

## BACKGROUND INFORMATION PRESIDENTIAL RECALL REFERENDUM PROCESS



- 11 April 2002 - After the massacre of *Puente Llaguno*, César Gaviria, Secretary General of the Organization of American States called on all sectors of Venezuela society to protest against the government of President Chavez in a peaceful and constitutional fashion. Gaviria called on the government to respect the legal and constitutional order, and do everything within its power to safeguard the lives of all Venezuelans. The Secretary General also called for the immediate restoration of freedom of the press and of expression and the open exchange of information, in accordance with democratic principles.
- 12 April 2002 - The members of the Group of Rio requested the OAS Secretary General to convoke a special session of the Permanent Council, based on article 20 of the Inter-American Democratic Charter, to carry out an evaluation of the situation in Venezuelan to establish the official position of the Organization of American States.
- 13 April 2002 - The Organization of American States resolved (Resolution 811) to send to Venezuela a mission headed by the Secretary General, with the aim of carrying out a fact-finding mission and undertaking the necessary diplomatic initiatives to promote the normalization of the democratic institutional framework.
- 1 May 2002 - The President of the Inter-American Commission of Human Rights Mr. Juan Méndez, announced a visit to Venezuela to work with the Venezuelan authorities and leaders of the Venezuelan society with a focus on strengthening the defense of human rights within a democratic context.
- 10 May 2002 - The Inter-American Commission of Human Rights through its President Juan Méndez condemned the tragic events of April 11<sup>th</sup>, 2002, where at least 16 people lost their lives. Additionally, Méndez condemned the attempted coup d'état and urged the Venezuelan government to conduct the investigations required by law to bring to justice those responsible for the massacre. Méndez expressed his concern for the great polarization observed in the Venezuelan society
- July 2002 - Former U.S. President Carter made a trip to Venezuela to lay the groundwork for negotiations. The Carter Center's effort is implemented by the Center's Americas and Conflict Resolution Programs.

- August 2002 - The Carter Center joined the Organization of American States and the United Nations Development Program, at the invitation of the government and several opposition groups, to begin a formal process to help resolve Venezuela's political crisis.
- August 2002 - The Organization of American States resolves (Resolution 821) to encourage the Venezuelan government and the groups opposed to President Chavez to work on a national reconciliation through a dialogue based on the Venezuelan constitution.
- November 2002 - The international tripartite working group (OAS, UNDP, Carter Center) began talks between the government and opposition political and civil society groups to search for an electoral option to move the country beyond the current crisis.
- 8 November 2002 - The Forum on Negotiation and Agreements is created.
- 2 December 2002 - Fourth national strike began with the participation of workers from the oil company. People opposed to Chavez signed informal forms to petition for a presidential recall referendum.
- 16 December 2002 - The Organization of American States resolves (Resolution 833), to urge the government of Venezuela and the *Coordinadora Democrática* to use good-faith negotiations to bring about a constitutional, democratic, peaceful and electoral resolution to the crisis that confronts the country.
- January 2003 - Former U.S. President Jimmy Carter traveled to Caracas to put forth two proposals to both sides: approve a constitutional amendment to shorten Chavez's presidential term and hold early elections, or use the existing constitutional provision for a recall referendum midway through the presidential term of office, with guarantees of international observation of the referendum.
- 2 January 2003 - The Supreme Court postpones a recall referendum process.
- 15 January 2003 - The OAS Secretary General César Gaviria creates the Group of Friends of Venezuela comprised by the Ministers of Foreign Affairs of Brazil, Chile, Mexico, Portugal, Spain and the Secretary of State of the United States of America.
- 2 February 2003 – First signature drive to petition the presidential recall referendum.
- 18 February 2003 - The joint declaration Against Violence and for Peace and Democracy in Venezuela is written and published by the Venezuelan government and the *Coordinadora Democrática*.
- 2 March 2003 - The Group of Friends of Venezuela encourages the government of Venezuela and the *Coordinadora Democrática* to bring about a constitutional, democratic, peaceful and electoral solution to the Venezuelan crisis.


