resolution 49/2024, Precautionary Measure No. 533-17, Williams Daniel Dávila Barrios regarding Venezuela, August 14, 2024, https://www.oas.org/en/iachr/decisions/mc/2024/res_49-24%20Ao_mc_533-17_ve_en.pdf (accessed February 19, 2025); “Anti-Chavista arrested in post-election protests is in ‘serious’ health condition, his son warns” (“Antichavista detenido en protestas poselectorales está «grave» de salud, alerta su hijo”), *Swissinfo*, August 15, 2024, <https://www.swissinfo.ch/spa/antichavista-detenido-en-protestas-poselectorales-est%3a1-%22grave%22-de-salud%2c-alerta-su-hijo/86854580> (accessed February 25, 2025).

²⁷⁹ Human Rights Watch phone interview with María Costanza Cipriani, Rocha’s wife, April 11, 2025; IACHR, Resolution 61/2024, Precautionary Measure No. 928-24, Perkins Rocha Contreras regarding Venezuela, September 2, 2024, https://www.oas.org/en/iachr/decisions/mc/2024/res_61-24%20Ao_mc_928-24_ve_en.pdf (accessed February 19, 2025).

- Biagio Pilieri, national coordinator of the political party Convergencia and member of the opposition's campaign team, who was detained with his son Jesús Alfredo Pilieri on August 28. His son was released the next day.²⁸⁰
- Pedro Guanipa, director of the Maracaibo mayor's office from the opposition party Primero Justicia, who was detained on September 26.²⁸¹
- Rafael Ramírez, mayor of Maracaibo from Primero Justicia, who was detained on October 1.²⁸²
- Alfredo Díaz, former governor of the Nueva Esparta state and leader of the opposition party Acción Democrática, who was detained on November 24.²⁸³
- Jesús Armas, member of the opposition's campaign team, who was detained on December 10.²⁸⁴
- Luis Palocz, a political activist from Caracas who was detained on December 14.²⁸⁵

²⁸⁰ Human Rights Watch phone interview with María Livia Vasile, Pilieri's wife, April 11, 2025; IACHR, Resolution 63/2024, Precautionary Measure No. 931-24, Biagio Pilieri Gianninoto and Jesús Alfredo Pilieri Vasile regarding Venezuela, September 6, 2024, https://www.oas.org/es/cidh/decisiones/mc/2024/res_63-24_mc_931-24_ve_es.pdf (accessed February 19, 2025).

²⁸¹ Human Rights Watch phone interview with Caroll Figueredo, Guanipa's wife, April 11, 2025; "Maduro's regime arrested opposition leader Pedro Guanipa: his family demands to know his whereabouts" ("El régimen de Maduro detuvo al opositor Pedro Guanipa: su familia exige conocer su paradero"), *Infobae*, September 26, 2024, <https://www.infobae.com/venezuela/2024/09/27/el-regimen-de-maduro-detuvo-al-opositor-pedro-guanipa-su-familia-exige-conocer-su-paradero/> (accessed February 25, 2025).

²⁸² Human Rights Watch phone interview with Vanessa Linares, Ramírez's wife, April 11, 2025; Florantonia Singer, "Venezuelan intelligence service arrests mayor of Maracaibo" ("El servicio de inteligencia venezolano detiene al alcalde de Maracaibo"), *El País*, October 2, 2024, <https://elpais.com/america/2024-10-02/el-servicio-de-inteligencia-venezolano-detiene-al-alcalde-de-maracaibo.html> (accessed February 25, 2025).

²⁸³ Human Rights Watch phone interview with Jennifer Díaz, Díaz's daughter, April 11, 2025; "Venezuelan opposition party denounces the arrest of former governor Díaz and demands his freedom" ("Partido opositor venezolano denuncia la detención de exgobernador Díaz y exige su libertad"), *Swissinfo*, November 25, 2024, <https://www.swissinfo.ch/spa/partido-opositor-venezolano-denuncia-la-detenci%C3%B3n-de-exgobernador-d%C3%ADaz-y-exige-su-libertad/88325096> (accessed February 25, 2025).

²⁸⁴ Human Rights Watch phone interview with Sairam Rivas, Armas' partner, February 11, 2025; IACHR, Resolution 105/2024, Precautionary Measure No. 1426-24, Jesús Alexander Armas Monasterios regarding Venezuela, December 31, 2024, https://www.oas.org/en/iachr/decisions/mc/2024/res_105-24_mc_1426-24_ve_en.pdf (accessed February 19, 2025); "The Maduro regime kidnapped opposition leader Jesús Armas in Caracas" ("El régimen de Maduro secuestró al dirigente opositor Jesús Armas en Caracas"), *Infobae*, December 11, 2024, <https://www.infobae.com/venezuela/2024/12/11/el-regimen-de-maduro-secuestro-al-dirigente-opositor-jesus-armas-en-caracas/> (accessed February 25, 2025).

²⁸⁵ See also "Largest anti-Chavista alliance demands to know the whereabouts of activist detained three days ago" ("Mayor alianza antichavista exige conocer el paradero de activista detenido hace tres días"), *Swissinfo*, December 17, 2024, <https://www.swissinfo.ch/spa/mayor-alianza-antichavista-exige-conocer-el-paradero-de-activista-detenido-hace-tres-d%C3%ADas/88606450> (accessed February 25, 2025).

- Enrique Márquez, 2024 presidential candidate for the opposition minority party that rejected the National Electoral Council's (Consejo Nacional Electoral, CNE) announced results, who was detained on January 7.²⁸⁶
- Luis Somaza, opposition leader of Voluntad Popular, who was detained on February 12.²⁸⁷

Maria Corina Machado

María Corina Machado, the leader of the opposition coalition that supported Edmundo González's candidacy, was arrested briefly on January 9, a day before inauguration day.

On January 9, at approximately 2:20 p.m. Caracas time, Machado made her first public appearance in months at a rally in Chacao, Caracas, after having gone into hiding to avoid arrest.²⁸⁸ As seen in videos geolocated by Human Rights Watch, she stood atop a truck on Calle Elice, addressing supporters.

Two videos verified by Human Rights Watch show officers from the motorized division of the PNB (División Motorizada de la Policía Nacional Bolivariana) present at the rally. In one of the videos, an officer's watch displays the time as around 3:10 p.m.²⁸⁹ Both videos show multiple officers maneuvering through the crowd and riding east along Avenida Libertador near the demonstration.

At 3:21 p.m, the X account Comando ConVzla reported that Machado had been intercepted while leaving the rally.²⁹⁰

A video recorded around 4 p.m., according to shadows visible in the video, shows men on motorcycles on the Altamira highway exchange stopping a motorbike with two passengers,

²⁸⁶ See also "Former presidential candidate Enrique Márquez detained in Venezuela" ("Detenido en Venezuela el excandidato presidencial Enrique Márquez"), *El País*, January 8, 2025, <https://elpais.com/america-colombia/2025-01-08/detenido-en-venezuela-el-excandidato-presidencial-enrique-marquez.html> (accessed February 25, 2025).

²⁸⁷ Human Rights Watch phone interview with Valeria Somaza, Luis Somaza's sister, April 11, 2025.

²⁸⁸ Video VENVIDo63 (copy on file with Human Rights Watch).

²⁸⁹ Videos VENVIDo64 and VENVIDo65 (copies on file with Human Rights Watch).

²⁹⁰ Comando ConVzla (@ConVzlaComando), post to X, January 9, 2025, <https://x.com/ConVzlaComando/status/1877435670278410688> (accessed February 19, 2025).

approximately one kilometer from the rally.²⁹¹ Another photograph taken at an unknown location shows some of the same men from the video, including one wearing a uniform of the motorized division and another in a red shirt. In the image, Machado is seen raising the fabric around her helmet to show her face while an officer appears to record her.²⁹²



Left image: Men on motorcycles on the Altamira highway stop a motorbike carrying two passengers, approximately one kilometer from the rally, around 4:00 p.m. Video shared on social media by: Eduardo Menoni. Source: Unknown. Right image: Machado is seen lifting the fabric around her helmet to reveal her face, while an officer appears to record her. Some of the same men from the video are present, including one wearing a motorized division uniform and another in a red shirt. Source: Unknown.

²⁹¹ Video VENVIDo66 (copy on file with Human Rights Watch).

²⁹² Photograph VENPHOo14 (copy on file with Human Rights Watch).

These visuals are consistent with Machado's later account in a video posted to Instagram on January 10, in which she stated that police officers had taken her, forced her to record a proof-of-life video, and later released her.²⁹³



Left image: Machado makes her first public appearance in months at a rally in Chacao, Caracas, at approximately 2:20 p.m. Source: © 2024 MIGUEL GUTIERREZ/EPA-EFE/Shutterstock. Center image: Officers from the PNB's motorized division are present at the rally around 3:10 p.m., maneuvering through the crowd. Right image: Men on motorcycles on the Altamira highway stop a motorbike with María Corina Machado, approximately one kilometer from the rally, around 4:00 p.m. Video shared on social media by: Eduardo Menoni. Source: Unknown. Satellite Image: © Airbus 2025. Source: Google Earth. Graphic © Human Rights Watch.

Jesús Armas Monasterio

On December 10, six hooded men arrested Jesús Armas Monasterio, a university professor, a former Caracas councilman, and a high-level member of María Corina Machado's campaign team in the city, as he was leaving a coffee shop, at 9 p.m., in Caracas.²⁹⁴

Days prior to his arrest, Armas Monasterio had participated in events alongside the families of political prisoners. Sairam Rivas, Armas Monasterio's partner, who herself had

²⁹³ María Corina Machado (@mariacorinamachado), post to Instagram, January 10, 2025, <https://www.instagram.com/p/DEqBYDdohK/> (accessed February 25, 2025).

²⁹⁴ Unless otherwise noted, this case is based on a Human Rights Watch phone interview with Sairam Rivas, Armas' partner, February 11, 2025.

been detained in 2014, told Human Rights Watch that men whom she believed to be part of SEBIN and General Directorate of Military Counterintelligence (Dirección General de Contrainteligencia Militar, DGCIM) showed up at these events and took photos of the attendees.

