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Opposition Denounces President Chavez

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Allegations of human rights abuses have become a part of the political tug-of-war between supporters of Venezuela's president Hugo Chavez and his opponents. Each side is accusing the other of killing political opponents, with anti-Chavez groups taking their complaints to the International Criminal Court (ICC) in The Hague, Netherlands. A fire that burned a total of eight soldiers being held in a punishment cell has also focused national attention on alleged mistreatment of soldiers in Venezuela.

Opposition lawyers bring complaint to Hague

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A group of lawyers asked the United Nations' ICC to investigate President Chavez for crimes against humanity, alleging that abuses include assassinations and tortures with political motivations. Alfredo Romero, an attorney representing the relatives of 52 victims of political violence in Venezuela, said on March 31 that he had met with prosecutors from the ICC and asked them to investigate the abuse complaints.

"This is a complaint against President Chavez and his government for crimes against humanity," Romero told Reuters news agency. Romero is part of a group of lawyers assisting relatives of at least 19 victims shot dead during a march against Chavez on April 11, 2002 near the presidential palace in downtown Caracas.

The violence led to the brief overthrow of Chavez, when a group of high-ranking military officers took control of events and removed him from power for 48 hours (see NotiSur, 2002-04-19 and 2002-05-03). But the executive, who returned to his post at the hands of loyal troops and his supporters, has blamed his adversaries for the dead and wounded who fell during the violence that surrounding his exit from and return to power.

The head of the group Victimas Venezolanas de Violencia Politica, Mohamad Merhi, said the complaint "includes documented cases of 20 killings of opposition demonstrators and more than 40 arbitrary detentions." Also, he said, there are "21 cases of torture and numerous cases of physical mistreatment and other inhumane acts, including cases of sexual abuse, all for political reasons." Merhi, who is the father of one of the 19 killed during the failed coup, presented the complaint in person. The complaint demands "immediate protection measures," he said, arguing that there are "repeated and planned [acts of human rights abuse] planned by the Chavez government."

"The group of Venezuelan victims found itself forced to come to the International Criminal Court when faced with the absolute negligence and partiality of the Justice Department, the People's Council, and the Venezuelan tribunals in failing to carry out the complaints on human rights violations," Merhi said.
**Government counterattacks over 62 dead "Chavistas"**

The Venezuelan government announced on April 3 that it would counterattack the complaint of crimes against humanity by presenting 62 cases of assassinated "Chavista," or pro-Chavez, campesinos. "Shortly, we are going to bring a complaint before international organizations for the killing of 62 campesino leaders by elements of the opposition," announced Vice President Jose Vicente Rangel. He did not say whether the complaint would also be brought before The Hague or other courts. He said the deaths had occurred in the states of Zulia, Apure and Tachira, which all share borders with Colombia, in the five years since Chavez took power.

"The regime of assassinations, by common consent of opposition elements and landlords, applies a policy of genocide on the border and thus 62 campesino leaders have been killed, all of whom belong to the government or government parties," said Rangel. Regarding the accusations against Chavez for crimes against humanity presented to the ICC a few days earlier, Rangel maintained that "it's a thing of no interest, of no importance. It deals with forged complaints."

Willian Lara, a deputy with the ruling party, said the complaint against Chavez "lacked foundations and forms part of a propaganda campaign designed to morally and politically assassinate the president," adding that he thought the complaint would not prosper in the courts.

**Burned soldiers' deaths brings criticism**

The regularly anti-Chavez mass media turned its attention away from the conflict over the recall referendum drive against Chavez (see NotiSur, 2004-03-12) to look at a case of eight soldiers who were burned in a fire while they were being held in a punishment cell. The incident has cast a strong light on the military punishment codes and the Chavez administration's depiction of the incident.

On March 30, a fire broke out in a punishment cell in Fort Mara, in the northwestern Guajira region on the border with Colombia, where eight soldiers were being held under arrest for reporting late to duty. The eight burn victims were taken to different hospitals. One of them, Orlando Bustamante, died on April 5. That day, on his weekly radio and TV program 'Alo Presidente', Chavez attacked the media for blowing the incident out of proportion to favor the opposition, when the soldiers had only suffered "minor burns."

Information Minister Jesse Chacon resigned, blaming himself for the incorrect information that had reached the president. But a week later, Chavez himself assumed responsibility for the mistake, and reinstated Chacon. Another young recruit, Angel Pedreanez, died of a heart attack after 35 days of agony as a burn victim. Bustamante also died of cardio-respiratory arrest, leading some opposition politicians to call the death "a strange coincidence."

In parliament and the media, the opposition is demanding an impartial investigation, and maintains that the responsibility of the military commanders in the western border region is being covered up by Chavez and Defense Minister Gen. Jorge Garcia Carneiro. Garcia Carneiro and army commander Raul Baduel were military school classmates of Chavez.
The military justice system has accepted Attorney-General Isaias Rodriguez's request that a civilian court handle the case involving the Fort Mara fire to establish who was responsible. As the outrage over the fire built, reports emerged that another soldier had died, in the western region of Zulia. According to his family, his superiors threw him into a pit of rotten-smelling water as punishment.

However, Garcia Carneiro said he drowned "during swimming practice." "If someone would dedicate themselves to documenting reports of excesses in the punishment of recruits in Venezuela, they could compile an entire volume of human rights violations," said Marino Alvarado, legal coordinator of the Programa Venezolano de Educacion Accion en Derechos Humanos (PROVEA), one of the country's leading human rights groups.

The human rights lawyer said "the rules on deprivation of liberty can only be established by law, not by regulations like the ones on disciplinary punishment, which openly contradict the constitution." With respect to the fire in Fort Mara, "we cannot affirm that the armed forces violated human rights, as if they had the intention of burning the soldiers, but there was omission in their responsibility for taking care of" the recruits, said Alvarado.

Family members have alleged that troops or officers approached the punishment cell from outside with a flamethrower. Officials have said the soldiers started the fire from the inside in an escape attempt and that the army no longer uses flamethrowers. The Fort Mara incident coincided with a civil court decision that condemned an officer to 21 years in prison for burning a soldier to death after dousing him with flammable liquid three years ago.

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