- 25 March 2003 - The OAS put forth to both sides a document containing the procedures to be followed during a potential presidential recall referendum.
- 1 April 2003 - The Representatives of the Venezuelan government and the *Coordinadora Democrática* began talks regarding a presidential recall referendum.
- 29 May 2003 - The agreement, signed in Caracas by members of the Forum on Negotiation and Agreements and witnessed by The Carter Center and the OAS, calls on the Venezuelan government and opposition to respect human rights, freedom of expression, and the right to petition for recall referenda of elected officials.
- 20 August 2003 - The signatures collected in February to petition the presidential recall referendum were handed to the National Electoral Council (CNE)
- 26 August 2003 - The new Board of the National Electoral Council (CNE) was elected.
- 12 September 2003 – The newly elected CNE Board disqualified the signatures collected to petition the presidential recall referendum claiming the signature drive took place before the mid term of President Chavez's mandate. CNE Board members also complained about the design of the petition forms.
- 18 November 2003 - The OAS and Carter Center announced they would observe the signature drive scheduled for November 28 until December 1, 2003.
- 28 November – 1 December 2003 - Second Signature drive to petition a presidential recall referendum.
- 1 December 2003 - The OAS, based on the reports presented by the Mission of international observers, declared that the signature drive was carried out in an orderly fashion. The international observers reported that the volunteers working at the collection centers fulfilled their duties following the procedure established by the electoral authorities. The OAS Mission expressed its concern about public statements made to discredit the signature collection process and found the people who declared that such statements were responsible for any deterioration of the peaceful environment that had characterized the journey.
- 19 December 2003 - Signatures are handed over to the electoral authorities.
- 29 December 2003 - President Chavez said the signature drive was a fraud. OAS Secretary General promptly reiterated in a press conference that the signature collection process was carried out within the referendum regulations created by the electoral authorities.
- 4 January 2004 - CNE announces the result of the signature validation process was to be published on 13 February 2004.
- 14 January 2004 - The Venezuelan Electoral Council (CNE) announced the participation of the OAS and Carter Center in the signature validation process.

- 30 January 2004 - The UN Secretary General Kofi Annan welcomed the constructive attitude of all parties in the search for a constitutional solution, as established in the agreement of 29 May 2003 signed by the government and the opposition *Coordinadora Democrática*. Annan welcomed the decision of the National Electoral Council (CNE) to involve international observers in its ongoing work, an important element in ensuring a peaceful, electoral and constitutional solution to the country's political impasse.
- 13 February 2004 - CNE postpones ruling on validation process for 19 February 2004.
- 19 February 2004 - CNE postpones ruling on validation process for 29 February 2004.
- 24 February 2004 - The CNE board decides to place under scrutiny 1,918,710 signatures on the grounds of irregularities related to signatures with similar handwriting.
- 24 February 2004 - The OAS and the Carter Center send a proposal to analyze a statistically representative random sample to determine the scope of the problem with the so called "planillas planas" of forms with similar handwriting.
- 27 February 2004 - The Venezuelan groups in favor of a presidential recall referendum organized a rally to hand in a letter to the heads of state and representative of the G15, meeting in Caracas during the Summit of developing countries. National Guardsmen shot tear gas and plastic bullets to the peaceful protesters. One person died and dozens were injured.
- 29 February 2004 - CNE postpones the ruling on validation process until 1 March 2004. The CNE announced the procedure to carry out the appeal process where 1,918,710 signatures and fingerprints will be compared to the data stored in the Department of Identification and Naturalization (DIEX), during a five day period. The CNE announced that on 25 March 2004, the Venezuelan people will know if a presidential recall referendum will take place this year.
- 1 March 2004 - The CNE President Francisco Carrasquero announced in a televised press conference that observers from the OAS and the Carter Center were withdrawing from monitoring the country's recall drive, after CNE board member Sobellas Mejías resigned. Jennifer McCoy – Director Americas Program and Francisco Diez – Carter Center Representative in Venezuela, denied CNE President's announcement and said the Carter Center Representatives are not leaving Venezuela, on the contrary, they will continue to work as facilitators during the crisis resolution process and as observers during the signature validation process.
- 2 March 2004 - CNE President Francisco Carrasquero announced that out of 3,4xx,xxx only 1,832,493 signatures are valid to petition a presidential recall referendum; 876,017 signatures are subject to an appeals process.
- 2 March 2004 - Fernando Jaramillo – OAS and Jennifer McCoy – Carter Center, announced in a televised press conference that they do not agree with the CNE ruling regarding the forms with similar handwriting. They explained the CNE has ignored the principle of presumption of good faith of the voter.