Rivas learned of the arrest through a friend who witnessed Armas Monasterio being taken. In the days that followed, Rivas and Armas Monasterio's parents visited several detention centers in Caracas, asking for him, but authorities refused to provide information on his whereabouts. They tried to present a habeas corpus petition on December 12, 13, and 16, but court personnel refused to accept it, claiming that they needed authorization from their supervisor to receive the document, according to Rivas.²⁹⁵

Six days after he was taken, on December 16, Armas Monasterio called Rivas and told her that he was being held at the Zona 7 detention center. He requested food and clothes. Rivas later learned from him that he had been held in an unofficial detention center in Caracas, where SEBIN officers suffocated him with a bag over his head—which Venezuelans call “bolsear”—as they interrogated him about María Corina Machado and other members of Vente Venezuela.²⁹⁶

After three days in the unofficial detention center, he was transferred to the headquarters of the PNB in Maripérez. He attended a virtual hearing with a judge along with another prisoner. His family and lawyer were not informed that he was being presented before a judge.

On December 18, Armas Monasterio's parents attempted to visit him, but prison authorities refused to grant them access. His relatives later heard rumors that he had been transferred to Helicoide. However, when his mother asked prison guards there the next day, they denied it. Later that day, a guard at Helicoide handed Armas Monasterio's family a list of items that he needed, which had been handwritten by him. The list included clothing, a chair, and a plastic container, among other things.

²⁹⁵ Habeas Corpus complaint on behalf of Jesús Alexander Armas Monasterio (copy on file with Human Rights Watch); See also IACHR, Resolution 105/2024, Precautionary Measure No. 1426-24, Jesús Alexander Armas Monasterios regarding Venezuela, para. 9.

²⁹⁶ Torture complaint on behalf of Jesús Alexander Armas Monasterios submitted to the Ombudsperson's Office on February 10, 2025 (copy on file with Human Rights Watch).

“Since he was moved to Helicoide, he has been without any contact with the outside,” Rivas told Human Rights Watch. The only information his family has received about him is small pieces of paper a guard reads to them with the items Armas Monasterio asks for. “Sometimes, he asks for things we’ve already brought him, which suggests that [he] might not be receiving everything we bring,” Rivas added.

As of February, Armas Monasterio’s family only suspected that he had been accused of terrorism, as they still didn’t know who his public defender was. There was no information on his case in the official legal system, according to information Rivas received from the courthouse.

Foreign Nationals

In early January 2025, Nicolás Maduro claimed that more than 150 foreign “mercenaries” had been detained in Venezuela. He claimed they were from 25 different countries, including Colombia, Argentina, the United States, Ukraine, and others. He claimed all confessed their crimes and were collaborating with Venezuelan authorities.²⁹⁷

Foro Penal documented that at least 71 cases of foreign nationals remained behind bars as of April.²⁹⁸

The detained individuals come from a variety of backgrounds and include humanitarian workers, tourists, and relatives of Venezuelans. Human Rights Watch documented several cases of foreigners who were stopped at security checkpoints when entering the country. After being taken in by security forces for questioning, many of them were subjected to an enforced disappearance.²⁹⁹ Venezuelan authorities have repeatedly withheld information

²⁹⁷ El Universal (@eluniversal), post to Instagram, January 15, 2025, <https://www.instagram.com/eluniversal/reel/DE3Q9ZLRPj6/> (accessed February 24, 2025); “Nicolás Maduro says the number of foreigners detained in Venezuela has risen to ‘more than’ 150” (“Nicolás Maduro dice que suben a «más» de 150 extranjeros los detenidos en Venezuela”), *Swissinfo*, January 9, 2025, <https://www.swissinfo.ch/spa/nicol%C3%A1s-maduro-dice-que-suben-a-%22m%C3%A1s%22-de-150-extranjeros-los-detenidos-en-venezuela/88694554> (accessed February 24, 2025).

²⁹⁸ Human Rights Watch phone interview with Alfredo Romero, Foro Penal, April 15, 2025.

²⁹⁹ Human Rights Watch phone interview with relatives of foreign nationals currently “disappeared,” January - April 2025; Human Rights Watch phone interview with David Guillaume, US national detained after July 28 and later released, March 25, 2025.

about these cases—even about detainees’ whereabouts—and denied consular access to those seeking to assist their nationals.³⁰⁰

³⁰⁰ Human Rights Watch phone interview with relatives of foreign nationals currently “disappeared,” January - April 2025; Human Rights Watch interviews with foreign services members, January - April 2025.

Colombian Nationals

Manuel Alejandro Tique, 32, worked for the humanitarian organization Danish Refugee Council (DRC) in Colombia.³⁰¹ On September 14, Tique flew from Bogotá to Arauca to cross into Venezuela by land and travel to Guasdalito for work.³⁰² He carried his passport and an invitation letter from the DRC, his sister told Human Rights Watch. At 2 p.m., upon crossing the border in a DRC vehicle with colleagues, DGCIM colleagues detained him, according to information provided to his family. Almost five hours later, members of security forces told his colleagues, who were waiting for Tique, that he had been taken into custody.

Nearly a month later, Interior Minister Cabello said in a press conference that Tique “hid behind NGO affiliations,” but was a “recruiter” for “paramilitary groups.”³⁰³

Venezuelan authorities have not provided his family or DRC or Colombian authorities information on his whereabouts or the charges against him, his sister said. His family believes Tique is being held in Rodeo I because a US citizen who was held there and later released said he shared a cell with Tique.³⁰⁴

Arlei Danilo Espitia Lara, 24, a farmer from Boyacá, crossed the border to Venezuela on September 13, to help a Venezuelan acquaintance renew her documents.³⁰⁵ His family learned that members of the Bolivarian National Guard (Guardia Nacional Bolivariana, GNB) detained him as he was crossing the border from Cúcuta, Colombia. Cabello described him in a press conference as the “leader of the ‘paracos,’” referring to

³⁰¹ Unless otherwise noted, this case is based on a Human Rights Watch phone interview with Diana Tique, Tique’s sister, March 21, 2025.

³⁰² See “Statement by DRC on the arrest of a staff member in Venezuela,” Danish Refugee Council statement, October 18, 2024, <https://drc.ngo/resources/news/statement-by-drc-on-the-arrest-of-a-staff-member-in-venezuela/> (accessed April 13, 2025); See also “Statement by the Danish Refugee Council on the continued detention of staff member in Venezuela,” Danish Refugee Council statement, February 14, 2025, <https://drc.ngo/resources/news/statement-by-the-danish-refugee-council-on-the-continued-detention-of-staff-member-in-venezuela/> (accessed April 13, 2025).

³⁰³ “Diosdado Cabello accused two Colombians of recruiting mercenaries: parents of the detainees speak out” (“Así Diosdado Cabello acusó a dos colombianos de reclutar mercenarios: hablan padres de los detenidos”), video clip, YouTube, October 29, 2024, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=aFoWfFILLGA> (accessed February 27, 2025).

³⁰⁴ Human Rights Watch phone interview with David Guillaume, US national detained after July 28 and later released, March 25, 2025.

³⁰⁵ Unless otherwise noted, this case is based on a Human Rights Watch phone interview with Espitia’s sister, February 26, 2025.

paramilitary groups in Colombia.³⁰⁶ Venezuelan authorities have denied his family any information on his whereabouts or the charges against him.

The family of **Brayan Sair Navarro Cáceres**, a 28-year-old driver, heard from him for the last time on January 6. Navarro Cáceres was returning to Venezuela, where he had been working for three months, after spending the holidays with his family.³⁰⁷ At around 9 a.m., he texted a relative saying that GNB members had taken him off the bus he was traveling on for interrogation. At 11:20 a.m., his family lost communication with him. They do not know what has happened to him.

“Mommy, I’m saving up—this year won’t pass without me visiting you,” said **Danner Gonzalo Barajas Luque**, a young construction worker, to his mother who lives in Venezuela, after five years of not seeing her.³⁰⁸ Barajas Luque travelled to Venezuela in November. His family learned from Colombian authorities that he got his passport stamped in Arauca, Colombia, and crossed the José Antonio Páez international bridge to Venezuela, but lack any additional information. The motorcycle taxi driver who drove him told them that the GNB stopped him for a routine interrogation. Two relatives searched for him at the border, but an officer told them to look for him in Caracas. His mother has traveled to the capital about 10 times since November and asked in detentions centers, DGCIM headquarters, and courts for her son, yet she has been unable to find out where he is.

Kevin José Saavedra Basallo, 22, traveled to Venezuela with his girlfriend and mother-in-law for a short trip on October 24.³⁰⁹ On his return on the 29th, security forces detained him in Venezuela. His family learned from someone who was with him that he was stopped after showing his Colombian military service booklet. His mother-in-law unsuccessfully looked for him at detention facilities in San Juan de los Morros, Guárico state, and Caracas.

³⁰⁶ “Diosdado Cabello accused two Colombians of recruiting mercenaries: parents of the detainees speak out” (“Así Diosdado Cabello acusó a dos colombianos de reclutar mercenarios: hablan padres de los detenidos”), video clip, YouTube, October 29, 2024, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=aFoWfFILLGA> (accessed February 27, 2025).

³⁰⁷ Unless otherwise noted, this case is based on a Human Rights Watch phone interview with Navarro’s aunt, February 26, 2025.

³⁰⁸ Unless otherwise noted, this case is based on a Human Rights Watch phone interview with Barajas’s mother, February 26, 2025.

³⁰⁹ Unless otherwise noted, this case is based on a Human Rights Watch phone interview with Saavedra’s mother, February 26, 2025.

Some of these families reported being contacted by individuals demanding money in exchange for information or to supposedly deliver food and other essential goods to their missing relatives. They have all been in touch with Colombian authorities, who, according to them, have stated that Venezuelan authorities are not providing any information.

David Guillaume and Jeralmy Barradas

On Thursday September 19, 2024, David Guillaume, a 30-year-old American nurse, and his fiancée Jeralmy Barradas, a 25-year-old Venezuelan student who lived in Colombia, approached the Venezuelan border in Cúcuta, Colombia. Guillaume did not have a visa, and he asked officials for a visa to enter as a tourist.³¹⁰

A Venezuelan official at the border told him he had to answer some questions. The official took them to an office on the Venezuelan side of the border. They kept them there for several hours and confiscated their phones and passports.

Later that night, officials took them to San Cristóbal, a city in Táchira state, where they said they had to ask them more questions for “state security reasons.” Guillaume and Barradas were held and interrogated in DGCIM’s office in San Cristóbal.

On Sunday morning officials drove them by car, handcuffed, to Caracas—a nine-hour drive. They were taken to DGCIM offices where officials asked them questions about “espionage” and “terrorism” with a polygraph, Guillaume said. They repeatedly asked whether he had received “instructions” from the opposition or others to attack the government or assassinate Maduro.

Guillaume and Barradas were held for 14 days in what he described as a “waiting room” in the DGCIM headquarters where they slept on mattresses on the floor.

On October 3, officers transferred Guillaume and other foreign citizens from the US, Peru, and Brazil to the Rodeo I prison. “Once in Rodeo I, we realized this was bigger than we thought,” he said. “There were dozens of foreigners, all from different backgrounds and countries, and the number [of foreigners] kept growing.”

³¹⁰ Unless otherwise noted, this case is based on a Human Rights Watch phone interview with David Guillaume, US national detained after July 28 and later released, March 25, 2025.

Between October and January, guards held him almost all day in his cell, which he says he shared with Colombian humanitarian worker Manuel Tique (see case described above). Despite his multiple requests, he was never allowed to communicate with his family or lawyer. He said that officials assigned him a public defense attorney from DGCIM.

On December 14, detainees staged a “revolt,” shouting their innocence and banging on their cell doors in an attempt to be heard by visitors. Guards repressed them with pepper spray and beatings, Guillaume said, and took him to a cell in what guards called a “punishment zone,” a small cell without windows where he was stripped naked and left alone for three days.³¹¹

Authorities denied Barradas’s mother information about their whereabouts. She traveled from Bogotá to San Cristóbal and then to Caracas, where she slept on the streets while searching for them.³¹² On October 17, Diosdado Cabello said in a press conference that Guillaume was being held in Venezuela and claimed that he was recruited to “provide aid in case of injuries during terrorist activities.” Cabello also showed a photo of Barradas. According to Cabello, some of the arrested foreigners had Venezuelan partners, like Barradas, and he claimed that these women had ties to criminal groups such as Tren de Aragua and Tren del Llano.³¹³

On January 31, officers took Guillaume to a separate room in Rodeo I. They asked him to sign a document and record a video, saying that he had been treated well and that his rights had been respected. He was later taken to the airport where he and five other American citizens were handed to a US delegation led by US Envoy for Special Missions Richard Grenell.³¹⁴

Barradas remained behind bars in Venezuela at the DGCIM headquarters at time of writing. Her family was able to confirm she was being held there only after Guillaume’s release,

³¹¹ See also Julie Turkewitz, “Welcome to Hell’: Five Months in a Venezuelan Prison,” *The New York Times*, March 18, 2025, <https://www.nytimes.com/2025/03/18/world/americas/americans-hostages-venezuela-prison.html> (accessed March 26, 2025).

³¹² Human Rights Watch phone interview with Barradas’s mother, March 26, 2025.

³¹³ See Senamecf Carabobo (@senamecfcarabobooficial), post to Instagram, October 17, 2024, https://www.instagram.com/senamecfcarabobooficial/reel/DBO_B7Ov1TZ/ (accessed March 26, 2025).

³¹⁴ See Richard Grenell (@richardgrenell), post to Instagram, February 1, 2025, <https://www.instagram.com/p/DFgxpjXvl3Z/> (accessed March 26, 2025).

when an officer agreed to take personal items to her and handed the family letters from Barradas. They have not been able to see her or speak with her on the phone.

“It is a witch-hunt, and foreigners have become exchange pawns,” Guillaume said.

Lucas Hunter

The family of Lucas Hunter, a 37-year-old Franco-American tourist, last heard from him on January 8, when he told his sister that he had been stopped by Venezuelan security forces in Paraguachón, Colombia, at the border with Venezuela’s Zulia state.³¹⁵

A photo of Hunter’s passport, reviewed by Human Rights Watch, confirms that he entered Colombia on December 28.³¹⁶ Hunter’s sister, Sophie Hunter, told Human Rights Watch that he was there for tourism. His family later learned that he had rented a bicycle in Palomino, in the northeastern state of La Guajira.

According to Hunter’s sister, on January 8, Venezuelan security forces stopped him in Paraguachón, a city in northern Colombia, close to the border. In an audio message sent to his family that day, Hunter said that he had been stopped and interrogated for four hours by Venezuelan police and military forces. He said that officers wrote a report saying he had accidentally crossed the border and had attempted to return to Colombia. He added that the officer who detained him ordered him to follow him. In his last message, Hunter said that he might be taken to Caracas and hoped that the authorities would allow him to leave.³¹⁷

A location pin and a photograph Hunter sent to his family confirm that he was on Venezuelan territory, near the immigration offices of the Administrative Service of Identification, Migration, and Immigration (Servicio Administrativo de Identificación, Migración y Extranjería, SAIME) in Zulia state, at the border. The photograph, which Human Rights Watch geolocated and confirmed, was taken at around 3 p.m., approximately 185 meters from the border, in Venezuela.³¹⁸

³¹⁵ Unless otherwise noted, this case is based on a Human Rights Watch phone interview with Sophie Hunter, Hunter’s sister, January 14, 2025; Foro Penal (@ForoPenal), post to X, February 5, 2025, <https://x.com/ForoPenal/status/1887185053525950918> (accessed February 19, 2025).

³¹⁶ Photograph VENPHO015 (copy on file with Human Rights Watch).

³¹⁷ Audio message sent by Hunter to his relative on January 8, 2025 (copy on file with Human Rights Watch).

³¹⁸ Photograph VENPHO016 (copy on file with Human Rights Watch).

At time of writing, his location and the reasons for his arrest remained unknown. The US and French consulates have been unable to obtain any information about his case, according to a relative.

Human Rights Defenders

Human rights defenders have also faced arbitrary detention, in addition to government harassment and intimidation.³¹⁹

These include:

- Kennedy Tejeda, a lawyer for Foro Penal, who was detained on August 2, when he was providing free legal aid to the families of those arrested after the election. He was still detained at time of writing.³²⁰
- Edward Ocariz, from the Human Rights Committee of Coche, Caracas, who was detained early on August 2 and released in December.³²¹
- Yendri Omar Velásquez, coordinator of the Venezuelan Observatory of LGBTIQ+ Violence, who was detained on August 3 at the Caracas airport when he was leaving to attend a UN Committee on the Elimination of Racial Discrimination session in Geneva. He was released hours later.³²²
- Edni López, an activist and human rights defender, who was detained at the Caracas airport on August 4 and released five days later.³²³

³¹⁹ See also “IACHR Condemns Persecution of Human Rights Defenders in Venezuela,” IACHR news release, August 29, 2024, https://www.oas.org/en/iachr/jsForm/?File=/en/iachr/media_center/preleases/2024/198.asp&utm_content=country-ven&utm_term=class-mon (accessed March 6, 2025).

³²⁰ IACHR, Resolution 92/2024, Precautionary Measure No. 143-13 and 181-19, Identified members of the organization “Foro Penal” regarding Venezuela, November 28, 2024, https://oas.org/en/iachr/decisions/mc/2024/res_92-24_mc_143-13%20and%20181-19_ve_en.pdf (accessed March 6, 2025).

³²¹ “The Committee for the Freedom of Political Prisoners confirmed the release of activist Edward Ocariz” (“El Comité por la Libertad de los Presos Políticos confirmó la excarcelación del activista Edward Ocariz”), *Infobae*, December 24, 2024, <https://www.infobae.com/venezuela/2024/12/24/el-comite-por-la-libertad-de-los-presos-politicos-confirio-la-excarcelacion-del-activista-edward-ocariz/> (accessed March 6, 2025).

³²² “Agents of the Chavista regime kidnapped LGBT rights activist Yendri Velásquez as he was leaving Venezuela” (“Agentes del régimen chavista secuestraron al activista por los derechos LGBT Yendri Velásquez cuando salía de Venezuela”), *Infobae*, August 3, 2024, <https://www.infobae.com/venezuela/2024/08/03/agentes-del-regimen-chavista-secuestraron-al-activista-por-los-derechos-lgbt-yendri-velazquez-cuando-salia-de-venezuela/> (accessed March 6, 2025).

³²³ “Family reports the disappearance of a humanitarian worker at Maiquetía airport” (“Familia denuncia desaparición de trabajadora humanitaria en aeropuerto de Maiquetía”), *El Pitazo*, August 4, 2024, <https://elpitazo.net/gran-caracas/familia-denuncia-desaparicion-de-trabajadora-humanitaria-en-aeropuerto-de-maiquetia/> (accessed March 6, 2025); “Human rights activist and defender Edni López released from prison” (“Excarcelada la activista y defensora de DDHH Edni López”), *Efecto Cocuyo*, August 9, 2024, <https://efectococuyo.com/la-humanidad/excarcelada-la-activista-y-defensora-de-ddhh-edni-lopez/> (accessed March 6, 2025).

- Henry Gómez Fernández, a lawyer and human rights defender from Amazonas state, who was detained on August 17.³²⁴
- Carlos Correa Barros, the head of the free speech NGO Espacio Público, who was detained on January 7 and released days later.

Additionally, two human rights defenders who were detained prior to the elections remain behind bars. These are:

- Rocío San Miguel, a renowned security expert and human rights defender, who was detained in February at Caracas Airport while traveling with her daughter. San Miguel is detained at Helicoide. Venezuelan human rights organizations and her lawyer requested her release on “humanitarian grounds” since she must undergo surgery for a fracture in her right shoulder. She remained in prison at time of writing.³²⁵
- Javier Tarazona, head of the Fundaredes, which exposed abuses by armed groups in the Venezuelan-Colombian border area. Security forces detained him and two other members of the organization on July 2, 2021. They were freed on October 26, but Tarazona, despite a delicate health condition, is still behind bars. His hearing has been postponed several times.³²⁶

Such abusive treatment is not limited to those working in human rights organizations but extends to individuals engaged in crucial efforts to defend people’s rights, including those who support relatives of detainees and those who play key roles in upholding the right to vote, such as electoral witnesses.

³²⁴ “Foro Penal: GNB arrests a human rights defender in Amazonas” (“Foro Penal: GNB detiene a defensor de derechos humanos en Amazonas”), *El Pitazo*, August 18, 2024, <https://elpitazo.net/politica/amazonas-foro-penal-denuncia-detencion-de-defensor-de-dd-hh/> (accessed March 6, 2025).

³²⁵ “Venezuela: The Government’s Escalating Repression and Attempts at Evading Scrutiny Face Resounding Condemnation from International Civil Society,” statement by international human rights organizations, February 16, 2024, <https://www.hrw.org/news/2024/02/16/venezuela-governments-escalating-repression-and-attempts-evading-scrutiny-face>; “Venezuelan activist Rocío San Miguel’s defense team reiterated that ‘she should be operated on freely and by doctors she trusts’” (“La defensa de la activista venezolana Rocío San Miguel reiteró que ‘debe ser operada en libertad y por médicos de su confianza’”), *Infobae*, February 15, 2025, <https://www.infobae.com/venezuela/2025/02/15/la-defensa-de-la-activista-venezolana-rocio-san-miguel-reitero-que-debe-ser-operada-en-libertad-y-por-medicos-de-su-confianza/> (accessed March 6, 2025).