- 4 March 2004 - The Permanent Representative of Venezuela to the UN, Milos Alcalay, resigns. Alcalay stated he can no longer work for a government that violates human rights, democratic principles and diplomatic dialogue.
- 5 March 2004 - José Miguel Vivanco, Executive Director for Human Rights Watch announced that there have been numerous allegations of beatings and ill-treatment of civilians detained by the guard and by police. Vivanco said a commission appointed by the Supreme Court reportedly fired three judges in Caracas for granting provisional release from detention to opposition protestors: "The firing of judges handling politically sensitive cases reflects a dangerous politicization of justice in Venezuela".<sup>1</sup>
- 11 March 2004 - The Constitutional Chamber of the Venezuelan Supreme Court ordered the Electoral Chamber not to make any ruling related to the CNE and the Recall Referendum. The decision violated the court's norm that stipulates all decisions shall be made by a minimum of four justices to be considered valid. (Three justices made the decision). "First time in Venezuela's judicial history that a Supreme Court's chamber orders another chamber not to rule on matters it oversees".<sup>2</sup>
- 14 March 2004 – José Miguel Vivanco, Executive Director for Human Rights Watch announced that there is clear evidence of human rights violations in Venezuela. Vivanco confirmed that the majority of the detainees had been released by the authorities.<sup>3</sup>
- 15 March 2004 - The President of the Electoral Chamber of the Supreme Court, Alberto Martini Urdaneta, rejected the decision made by the Constitutional Chamber and described it as an attempt to break the rule of law. The Electoral Chamber's ruling ordered the CNE to consider as valid the 876,017 signatures the electoral authorities had placed under scrutiny. Martini Urdaneta announced that only those citizens who claim their signatures were used furtively shall go to the appeals process, according to article 31 of the referendum regulations.
- 16 March 2004 - The President of the National Electoral Board, Jorge Rodríguez announced the CNE will appeal against the decision of the Electoral Chamber of the Venezuelan Supreme Court.

(Sources: Documents and Communiqués emitted by the Organization of American States and the Carter Center, Newspaper El Universal)

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<sup>1</sup> Human Rights Watch Communiqué – 5 March, 2004

<sup>2</sup> Daily International News Review, by Alexandra Beech

<sup>3</sup> Human Rights Watch Press Conference, José Miguel Vivanco – 14 March, 2004

## VENEZUELA

### PERFORMANCE OF THE CHAVEZ ADMINISTRATION

#### FOREIGN DIRECT INVESTMENT<sup>1</sup>

US \$ (Million)	1999	2000	2001	2002	2003
<b>FDI</b>	3,290	4,465	3,448	1,389	500

#### ECONOMIC GROWTH<sup>2</sup>

Percentile Variation	1998	1999	2000	2001	2002	2003
<b>GDP</b>	0.2	-6.1	3.2	2.7	-9.0	-9.5