³²⁶ Human Rights Watch, *World Report 2022* (New York: Human Rights Watch, 2022), Venezuela chapter, <https://www.hrw.org/world-report/2022/country-chapters/venezuela#981f12>; “Javier Tarazona faces a new public trial” (“Javier Tarazona enfrenta nuevo juicio público”), *RunRun.es*, March 6, 2025, <https://runrun.es/el-megafono/574192/tarazona-enfrenta-nuevo-juicio-publico/> (accessed March 6, 2025).

Carlos Correa Barros

On January 7, in Caracas, Carlos Correa Barros, head of the leading free speech NGO Espacio Público, was taken by hooded men into an unidentified vehicle, according to a post shared by the organization's account on X that evening.³²⁷

For the next nine days, his family struggled to determine his whereabouts. They visited multiple institutions, including the PNB headquarters in Maripérez, the PNB's Boleíta Control Center known as Zona 7, Helicoide, and the SEBIN headquarters in Maripérez, as well as PNB and GNB detention facilities in Cotiza.³²⁸

On January 8, they had to wait seven hours to file a *habeas corpus*.³²⁹ That same day Cabello said in an interview that Correa Barros had been detained due to his alleged involvement in a "conspiracy plan."³³⁰

On January 15, Correa Barros's wife shared in a video posted to X that a prosecutor had confirmed her husband's detention but did not provide any details about his whereabouts or the charges against him. The prosecutor told her that Correa Barros was brought before a judge on January 9 for terrorism-related charges. His family was not notified of his hearing, and Correa Barros was appointed a public defender instead of his trusted lawyer.³³¹

His case attracted notable international attention. Correa Barros was released on January 16.³³²

³²⁷ Espacio Público (@espaciopublico), post to X, January 8, 2025, https://x.com/espaciopublico/status/1876802397416173841?t=crMNPAr93oQcWssnAY_aLw&s=08 (accessed February 19, 2025).

³²⁸ IACHR, Resolution 3/2025, Precautionary Measure No. 16-25, Carlos José Correa Barros regarding Venezuela, January 10, 2025, https://oas.org/en/iachr/decisions/mc/2025/res_3-25_mc_16-25_ve_en.pdf (accessed February 19, 2025), para. 6.

³²⁹ "A habeas corpus petition has been filed to demand the release of Carlos Correa" ("Introducen recurso de habeas corpus para exigir la liberación de Carlos Correa"), *Espacio Público*, January 8, 2025, <https://espaciopublico.org/introducen-habeas-corpus-para-exigir-la-liberacion-de-carlos-correa/> (accessed March 6, 2025).

³³⁰ ETVV (@evtmiami), post to Instagram, January 9, 2025, <https://www.instagram.com/evtmiami/reel/DEmIE6OCpMe/> (accessed February 19, 2025).

³³¹ Espacio Público (@espaciopublico), post to X, January 15, 2025, <https://x.com/espaciopublico/status/1879643926036152398> (accessed February 19, 2025).

³³² Espacio Público (@espaciopublico), post to X, January 16, 2025, <https://x.com/espaciopublico/status/1879824400062751059> (accessed February 19, 2025).

Estuardo Pérez Olmedo (pseudonym)

Estuardo Pérez Olmedo, a community human rights defender, was forcibly taken from his home by a group of security officers dressed in black uniforms after the July 28 election.³³³ He repeatedly asked for an arrest warrant or the reason for his detention, but he was denied this information. Instead, during the more than four months he was imprisoned, Pérez Olmedo repeatedly heard that he had been arrested “by order of the president.”

Between August and December, he was transferred to six different detention centers. While detention conditions varied, he consistently faced issues with access to water, food, and medicine. He also endured ill-treatment from guards and other authorities, who threatened him and pressured him to falsely accuse María Corina Machado, Edmundo González, and others of paying people to protest and damage public property.

Pérez Olmedo also told Human Rights Watch that his phone was searched by PNB officers without judicial authorization—both manually and with a device officers referred to as a “chupacabras.” The description of this device resembles a forensic extraction device (UFED) capable of bypassing passcodes and encryption and extracting and analyzing the data inside a smartphone. According to a video reviewed by Human Rights Watch, Venezuelan security forces have access to UFED devices made by the company Cellebrite.³³⁴

His initial hearing took place two days after his detention at Zona 7 prison via phone call, during which he could barely hear the judge. At the prison he also briefly saw his sister, who had searched for him across multiple detention centers before prison authorities finally admitted he was there. After that, Pérez Olmedo was unable to see any family members until late September, he told Human Rights Watch.

It was only during his preliminary hearing that Pérez Olmedo learned he was accused of setting fires during protests on July 29 and 30 near his home. He denied any involvement in these events.

³³³ Unless otherwise noted, this case is based on a Human Rights Watch phone interview with Estuardo Pérez Olmedo (pseudonym), February 12, 2025.

³³⁴ Cazadores de Fake News (@cazamosfakenews), post to X, October 29, 2021, <https://x.com/cazamosfakenews/status/1454212859819343876> (accessed March 26, 2025).

Upon his release in December, authorities forced him to sign a document stating that his rights had not been violated and to record a video. He was then abandoned, along with other released prisoners, around 10:30 p.m. in a remote area—without money or any way to contact his family.

In February, six months after his arrest, while the investigation against him remained ongoing, Pérez Olmedo was finally able to meet with his public defender in person. However, the defender said Pérez Olmedo would not be able to see his case file and admitted that even he did not have a copy. According to Pérez Olmedo, the defender also advised against seeking private legal representation, saying, “They’re not allowing it.” He recalled the moment when the defender looked at him and said, “You know that the law is not being followed here.”

Critics Forced to Flee

Nearly 8 million Venezuelans have left their country since 2014.³³⁵ The country's ongoing humanitarian emergency has undermined access to food and medicine for many families. Others have had to flee abuse, persecution, and violence by security forces, armed groups, and gangs.³³⁶

Human Rights Watch documented in multiple cases how intimidation, persecution, and other abuses forced critics of the government to flee Venezuela following the elections. Some had their homes raided, marked with graffiti, vandalized, or even attacked with gunfire. Others were followed, had unidentified individuals stationed outside their homes or offices, or received threats. Some were warned of arrest warrants or investigations against them. These included elected officials, local authorities, campaign coordinators for Vente Venezuela, people who worked at polling stations or were pivotal to secure the electoral tally sheets, and former security force members.³³⁷

Several of those interviewed are awaiting a decision on their asylum applications in countries in Latin America, particularly Colombia. Some said they applied for resettlement through the US Safe Mobility Offices, but their applications were “suspended” following President Donald Trump’s decision to end the resettlement program.³³⁸

³³⁵ Regional Inter-Agency Coordination Platform for Refugees and Migrants from Venezuela (R4V), “Refugees and migrants from Venezuela,” webpage, [n.d.], <https://www.r4v.info/es/refugiadosymigrantes> (accessed February 20, 2025); Human Rights Watch, *The Venezuelan Exodus: The Need for a Regional Response to an Unprecedented Migration Crisis* (New York: Human Rights Watch, 2018), <https://www.hrw.org/report/2018/09/03/venezuelan-exodus/need-regional-response-unprecedented-migration-crisis>.

³³⁶ Human Rights Watch, *“This Hell Was My Only Option”: Abuses Against Migrants and Asylum Seekers Pushed to Cross the Darién Gap* (New York: Human Rights Watch, 2023), <https://www.hrw.org/report/2023/11/09/hell-was-my-only-option/abuses-against-migrants-and-asylum-seekers-pushed-cross>.

³³⁷ Human Rights Watch interviews with people who fled Venezuela after July 28, January and February 2025.

³³⁸ Email received by one of the applicants from the Resettlement Support Center (RSC) for Latin America, operated by the International Organization for Migration (IOM) that states: “In accordance with the Executive Order ‘Realignment of the U.S. Refugee Admissions Program,’ refugee travel to the United States and all case processing activities under the U.S. Refugee Admissions Program are suspended until further notice.” (copy on file with Human Rights Watch). For more information about the realignment of the US Refugee Admissions Program, see United States Federal Register, Presidential Documents, Executive Order 14163, Realigning the United States Refugee Admissions Program, January 20, 2025, <https://www.whitehouse.gov/presidential-actions/2025/01/realigning-the-united-states-refugee-admissions-program/> (accessed February 27, 2025).

Selected Cases

*Torres Municipality's Government Cabinet*³³⁹

In 2021, **Javier Oropeza** won the mayoral election in Torres, Carora, Lara state, representing the opposition party Mesa de la Unidad Democrática (MUD). His victory ended years of control by the United Socialist Party of Venezuela (Partido Socialista Unido de Venezuela, PSUV).³⁴⁰

On election day in 2024, in an interview posted to Instagram, Oropeza encouraged voters to participate and wait “calmly and peacefully” for the results.³⁴¹ However, after electoral authorities announced that Maduro had been re-elected, protests erupted in the municipality. Oropeza spoke with state prefect Elvis Méndez, a local official in charge of security issues with links to the PSUV, “to express [his] willingness to cooperate and to ensure that public security forces were alert, given that the municipality does not have its own law enforcement,” he told Human Rights Watch.

On July 30, peaceful protesters gathered near Ambrosio Oropeza Square, in downtown Carora. People inside the local PSUV office allegedly shot protesters in the square. One protester, Walter Loren Páez Lucena, died in the protest. The situation escalated outside the PSUV office, where videos verified by Human Rights Watch showed confrontations, fires, damaged property, and destroyed motorcycles (see “Killings During the Protests” above more details on this case).

PSUV members later accused Oropeza and his team of orchestrating the attack, including **Jesús Guillermo Gómez**, the mayor's general director, who had already fled the city.³⁴²

³³⁹ Unless otherwise noted, this case is based on a Human Rights Watch interview with six members of the government cabinet of Torres municipality, Carora, Lara state, January 2025. The six members include: Javier Oropeza, Jesús Guillermo Gómez, Wilman Montero, Iraidá Timaure, Jesús Camacaro and Ronald Marchán.

³⁴⁰ Liz Gascón, “Lara | Javier Oropeza wins the Mayorship of Torres after 17 years of official dominance” (“Lara | Javier Oropeza gana la Alcaldía de Torres tras 17 años de dominio oficialista”), *El Pitazo*, November 22, 2021, <https://elpitazo.net/occidente/lara-javier-oropeza-gana-la-alcaldia-de-torres-tras-17-anos-de-dominio-oficialista/> (accessed February 20, 2025); Karina Peraza Rodríguez and Liz Gascón, “The Governorship and seven of nine Mayor Offices in Lara were left in the hands of the PSUV” (“La Gobernación y siete de nueve alcaldías en Lara quedaron en manos del PSUV”), *Runrun.es*, November 25, 2021, <https://runrun.es/noticias/461327/la-gobernacion-y-siete-de-nueve-alcaldias-en-lara-quedaron-en-manos-del-psuv/> (accessed February 20, 2025).

³⁴¹ Elchivo.com (@elchivopuntocom) and Javier Oropeza (@Javieroropezaalvarez), post to Instagram, <https://www.instagram.com/elchivopuntocom/reel/C9-31D3Slxk/> (accessed February 20, 2025).

³⁴² Police records on the homicide investigation concerning the death of Páez Lucena (copy on file with Human Rights Watch).

However, Oropeza and five other members of his cabinet told Human Rights Watch they did not participate in the protest and denied any involvement in the violence.

In the days following the protests, Oropeza released multiple statements urging calm and peaceful demonstrations.³⁴³ On the night of July 30, a person close to a security force branch warned him and **Wilman Montero**, a councilman from the opposition party Acción Democrática, that they would be arrested soon. They spent the night hiding and left Carora the next day. While hiding, they learned that their homes were being surveilled by drones and security forces.

Oropeza says that authorities seized some of his properties, including the local media outlets *Diario El Caroreño* and *Diario de Lara*. “My lawyers searched for any legal documentation justifying the seizure of my properties, but none exists,” he said.

Two members of Oropeza’s team, **Iraida Timaure** and **Jesús Camacaro**, and the councilman for Primero Justicia, **Ronald Marchán**, remained in Carora, trying to prevent the PSUV from taking over the mayor’s office.

On August 6, a judge arrived at the office, accompanied by PSUV councilmen. They said they came to confirm the mayor’s absence. The next day, a man they believed to be a SEBIN member entered the office looking for Marchán. Marchán said that when he heard his name he left through a back door. He fled the country two days later.

By August 8, the office was surrounded by security forces. At 1:30 p.m. Oropeza’s team decided to leave. “We felt we lost the battle, all was lost,” Camacaro said. As they walked away, a wine-red car stopped ahead of them. A man stepped out and pulled out a gun. Everyone ran except for **Endrick Medina**, the director of the Mayor’s Office in charge of

³⁴³ Javier Oropeza (@javieroropezaalvarez), Alcaldía de Torres (@torres_alcaldia) and Anibys Reyes De Oropeza (@anibysandre), post to Instagram, July 30, 2024, <https://www.instagram.com/p/C-DVieeORBl/?hl=es> (accessed February 20, 2025); Javier Oropeza (@javieroropezaalvarez), Alcaldía de Torres (@torres_alcaldia) and Anibys Reyes De Oropeza (@anibysandre), post to Instagram, July 31, 2024, <https://www.instagram.com/p/C-EWvflJdM4/?hl=es> (accessed February 20, 2025); Javier Oropeza (@javieroropezaalvarez), Endrick Medina Véliz (@endrick_mveliz), Anibys Reyes De Oropeza (@anibysandre), Ronald Marchan (@ronaldmarchan), Wilman Montero Pérez (@wilmanmonterove) and Alcaldía de Torres (@torres_alcaldia), post to Instagram, July 31, 2024, <https://www.instagram.com/p/C-GRzNBpp8y/?hl=es> (accessed February 20, 2025); Javier Oropeza (@javieroropezaalvarez), Jesús Guillermo Gómez Bastidas (@jesusggbcarora), Anibys Reyes De Oropeza (@anibysandre), Endrick Medina Véliz (@endrick_mveliz), post to Instagram, August 3, 2024, <https://www.instagram.com/p/C-NfOFMup6t/?hl=es> (accessed February 20, 2025).

transparency and public access to information, who raised his hands. He was arrested and remained imprisoned at time of writing.

Camacaro fled Venezuela on August 9. Timaure initially remained in hiding but later returned to the mayor's office, as Oropeza had entrusted her to take charge. However, PSUV members prevented her from assuming office. On August 17, councilmen from the PSUV appointed Lasmit Verde, a PSUV member, as the new mayor. "It was essentially a small coup within the municipality," Oropeza stated.

The night before Timaure left Carora, she saw drones flying over her house. She fled the country a few days later. In September, security forces arrived at her home. Her husband, who had remained in Venezuela, was forced into hiding. Their house was searched, and their vehicles were confiscated. Timaure showed Human Rights Watch photos of men in black clothing that matched security forces uniforms next to a house she claimed was hers. "Even now, I receive pictures showing PNB officers at my house," she said.

According to a list shared by Oropeza with Human Rights Watch, 42 people—including seven children—who were either part of the mayor's cabinet or their family members are now in exile across Colombia, Chile, Brazil, Peru, and Ecuador.

Those in Colombia are struggling to rebuild their lives, unable to work while waiting for their asylum requests to be processed.³⁴⁴ Some had applied for resettlement in the US through the Safe Mobility Offices but were notified that their cases had been suspended.³⁴⁵

"They took everything from us," Camacaro said. "Our peace, our dreams, our careers, our possessions—everything."

³⁴⁴ On January 25, 2025, Colombia issued a decree allowing asylum seekers to work while their asylum claims are being processed. This change will not take effect until July 2025. See Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Decree No. 0089 of 2025, signed on January 25, 2025, <https://www.cancilleria.gov.co/newsroom/news/expidito-decreto-0089-2025-cual-modifica-marco-reglamentario-materia-refugio-colombia#:~:text=El%20Ministerio%20de%20Relaciones%20Exteriores,efectivo%20en%20la%20gesti%C3%B3n%20y> (accessed March 7, 2025), arts. 1 and 3.

³⁴⁵ Email received by one of the applicants from the RSC for Latin America, operated by the IOM that states: "In accordance with the Executive Order 'Realignment of the U.S. Refugee Admissions Program,' refugee travel to the United States and all case processing activities under the U.S. Refugee Admissions Program are suspended until further notice." (copy on file with Human Rights Watch).

Luis Carrero and Judith Álvarez

Luis Carrero, 53 and Judith Álvarez, 61, both retired university professors, never considered themselves politicians.³⁴⁶ Yet, driven by a deep concern for their country's future, they joined Venezuela's opposition movement, they told Human Rights Watch. Carrero served as the regional coordinator and campaign director for Vente Venezuela in Táchira state, while Álvarez coordinated efforts in the municipality of Junín, in the same state.

Their commitment drove them to work on the campaign since the opposition primary election. During the presidential election campaign in July 2024, when he believed to be SEBIN agents repeatedly followed Carrero whenever he traveled to meetings in municipalities across Táchira. Vehicles with dark-tinted windows trailed him, taking photographs. Neighbors warned them that SEBIN agents had visited their home taking pictures and asking about their whereabouts. On June 28, the day María Corina Machado visited Táchira, a graffiti tag with Carrero's initials "LC" appeared on their home in Rubio. Human Rights Watch obtained and reviewed two photos of their house.³⁴⁷



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³⁴⁶ Unless otherwise noted, this case is based on a Human Rights Watch interview with Luis Alfonso Carrera and Judith Álvarez, February 1, 2025.

³⁴⁷ Photographs VENPHO001 and VENPHO002 (copies on file with Human Rights Watch).

In the days leading up to the vote, they avoided sleeping at home, fearing arrest or the seizure of campaign materials. On July 27, they returned briefly to collect clothes. At 6:30 a.m., a group of five armed people—four men and one woman, all hooded and with long guns—arrived at their house. As Álvarez stepped into a room in her own house, one of the hooded men grabbed her shoulder, she said. The woman among them said, “Shut up or I’ll kill you,” shoving her onto the bed, Álvarez recalled. The man said to the woman to leave her. “We don’t have orders to kill them,” he said. Human Rights Watch reviewed a photo showing two hooded men in black clothes, one of them carrying a long weapon, next to a metallic white door that matches the door of Carrero and Álvarez’s home.

Meanwhile, in the garage, three men seized Carrero. He tried to run, yelling “Help!” as they chased him into the street. They fired their weapons. When Carrero froze, the men beat him over the head and dragged him back into the house, assaulting him again when he tried to escape a second time. Carrero recalls a neighbor screaming: “Don’t kill the professor!” Inside the garage, they forced him to the ground and pointed their weapons at him. “I thought they were going to kill me,” he told Human Rights Watch. One of the hooded men told him they did not have orders to kill, but warned: “If anything happens, we know where your family is.” The assailants left, taking phones and computers, but no money or other valuables. That night, Carrero and Álvarez went to hide on a farm.

The next day, they voted in the election and afterwards helped to collect and scan all the tally sheets from border municipalities. They hid on the second floor of a store and their colleagues came in with the tally sheets pretending they were going to buy something.

Two days after the election, Carrero’s photo circulated widely on social media. Human Rights Watch found the photo posted on July 31st on different social media platforms. It had the PNB and Directorate of Strategic and Tactical Actions (Dirección de Acciones Estratégicas y Tácticas, DAET) logos at the top and a title saying, “Leaders of violent protesters in Táchira.” That same day, someone with ties to the security forces helped Carrero and Álvarez leave the country.

Álvarez’s mother and friends still tell them that unknown individuals frequently take photos of their house. “We fear for our families,” they said. Even outside of Venezuela, strangers have taken photos of them, and they feel like they’re being watched.

Carrero decided to apply for asylum in Colombia, which is still pending. Álvarez holds dual Colombian-Venezuelan nationality. They sell food to pay rent and rely on money that their daughters, who live abroad, send them.

“The people [we fled the country with] had set January 10 [inauguration day] as the date we would return,” they said. However, almost a month later, they were still out of Venezuela with no prospects of returning.

Beatríz Mora

Beatríz Mora, 57, her partner Sergio Olano, 57, and their son Juan Eduardo Olano, 25, always worked in defense of human rights, they said.³⁴⁸ Mora acted as a national observer for Vente Venezuela, Olano trained electoral witnesses, and their son organized the youth sector for María Corina Machado’s visit to Táchira in June.

Mora told Human Rights Watch that, following Machado’s visit, she received a call from someone linked with security forces who suggested she get her son out of the country because authorities intended to accuse him of terrorism. That same night, despite their son’s reluctance, his parents arranged for him to leave Venezuela.