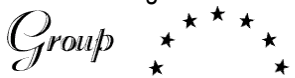
#### UNEMPLOYMENT<sup>3</sup>

	1998	1999	2000	2001	2002	2003 (Jul)
<b>Unemployment</b>	11%	15%	14%	13%	18%	23.8%

#### POPULATION BELOW POVERTY LINE<sup>4</sup>

Percentage of total population	1998	2000	2002
<b>Poverty</b>	57.6%	60.3%	72%

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<sup>1</sup> UN – CEPAL – Foreign Investment in Latin America and the Caribbean, Annual Report 2002.  
Gustavo García - 2003

<sup>2</sup> Venezuelan National Institute of Statistics, Venezuelan Central Bank and Center of Analysis and Documentation of the Venezuelan Workers (CENDA)

<sup>3</sup> United Nations Division of Statistics and Economic Projects (CEPAL)

<sup>4</sup> Poverty 1999-2001 By Matías Riutort, Matías Riutort's update for actual 2002 (IIES-UCAB)

## POVERTY AND CRIME UNDER CHAVEZ

- By the end of 2003, 80% of the Venezuelan population was under the poverty line. 50% of that total living in critical poverty.<sup>5</sup>
- 3,000,000 children live in extreme poverty<sup>5</sup>
- 10 out of 10,000 children live on the streets<sup>6</sup>
- During the first four years of the Chavez administration, the number of poor households in Venezuela increased by 650,000 – equivalent to 3,380,000 people –
- **CRIME:** Every hour more than one person die in Venezuela
- Since 1999 Venezuela has been in the top six countries with highest criminality rates in the world
- Kidnappings:  
Number of kidnappings / total year = 137  
1999 – 2000 # Kidnappings = 271 (+ 97.7%)  
2000 – 2001 # Kidnappings = 350 (+ 28.8%)  
2001 – 2002 # Kidnappings = 515 (+ 47.1%)
- The total number of kidnappings from 1999 until 2003 represent 55% of all kidnappings reported in the country since 1963.<sup>7</sup>
- Extermination groups have killed more than 1,200 Venezuelans since 1999.<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> Fundacredesa – A Non Government Organization

<sup>6</sup> UNICEF

<sup>7</sup> Newspaper El Universal – August 4<sup>th</sup>, 2003

<sup>8</sup> “Fuerza Integradora” and “Víctimas Venezolanas de Violaciones de los Derechos Humanos”

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**COMMUNIQUÉ  
(SUMMARY)  
Feb. 25<sup>th</sup>, 2004**

**The Venezuelan Democratic Coalition (*Coordinadora Democrática*),**

Considering the Venezuelan National Electoral Council (CNE) has decided to place under scrutiny the so called “planillas planas” or forms with similar handwriting in the sections containing personal data.

Taking into consideration the complexity of the appeals process to be carried out by the Superior Technical Committee of the electoral body, process that may result in the invalidation of 1,918,710 signatures on the grounds of irregularities not contemplated in the constitution.

Considering the National Electoral Council (CNE) has violated the following articles of the Venezuelan constitution:

Article 62: The Venezuelan people have the right to participate freely in political and national matters.

Article 63: The suffrage is a citizen’s right.

Article 66: The Venezuelan people have the right to demand public authorities to be accountable for their actions.

Article 72: The people of Venezuela have the right to recall all public officers elected by popular election, including the President of the Republic.

Article 22 of the Referendum Regulation: What establishes the legitimacy of the will of the voter is the signature and the fingerprint, not the manner in which personal data is included in the petition form.

Article 29 of the Referendum Regulations: Establishes the reasons why a petition form should be placed under scrutiny or be invalidated. Similar handwriting in the sections containing personal data, is not established in this article, as reason to order an appeals process or to invalidate the signatures contained in such petition form.

Taking into account the electoral authorities have violated fundamental internationally recognized principles of constitutional law, when charging the citizens with the faults committed by the authorities, and ignoring the will of the people through excessive technicalities.