Mora and Olano remained in Venezuela to carry out their electoral roles. On July 28, at around 4 p.m., Mora held a press conference raising concerns about information that the National Electoral Council (Consejo Nacional Electoral, CNE) would refuse to publish the tally sheets.³⁴⁹

Protests broke out that night and a person was killed outside a polling station.³⁵⁰ At 9 p.m., Mora and Olano decided to relocate to a safer place inside the city.

³⁴⁸ Unless otherwise noted, this case is based on a Human Rights Watch interview with Beatríz Mora and Sergio Olano, January 31, 2025.

³⁴⁹ La Nación Radio (@lanacionradio), Diario La Nación (@diariolanacionve) and Diario La Nación - Venezuela (@lanacionweb), post to Instagram, July 28, 2025, <https://www.instagram.com/lanacionradio/reel/C9-zsoEhEt3/> (accessed February 20, 2025).

³⁵⁰ See, for example, “One dead and several injured reported in an attack by Chavista colectivos during the vote audit in Táchira state” (“Reportan un muerto y varios heridos por un ataque de colectivos chavistas durante la auditoría de los votos en el estado Táchira”), *Infobae*, July 28, 2024, <https://www.infobae.com/venezuela/2024/07/29/reportan-un-muerto-y-varios-heridos-por-un-ataque-de-colectivos-chavistas-durante-la-auditoria-de-los-votos-en-el-estado-tachira/> (accessed March 6, 2025); Lorena Bornacelly, “Attack on a polling center in Táchira leaves one dead and two injured” (“Ataque a centro electoral en Táchira causa un muerto y dos heridos”), *El Pitazo*, July 28, 2024, <https://elpitazo.net/regiones/ataque-a-centro-electoral-en-tachira-deja-un-muerto-y-dos-heridos/> (accessed March 6, 2025).

On August 8, neighbors informed them that agents from the Scientific, Penal, and Criminalistic Investigative Service Corps (Cuerpo de Investigaciones Científicas, Penales y Criminalísticas, CICPC) had arrived to raid their house. A search warrant, which Human Rights Watch reviewed, listed their home address and said that firearms, electronic equipment, drones, mortars, and Molotov bombs “might” be found there.³⁵¹

For 10 days, Mora and Olano hid with the help of family and friends. On August 16, Mora received a message from the Instagram account of a PSUV member of the National Assembly, which read “You were misbehaving. Knock, Knock,” referencing the government’s operation of the same name, through which hundreds of people were arrested. That same night, they fled the country. Mora later said, “We committed no crime, yet we had to flee like criminals.”

Mora is awaiting recognition of her refugee status in Colombia. Her home in Venezuela remains under surveillance, she said. Human Rights Watch verified a photo of a white car bearing the logo of the CICPC’s Division Against Extortion and Kidnapping (División contra extorsión y secuestro) logo parked inside the residential parking lot in the complex where she lived in Táchira.³⁵²

She believes she is also under surveillance in Colombia. She showed Human Rights Watch photos of a car, with Venezuelan plates, that she says parks outside her house for hours.

Mora and Olano volunteer with a foundation providing aid to displaced individuals. To save money, they often eat only twice a day. They had applied for resettlement in the United States, where Mora’s brother and their son now live, but the application process has been suspended. Her son, who entered the US through the parole program, now fears being forced to leave the country.

³⁵¹ Search warrant issued by the 5th judge of control of the criminal court of San Cristóbal on August 6, 2024 (copy on file with Human Rights Watch).

³⁵² Photograph VENPHO017 (copy on file with Human Rights Watch).

The International Response to the Crisis

Repression and evidence of electoral fraud in Venezuela have drawn widespread concern around the globe.

Only a handful of governments—including Russia, China, and, in Latin America and the Caribbean, Honduras, Cuba, Bolivia, and Nicaragua—recognized Maduro as the winner of the election. These are largely long-time allies of Maduro, such as the Cuban government, which according to evidence compiled by the UN Independent International Fact-Finding Mission on the Bolivarian Republic of Venezuela (FFM), has for years “trained, advised and participated in intelligence and counter-intelligence” with counterparts at Venezuela’s General Directorate of Military Counterintelligence (Dirección General de Contrainteligencia Militar, DGCIM) and provided training to Venezuela’s Bolivarian National Intelligence Service (Servicio Bolivariano de Inteligencia Nacional (SEBIN)).³⁵³

On August 16, the Permanent Council of the Organization of American States (OAS), where all member states are represented, approved by consensus a resolution urging Venezuelan authorities to publish all precinct-level tally sheets and carry out an “impartial verification” of the results. It also urged authorities to respect human rights.³⁵⁴

The governments of Colombia, Brazil, and to a lesser extent, Mexico, called for talks with the Maduro government and publicly urged it, to no avail, to release the electoral tally-sheets.³⁵⁵ They presented proposals to seek a negotiated solution to the crisis, including power-sharing mechanisms, repeating the election, and granting amnesties.³⁵⁶

³⁵³ UN Human Rights Council, Detailed findings of the independent international fact-finding Mission on the Bolivarian Republic of Venezuela, Crimes against humanity committed through the State's intelligence services: structures and individuals involved in the implementation of the plan to repress opposition to the Government, UN Doc. A/HRC/51/CRP.3 (2022), <https://docs.un.org/A/HRC/51/CRP.3> (accessed March 6, 2025), paras. 65-67.

³⁵⁴ OEA (@OEA_oficial), post to X, August 16, 2024, https://x.com/OEA_oficial/status/1824555424282010085 (accessed January 13, 2025).

³⁵⁵ Cancillería Colombia (@CancilleriaCol), post to X, August 8, 2024, <https://x.com/CancilleriaCol/status/1821652789455425951> (accessed January 13, 2025).

³⁵⁶ Human Rights Watch letter to Mr. Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva, President of Brazil, Mr. Gustavo Petro, President of Colombia, Mr. Andrés Manuel López Obrador, President of Mexico, August 27, 2024, <https://www.hrw.org/news/2024/08/27/human-rights-watch-letter-presidents-brazil-colombia-and-mexico-crisis-venezuela>.

Following Venezuela's decision to cut ties with Argentina and other governments, Brazil also assumed custody of the Argentine embassy in Caracas, where six members of the opposition sought asylum on March 20, 2024. One of them left the embassy in December and died in February. The embassy is under heavy surveillance by members of the Venezuelan intelligence and armed forces, which have seized and occupied nearby houses. Security officers do not allow the asylees to receive visitors, and limit their access to food and medicine. Since December, the state-owned electricity company has cut off power to the embassy.³⁵⁷

The Biden administration, then in office in the United States, urged Maduro to release the precinct-level tally sheets, carry out a verification of the results, and respect the will of the people.³⁵⁸ In September 2024 and January 2025, the US government imposed targeted sanctions on 16 Venezuelan officials who obstructed the elections, including the president of the Supreme Court, and eight officials who "lead key economic and security agencies enabling Nicolás Maduro's repression," including the president of the Venezuela's state-owned oil company, PDVSA.³⁵⁹

The Biden administration said it would reinstate some of the sanctions they lifted when the Maduro government and the opposition signed the Barbados Agreement on October 2023.³⁶⁰ After the elections, it did not revoke a license granted in November 2022 allowing Chevron to operate in Venezuela, in part due to concerns that doing so could make the situation in the country worse.³⁶¹

³⁵⁷ "Urgent call to protect political asylees in the Argentine Embassy in Caracas," statement by international human rights organizations, December 18, 2024, <https://www.hrw.org/news/2024/12/18/urgent-call-protect-political-asylees-argentine-embassy-caracas>.

³⁵⁸ "Joint Statement on Venezuela Election," US Department of State media note, August 16, 2024, <https://2021-2025.state.gov/joint-statement-on-venezuela-election/> (accessed February 17, 2025).

³⁵⁹ "Treasury Targets Venezuelan Officials Aligned with Nicolas Maduro in Response to Electoral Fraud," US Department of the Treasury news release, September 12, 2024, <https://home.treasury.gov/news/press-releases/jy2577> (accessed March 6, 2025); "Treasury Sanctions Venezuelan Officials Supporting Nicolas Maduro's Repression and Illegitimate Claim to Power," US Department of the Treasury news release, January 10, 2025, <https://home.treasury.gov/news/press-releases/jy2778> (accessed March 6, 2025).

³⁶⁰ "In Response to Electoral Roadmap, Treasury Issues New Venezuela General Licenses," US Department of the Treasury news release, October 18, 2023, <https://home.treasury.gov/news/press-releases/jy1822> (accessed March 6, 2025).

³⁶¹ "Treasury Issues Venezuela General License 41 Upon Resumption of Mexico City Talks," US Department of the Treasury news release, November 26, 2022, <https://home.treasury.gov/news/press-releases/jy1127> (accessed March 6, 2025).

The European Union also urged Maduro to publish the tally-sheets and respect the will of the people.³⁶² On January 10, the European Union extended its own sanctions against 54 individuals and added 15 others, including members of the CNE, the judiciary, and the security forces, while affirming the EU's support to the Venezuelan people.³⁶³ Also in January, the EU expressed regret at the Venezuelan authorities' decision to "substantially reduce the accredited diplomatic staff of several Member States in Caracas."³⁶⁴

The Trump Administration and its Effects on Venezuela

On January 31, only 10 days after President Trump took office, his envoy for special missions, Richard Grenell, visited Caracas and met with Maduro. The US State Department said the visit was focused on seeking migration agreements and releasing American citizens detained in Venezuela. Grenell secured the release of six American nationals who were detained in Venezuela and Maduro agreed to send aircrafts to assist with the deportation of Venezuelan nationals in the United States.³⁶⁵

A day later, on February 1, the Office of Foreign Assets Control (OFAC) automatically renewed a 2022 license allowing Chevron to operate in Venezuela.

³⁶² European External Action Service (EEAS), "Informal meeting of EU Foreign Ministers: Press remarks by High Representative at the press conference," August 29, 2024, https://www.eeas.europa.eu/eeas/informal-meeting-eu-foreign-ministers-press-remarks-high-representative-press-conference_en (accessed January 13, 2025); EEAS, Venezuela: Speech by the High Representative/Vice-President Josep Borrell in the EP plenary on developments after presidential elections, September 17, 2024, https://www.eeas.europa.eu/eeas/venezuela-speech-high-representative-vice-president-josep-borrell-ep-plenary-developments-after_en (accessed January 13, 2025); European Parliament, "European Parliament resolution of 23 January 2025 on the situation in Venezuela following the usurpation of the presidency on 10 January 2025," Resolutions on topical subjects 2025/2519(RSP), January 23, 2025, https://www.europarl.europa.eu/doceo/document/TA-10-2025-0007_EN.html (accessed April 11, 2025).

³⁶³ "Venezuela: Council renews restrictive measures and lists a further 15 individuals in view of the situation in the country," Council of the European Union news release, January 10, 2025, <https://www.consilium.europa.eu/en/press/press-releases/2025/01/10/venezuela-council-renews-restrictive-measures-and-lists-a-further-15-individuals-in-view-of-the-situation-in-the-country/> (accessed March 6, 2025); "Venezuela: statement by the High Representative on behalf of the European Union on the events of 10 January 2025," Council of the European Union statement, January 10, 2025, <https://www.consilium.europa.eu/en/press/press-releases/2025/01/10/venezuela-statement-by-the-high-representative-on-behalf-of-the-eu-on-the-events-of-10-january-2025/> (accessed April 11, 2025).

³⁶⁴ "Venezuela: Statement by the Spokesperson on recent decisions by the Venezuelan authorities," EEAS statement, January 15, 2025, https://www.eeas.europa.eu/eeas/venezuela-statement-spokesperson-recent-decisions-venezuelan-authorities_en (accessed April 11, 2025).

³⁶⁵ Donald J. Trump (@realDonaldTrump), post to X, February 1, 2025, <https://x.com/realDonaldTrump/status/1885739833399619760> (accessed March 6, 2025).

Grenell later said that the Trump administration was seeking a “different relationship” with Maduro, and noted that the president is “somebody who doesn’t want to do regime change.”³⁶⁶ Grenell also described what he said to Maduro: “I said ‘we are not here to give you anything. What I am here to do though is to tell you ‘I came here to Caracas, I am now sitting in your palace asking you to do things’. And you have camaras all-around, you are going to use this moment, you will tell people I am here, that alone is a gift.’”³⁶⁷

On February 5, Secretary of Homeland Security Kristi Noem terminated the 2023 designation of Venezuelans in the United States as eligible for Temporary Protected Status (TPS), effective April 7, 2025.³⁶⁸ Her decision noted that “there are notable improvements in several areas such as the economy, public health, and crime that allow for these nationals to be safely returned to their home country.”³⁶⁹ The decision also noted—without pointing to specific evidence—that the TPS designation had facilitated entry into the United States of members of Tren de Aragua, a gang that President Trump designated as a “foreign terrorist organization.”³⁷⁰ The Department of Homeland Security (DHS) also terminated parole programs announced in 2022 and 2023 for nationals of Venezuela, Cuba, Haiti and Nicaragua.³⁷¹

³⁶⁶ Jacob Burg and Jan Jekielek, “Grenell: US Gave Venezuela Nothing in Exchange for 6 Freed American Hostages,” *The Epoch Times*, February 21, 2025, <https://www.theepochtimes.com/us/grenell-us-gave-venezuela-nothing-in-exchange-for-6-freed-american-hostages-5813721> (accessed March 6, 2025).

³⁶⁷ Ibid.

³⁶⁸ US Department of Homeland Security, US Citizenship and Immigration Services (USCIS), Temporary Protected Status Designated Country: Venezuela, webpage, [n.d.], <https://www.uscis.gov/humanitarian/temporary-protected-status/temporary-protected-status-designated-country-venezuela> (accessed April 11, 2025). However, on April 3, 2025, DHS extended the 2023 TPS designation for Venezuelans following a March 31, 2025, ruling by Judge Edward Chen, a federal judge in San Francisco. DHS stated it had “every intention of ending Venezuela TPS as soon as it obtains relief from the court order.”

³⁶⁹ US Department of Homeland Security, USCIS, Termination of the October 3, 2023 Designation of Venezuela for Temporary Protected Status, February 5, 2025, <https://www.federalregister.gov/documents/2025/02/05/2025-02294/termination-of-the-october-3-2023-designation-of-venezuela-for-temporary-protected-status> (accessed March 6, 2025).

³⁷⁰ Ibid.

³⁷¹ See US Department of Homeland Security, USCIS, Termination of Parole Processes for Cubans, Haitians, Nicaraguans, and Venezuelans, March 25, 2025, <https://www.federalregister.gov/documents/2025/03/25/2025-05128/termination-of-parole-processes-for-cubans-haitians-nicaraguans-and-venezuelans> (accessed April 15, 2025). See, however, Nate Raymond, “US judge to block Trump from revoking thousands of migrants’ legal status,” *Reuters*, April 10, 2025, <https://www.reuters.com/legal/us-judge-blocks-trump-revoking-thousands-migrants-legal-status-2025-04-10/> (accessed April 15, 2025).

The Trump administration reinstated deportation flights to Venezuela in February.³⁷² In February 2025, the United States sent 200 Venezuelan deportees to the military prison at Guantánamo Bay, a facility notorious for detaining and torturing terrorism suspects since 2002 and used in large part as a way of evading legal protections and public scrutiny in the US.³⁷³ Additionally, deportees have been sent to El Salvador and held in a maximum security prison known as the Center for Terrorism Confinement (Centro de Confinamiento del Terrorismo, CECOT), where they have been subjected to enforced disappearances and arbitrary detention.³⁷⁴ In many cases, US authorities have labeled Venezuelan deportees as members of the criminal group Tren de Aragua without presenting credible evidence.³⁷⁵

On February 26, President Trump announced that he was ending Chevron’s license to operate in Venezuela. He said that this was due to electoral conditions in Venezuela “which have not been met by the Maduro regime” and that the Venezuelan government was not returning “violent criminals” back to Venezuela at the “rapid pace that they agreed to.”³⁷⁶ Some US media outlets reported that the decision came amid pressure from Representatives Mario Diaz-Balart, Carlos Gimenez, and Maria Elvira Salazar, all of whom represent Florida in Congress.³⁷⁷ On March 4, the OFAC formally revoked the license and gave Chevron 30 days to wind down its operations.³⁷⁸

³⁷² “242 migrants deported from the United States returned to Venezuela on a flight from Mexico” (“242 migrantes deportados de Estados Unidos regresaron a Venezuela en vuelo desde México”), *Infobae*, February 25, 2025, <https://www.infobae.com/venezuela/2025/02/24/242-migrantes-deportados-de-estados-unidos-regresaron-a-venezuela-en-vuelo-desde-mexico/> (accessed March 7, 2025).

³⁷³ See “US deports 177 Venezuelan migrants from Guantanamo Bay,” *Al Jazeera*, February 21, 2025, <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2025/2/21/us-deports-dozens-of-venezuelan-migrants-from-guantanamo-bay> (accessed March 31, 2025); Carol Rosenberg, “U.S. Has Spent \$40 Million to Jail About 400 Migrants at Guantánamo,” *The New York Times*, March 31, 2025, updated April 1, 2025, <https://www.nytimes.com/2025/03/31/us/politics/migrants-guantanamo-costs.html> (accessed March 31, 2025).

³⁷⁴ “US/El Salvador: Venezuelan Deportees Forcibly Disappeared,” Human Rights Watch news release, April 11, 2025, <https://www.hrw.org/news/2025/04/11/us/el-salvador-venezuelan-deportees-forcibly-disappeared>.

³⁷⁵ Julie Turkewitz and Hamed Aleaziz, “Family of Venezuelan Migrant Sent to Guantánamo: ‘My Brother Is Not a Criminal,’” *The New York Times*, February 11, 2025, <https://www.nytimes.com/2025/02/11/world/americas/luis-castillo-venezuela-migrant-guantanamo-bay-trump.html> (accessed March 7, 2025).

³⁷⁶ Rapid Response 47 (@RapidResponse47), post to X, February 26, 2025, <https://x.com/RapidResponse47/status/1894828203568439434> (accessed March 6, 2025).

³⁷⁷ Marc Caputo, “Exclusive: How Congress’ ‘Crazy Cubans’ pushed Trump to kill oil deal,” *Axios*, March 3, 2025, <https://www.axios.com/2025/03/03/trump-congress-cuban-americans-venezuela-oil> (accessed March 6, 2025).

³⁷⁸ US Department of the Treasury, Office of Foreign Assets Control (OFAC), Venezuela Sanctions Regulations, 31 CFR part 591, General License No. 41a, March 4, 2025, <https://ofac.treasury.gov/media/934026/download?inline> (accessed March 6, 2025).

Broader decisions adopted by the Trump administration have also had an impact on efforts to promote accountability and human rights in Venezuela.

In particular, on January 20, President Trump signed an executive order pausing US foreign assistance across the world.³⁷⁹ On March 10, Marco Rubio announced that the administration had cancelled over 80 percent of United States Agency for International Development (USAID) contracts and thousands of State Department foreign assistance programs.³⁸⁰ These decisions have suspended funding for humanitarian and human rights groups playing key roles in Venezuela, including independent journalists and those providing legal and other support to people who have been arbitrarily detained.

The International Criminal Court

The International Criminal Court (ICC) is the permanent international court created to try people, including senior officials, accused of war crimes, crimes against humanity, genocide, and the crime of aggression.³⁸¹ It is a court of last resort, stepping in when national authorities are unable or unwilling to conduct genuine proceedings.

The ICC's Office of the Prosecutor (OTP) has launched a formal investigation into the situation in Venezuela. It seeks to determine whether the Office believes that crimes against humanity, as defined under the Rome Statute, have been committed in Venezuela and should be prosecuted.³⁸²

³⁷⁹ "US: Order Halting Foreign Aid Work Puts Lives at Risk," Human Rights Watch news release, January 27, 2025, <https://www.hrw.org/news/2025/01/27/us-order-halting-foreign-aid-work-puts-lives-risk>; "US: Trump Administration Guts Foreign Aid," Human Rights Watch news release, February 28, 2025, <https://www.hrw.org/news/2025/02/28/us-trump-administration-guts-foreign-aid>.

³⁸⁰ Marco Rubio (@marcorubio), post to X, March 10, 2025, https://x.com/marcorubio/status/1899021361797816325?ref_src=twsrc%5Egoogle%7Ctwcamp%5Eserp%7Ctwgr%5Etweet (accessed April 11, 2025).

³⁸¹ Rome Statute of the ICC (Rome Statute), A/CONF.183/9, July 17, 1998, entered into force July 1, 2002.