Recalling what is stipulated in the point 12 of the Agreement signed on 29 May 2003, between the Venezuelan government and the *Coordinadora Democrática*, (with the Organization of American States, the Carter Center and the United Nations Development Program as guarantors) a presidential recall referendum, as stipulated in article 72, shall bring about the solution to the Venezuelan crisis. Therefore, this type of obstruction to carry out the agreement is in violation of the Resolution 833 of the Permanent Council of the Organization of American States.

Considering the electoral authorities violated article 21 of the Inter-American Democratic Charter for interfering with the success of the diplomatic mission of the international observers sent by the Organization of American States and the Carter Center.

Emphasizing the fact that the Venezuelan constitution confers to the people of Venezuela the national sovereignty. A ruling against a presidential recall referendum process would be nothing more than a maneuver to prevent the people of Venezuela from exercising their constitutional rights, jeopardizing the peaceful resolution of the political crisis that confronts the country and attempting to destroy the democratic foundations of the nation.

Resolves:

- 1) To declare the ruling of the Venezuelan National Electoral Council (CNE) a serious offense against the constitution, the referendum regulations created by the electoral body itself, and the sovereignty of the people of Venezuela. The delays and excessive technicalities of the electoral authorities have interfered and obstructed the recall referendum process.
- 2) To question the good-faith of those CNE board members who voted in favor of placing 213,190 petition forms under scrutiny, for their decision is unconstitutional and ignores the will of the Venezuelan people
- 3) To denounce a possible interference of the government in the signature validation process. President Chávez and high ranking government officials have constantly discredit the signature drive process and accused the opposition of committing fraud.
- 4) To support the international observers from the OSA and Carter Center, and to accept and support their proposal to analyze a statistically representative random sample to determine the scope of the problem with the forms placed under scrutiny.
- 5) To exhort all those Venezuelans in public office, labor unions, etc., to denounce the violations of the constitutional rights of the Venezuelan people, perpetrated by the electoral authorities.
- 6) To convoke peaceful rallies to protest against the CNE's ruling

Summary and translation by Maritza Ramírez de Agena

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**MESSAGE FROM THE COORDINADORA DEMOCRÁTICA  
TO THE HEADS OF STATE AND REPRESENTATIVES OF THE G15  
(SUMMARY)**

You have come to Venezuela to witness the fight of the people of Venezuela for their constitutional rights. Our country has had for decades a solid democratic tradition, and our society is determined to defend the freedoms established in our constitution.

These are difficult times in Venezuela. We, the Venezuelan people are committed to find a democratic, constitutional, electoral, and importantly, a peaceful solution to the political crisis that confronts the country, as established in the agreement signed on May 2003 between the government of Venezuela and the *Coordinadora Democrática*.

After eight months of negotiations facilitated by the Secretary General of the Organization of American States, the Carter Center and the United Nations Development Program, the Agreement of the Forum for Negotiation and Agreements in Venezuela was signed. In the agreement, the Venezuelan government and the democratic coalition *Coordinadora Democrática* committed themselves to a presidential recall referendum.

Numerous heads of state and leaders of recognized international institutions and organizations have expressed their concern for the continuous deterioration of the rule of law in Venezuela, the political polarization and the escalating violence in the country. Representatives of the international community have acknowledged the risk of further deterioration of the democratic system in Venezuela unless a presidential recall referendum is activated by the electoral authorities.

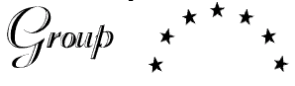
The democratic coalition has since, given concessions to speed up the recall referendum process. The electoral authorities have delayed in two opportunities their answer to the petition. They received 3,448,747 signatures two and a half months ago and have yet to pronounce a ruling. Furthermore, the CNE board members decided by simple majority 3-2 votes, to placed under scrutiny 213.190 forms containing approximately 1,918,710 signatures.



The members of the *Coordinadora Democrática*, would like to emphasize the importance the Summit of the G15 has for President Chavez's international marketing campaign, during this crucial time. The social crisis and economic chaos during the last five years, the higher level of public debt, the closing of thousands of small and medium sized businesses, higher levels of unemployment, poverty, crime and violence and the erosion of the rule of law in Venezuela have revealed the failure of the policies implemented by the Chavez administration. At the same time, the Venezuelan people have witnessed the escalating autocracy exhibited by President Chavez. The visit of the head of state of your country to Caracas at this critical time, will be exploited by Chavez as a token of your country's support of his regime.

The Venezuelan democracy has contributed to the advance made on South-South cooperation, and it played an important role in the foundation of the G15. In the name of our common history, we, the Venezuelan people ask for your solidarity and your support to promote the presidential recall referendum process as the peaceful solution to the political crisis in the country.

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## **Chavez Denounces Bush as Foes Fight Troops**

Sun Feb 29, 2004 09:18 PM ET

By Patrick Markey



CARACAS, Venezuela (Reuters) - Venezuelan President Hugo Chavez called President Bush an "---hole" on Sunday for meddling, and vowed never to quit office like his Haitian counterpart as troops battled with opposition protesters demanding a recall referendum against him.

Chavez, who often says the U.S. is backing opposition efforts to topple his leftist government, accused Bush of heeding advice from "imperialist" aides to support a brief 2002 coup against him.

"He was an ---hole to believe them," Chavez roared at a huge rally of supporters in Caracas.

The Venezuelan leader's comments came as fresh violence broke out on the streets of the capital, where National Guard troops clashed with opposition protesters pressing for a vote to end his five-year rule.

Military helicopters roared in low runs overhead as soldiers fired tear gas and plastic bullets to repel several hundred opposition demonstrators who threw stones and set up burning barricades in eastern Caracas late into the night.

Troops and opposition activists also skirmished in other cities.

"We call on the country to continue with peaceful resistance," opposition leader Enrique Mendoza said. "This fight will last as long as necessary."

A soldier and a cameraman were shot and injured during the clashes and an opposition protester was wounded in the head by gunmen firing from motorbikes, witnesses and officials said.

Electoral authorities, citing the need to preserve peace in the country, said they were postponing until Monday the preliminary results of their verification of the opposition's petition for a recall vote.

One demonstrator carried a banner reading: "Bye bye Aristide, Chavez you're next," referring to Haiti's leader Jean-Bertrand Aristide, who fled into exile on Sunday in the face of an armed rebellion.

But the firebrand populist vowed to defeat any attempt to unseat him and threatened to cut off oil supplies to the United States from the world's No. 5 crude oil exporter should Washington try an invasion or trade sanctions.

"Venezuela is not Haiti and Chavez is not Aristide," he said.

Tens of thousands of Chavez supporters marched earlier on Sunday to protest what they condemned as U.S. meddling in Venezuelan affairs. The State Department routinely dismisses the president's accusations.

The referendum campaign is the latest political fight for Chavez, who survived the short-lived 2002 coup and a strike last year by opponents who fear his self-styled "revolution" is slowly turning Venezuela into a Cuban-style communist state.

Since his first election in 1998, the president has vowed to improve the lives of the impoverished that see little of the country's oil wealth. But his opponents say he has failed and has instead pushed the country into economic ruin.

Political tensions have flared again recently as setbacks delayed a ruling by the National Electoral Council on whether to allow the recall referendum to go forward. Two protesters were shot and killed on Friday during an opposition march.

The Organization of American States (OAS) and the Carter Center, which are observing the referendum process, appealed for calm on Sunday ahead of the council decision.

Electoral authorities said they would make a preliminary ruling Monday on whether the opposition collected the minimum 2.4 million valid signatures required for a vote. The opposition says it handed over 3.4 million signatures. Opposition leaders accuse pro-government officials in the electoral council of trying to block the poll by disqualifying many valid signatures. Chavez says his opponents' petition is riddled with forgeries.