³⁸² See *Situation in the Bolivarian Republic of Venezuela I*, ICC, Decision Authorizing the Resumption of the Investigation Pursuant to Article 18(2) of the Statute, No. ICC-02/18, June 27, 2003, <https://www.icc-cpi.int/sites/default/files/CourtRecords/0902ebd1804e8166.pdf> (accessed April 9, 2025). The investigation was launched in 2021 after the Office of the Prosecutor's (OTP) preliminary examination found a "reasonable basis" to conclude that crimes against humanity had been committed, especially in the context of detention. The investigation was briefly paused in 2022 pursuant to a request from Venezuelan authorities to defer the OTP's work in favor of efforts being carried out by national authorities.

In February, the Trump administration issued an Executive Order authorizing the use of sanctions against court officials of the ICC and others supporting the court's work in investigations the US government objects to.³⁸³ While the Trump administration has not specifically objected to the Court's engagement with the situation in Venezuela, the sanctions program appears designed in part to chill broader cooperation with the ICC and intimidate Court officials, and will likely affect the rights of victims globally.

³⁸³ "US: Trump Authorizes International Criminal Court Sanctions," Human Rights Watch news release, February 7, 2025, <https://www.hrw.org/news/2025/02/07/us-trump-authorizes-international-criminal-court-sanctions>.

Recommendations

To Governments in Latin America, Europe and the United States:

- Publicly and privately call for the Maduro government to cease enforced disappearances, arbitrary detentions, torture, and other human rights violations.
- Use engagement with the Maduro government as leverage to secure verifiable, even if incremental, progress on human rights, in particular:
 - Disclosing the whereabouts and fate of all detainees to their families and ensuring that detainees' rights to communication, legal representation, and access to their case files are respected.
 - Allowing detainees to receive periodic visits from their relatives and lawyers.
 - Releasing people arbitrarily detained and subjected to enforced disappearances.
 - Dropping criminal cases against people facing arbitrary prosecution, including for fabricated alleged violations of the anti-terrorism and anti-hatred legislation.
 - Strictly complying with international legal obligations and international standards to detain children only as a last resort and for the shortest possible period of time, and guaranteeing detained children are always held separately from adults and safe from all forms of abuse.
 - Reforming the composition of the current National Electoral Council (Consejo Nacional Electoral, CNE) and allowing for meaningful voter registration and electoral audits ahead of local elections scheduled for May 2025.
- Encourage foreign governments whose assistance to the government of Venezuela directly aids its repression and abuse, such as Cuba, to end that support.
- Take steps to help ensure that those responsible for widespread human rights violations are held accountable for their actions, including by:
 - Expanding targeted sanctions on members of the security forces, armed “colectivos,” and Venezuelan officials responsible for grave human rights violations.
 - Advancing investigations and prosecutions of the most serious crimes committed in Venezuela, including under the principle of universal jurisdiction, to the extent permitted by domestic law.

- Supporting the International Criminal Court by ensuring it has the necessary resources and independence to advance its work globally and publicly condemning efforts to intimidate or interfere with its work, officials, and those cooperating with the institution.
- Supporting the work of the UN Independent International Fact-Finding Mission on the Bolivarian Republic of Venezuela by ensuring the mission has the necessary resources to advance its work and urging Venezuela to grant them access to the country.
- Supporting the work of the UN Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR) by ensuring the office has the necessary resources to advance its work and urging Venezuela to guarantee their full return into the country.
- Expand access to international protection for Venezuelans fleeing the country, including by:
 - Establishing streamlined procedures that prioritize and expedite asylum claims from Venezuelans who have fled the country in response to political persecution, arbitrary detention, or other forms of repression following the elections, particularly those facing imminent threats in Venezuela and in the host country, ensuring that their applications are reviewed within a reasonable timeframe.
 - Ensuring that no Venezuelan asylum seeker is deported or forced to return to a country where they may face persecution, as required under the principle of “non refoulment.”
 - Implementing a region-wide temporary protection regime that would grant all Venezuelans temporary legal status for a reasonable and renewable term, even if they may not qualify for refugee status under domestic law.
 - Reversing measures that effectively prevent access to asylum and push people into dangerous crossings, in line with the 2022 Los Angeles Declaration on Migration and Protection, including through a progressive liberalization of visa requirements and by creating easily accessible visa facilitation regimes or other measures for people legally staying in the country, taking into account the need for these mechanisms to be economically accessible and ensuring access to people who may not have all required documentation for reasons beyond their control.

- Support Venezuelan organizations, including those working from abroad, focused on human rights, democracy, and humanitarian aid, ensuring they can effectively represent and protect the rights of all Venezuelans while safeguarding their members.
- Promote a negotiated process between the Maduro government and the political opposition with the objective of seeking a transition towards democratic, rights-respecting governance.

To the US Government:

- Support accountability for human rights violations in Venezuela, including by:
 - Rescinding Executive Order 14203 authorizing ICC-related sanctions.
 - Considering imposing additional targeted sanctions on Venezuelan officials, security forces, and “colectivos” involved in human rights violations, ensuring that those responsible face individual consequences.
- Take measures to ensure protection for Venezuelan migrants and asylum seekers. These include:
 - Redesignating Temporary Protected Status (TPS) for Venezuelans, recognizing the ongoing conditions and risks Venezuelans face in their country.
 - Re-establishing safe pathways for Venezuelans fleeing persecution, including those who applied for resettlement and whose proceedings have been suspended.
 - Considering other safe and legal avenues, such as family reunification visas; expanded temporary work visas; and temporary visas for witnesses of serious crimes as enumerated in the eligibility criteria for U visas.
 - Suspending deportations, whether direct or through a third country, to Venezuela until there is an accurate risk assessment to determine if the deportee might face persecution if returned to Venezuela.
 - Ensuring timely and fair adjudication of asylum claims from Venezuelan exiles.
- Resume funding for humanitarian and human rights programming that assists Venezuelans, including programs providing legal and psychological support to victims of repression, and for implementing adequate protection mechanisms for those working within these organizations.

To Governments in Latin America:

- Leverage regional and international forums including the upcoming European Union (EU)-CELAC Summit, to be held in Colombia in November 2025, to urge Venezuelan authorities to release people arbitrarily detained and put an end to repression.
- Collaborate to guarantee the safety, dignity, and human rights of individuals currently sheltered in the Argentine Embassy in Caracas, which is under Brazil's protection, by engaging in direct negotiations with the Venezuelan government to secure safe passage for the asylees to a third country where they can receive adequate protection.

To EU Governments:

- Include the situation in Venezuela on the agenda of the EU-CELAC Summit, to be held in Colombia in November 2025, and ensure space for civil society participation.

To the UN Secretary General:

- Take steps, personally or through a special envoy, to promote a negotiated process between the Maduro government and the opposition with the objective of seeking a transition to democratic, rights-respecting governance.
- Publish the final report of the UN Electoral Technical Team's findings.
- Develop and implement strategies through the UN team in Venezuela to protect civil society organizations facing escalating harassment and repression, particularly considering the potential criminalization of their work following the NGO registration process mandated by the Law on Oversight, Regularization, Operations, and Financing of Non-Governmental Organizations and Non-Profit Social Organizations.

To UN member states at the UN Human Rights Council:

- Bring attention to the rights crisis in Venezuela, raising human rights concerns during Council meetings and debates, including through individual and joint statements highlighting the critical issue of enforced disappearances, and

condemning post-electoral human rights violations in Venezuela, including against children, political opponents, and foreign nationals.

- At the council, urge the Venezuelan government to allow for the full reinstatement of OHCHR's presence in Venezuela, guaranteeing full transparency regarding the terms of its operations. Such reinstatement should include access to detention centers, court proceedings, and sites of alleged human rights abuses to enable independent monitoring and reporting.

To the UN Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights:

- Closely monitor and publicly report on the human rights situation in Venezuela, publicly expressing concern about killings, enforced disappearances, arbitrary arrests, and other forms of repression.
- Increase engagement with civil society organizations, victims, and independent journalists to document abuses comprehensively, counteract state tools to restrict their work, and protect those persecuted.

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Above all, we are deeply grateful to all Venezuelans who, despite fear of repression and persecution, have trusted us with their stories.

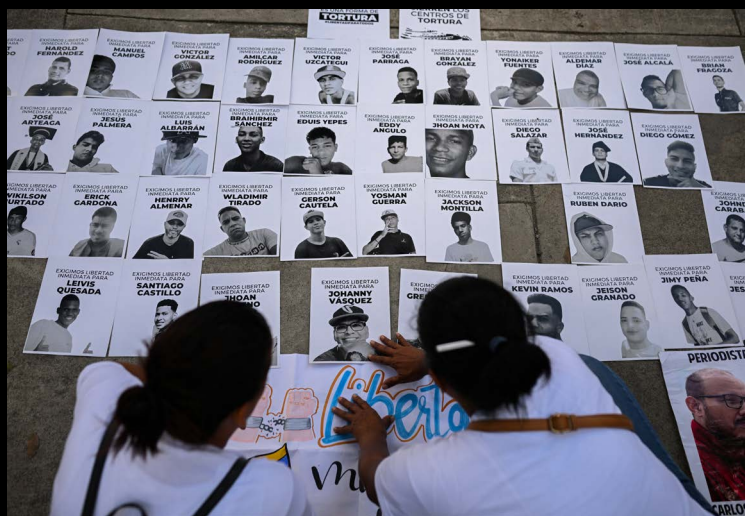
Punished for Seeking Change

Killings, Enforced Disappearances, and Arbitrary Detention Following Venezuela's 2024 Election

Following July 2024 presidential elections, electoral authorities in Venezuela announced that Nicolas Maduro had been re-elected president, despite substantial evidence to the contrary. When people took to the streets to demand a fair counting of votes, Venezuelan authorities responded with brutal repression. At least 24 protesters and bystanders were killed and over 2,000 people were detained in connection with post-electoral protests.

Punished for Seeking Change documents human rights violations committed against protesters, bystanders, opposition leaders, and critics in the post-electoral protests and the months that followed. It implicates Venezuelan authorities and pro-government armed groups, known as “colectivos,” in widespread abuses, including the killing of protesters and bystanders, enforced disappearances of opposition party members and foreign nationals, arbitrary detention and prosecution of children and others, and torture and ill-treatment of detainees.

With 8 million Venezuelans abroad, the rights crisis in Venezuela remains arguably the most consequential in the Western Hemisphere. Governments should support accountability efforts for these grave human rights violations, call for the release of people arbitrarily detained, and expand access to asylum and other forms of international protection for Venezuelans fleeing repression.



Relatives of detainees take part in a demonstration demanding the release of political prisoners in front of the Public Prosecutor's Office in Caracas on November 21, 2024.
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