## **AMNESTY INTERNATIONAL**

### **PRESS RELEASE**

#### **Venezuela: Respect for human rights must be guaranteed**

The authorities must ensure protection of human rights of all citizens in the increasingly violent political climate surrounding the decision of the National Electoral Commission expected today, Amnesty International said today.

At least three people were killed and up to 50 injured, including two journalists, over the weekend in the context of clashes between National Guard and Anti and Pro government demonstrators. There have been allegations of excessive use of force, in particular by the National Guard, while policing these demonstrators, some which were reportedly violent. Heavily armed military and civilian intelligence units also reportedly participated in policing operations. There have also reportedly been a number of detentions of opposition supporters during opposition demonstrations in different parts of the country.

Amnesty International is calling for all law enforcement officials to abide by international standards on the use of force and firearms when policing demonstrations and maintaining public order and for all allegations of human rights abuses to be effectively investigated. The organization is also urging the authorities to ensure full respect of the rights of any persons detained in connection with the disturbances.

Venezuela's smoldering political crisis may result in further mass street demonstrations by both pro and anti government supporters in the coming days. While it is primarily the Government's responsibility to ensure the protection of human rights of all citizens, all social and political actors, whether opposition or government supporters, should avoid contributing to the spiraling political violence and the deterioration in the human rights situation.

#### **Background information**

Over the weekend the National Electoral Commission postponed until Monday 1 March the publication of its decision on the validation of signatures gathered to petition a recall referendum on President Hugo Chavez. The decision is expected to require further validation of signatures gathered. The potential for conflict around the decision is grave.

The policing of public demonstrations has frequently resulted in human rights violations by the police and security forces in Venezuela over the last 15 years. The authorities have consistently failed to investigate and punish officials responsible for abuses or effectively implement United Nations guidelines on the use of force or firearms. Incidents of political violence, attributed to both government or opposition supporters, that have taken place under President Chavez's administration, such as the deaths and injuries that occurred in the context of the attempted coup of 11 April 2002, have not been investigated effectively and have gone unpunished. The impunity enjoyed by the perpetrators encourages further human rights violations in a particularly volatile political climate.

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## **HUMAN RIGHTS WATCH**

### **Venezuela Investigate Charges of Abuses Against Protestors**

(Washington D.C., March 5, 2004) — The Venezuelan government should conduct a thorough investigation into allegations that state security forces have beaten and abused detained protestors this week, Human Rights Watch said today. The investigation should also examine the circumstances of killings that occurred during confrontations between protestors and police.

“Given how volatile the political climate in Venezuela is right now, it’s critical that government security forces exercise appropriate restraint in responding to protests,” said José Miguel Vivanco, executive director of the Americas Division of Human Rights Watch. “The government needs to investigate these allegations of brutality to ensure that members of the police and the National Guard haven’t stepped over the line.”

There have been reports of at least nine protestors killed and dozens of people injured—including several journalists—during confrontations with the National Guard over the past week. Under international standards, the intentional use of lethal force by law enforcement officials is permissible only when strictly unavoidable to protect life.

There have also been numerous allegations of beatings and ill-treatment of civilians detained by the guard and by police. In Zulia State, for example, members of the National Guard detained 23 students and two professors who participated in a protest march on Monday. One of the professors reported to Human Rights Watch that he and five students were beaten by the guard members who detained them. The detainees were released the following day after a judge threw out charges against them.

There have also been reports of acts of vandalism committed by some demonstrators, as well as attacks on the pro-government press.

A commission appointed by the Supreme Court is reported to have summarily fired three judges in Caracas this week after they exercised their authority to grant provisional release from detention to opposition protestors.

“The firing of judges handling politically sensitive cases reflects a dangerous politicization of justice in Venezuela,” said Vivanco.