

10-13-2006

Six Miners Gunned Down, Venezuela Promises Investigation

LADB Staff

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digitalrepository.unm.edu/notisur>

Recommended Citation

LADB Staff. "Six Miners Gunned Down, Venezuela Promises Investigation." (2006). <https://digitalrepository.unm.edu/notisur/13531>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Latin America Digital Beat (LADB) at UNM Digital Repository. It has been accepted for inclusion in NotiSur by an authorized administrator of UNM Digital Repository. For more information, please contact amywinter@unm.edu.

Six Miners Gunned Down, Venezuela Promises Investigation

by LADB Staff

Category/Department: Venezuela

Published: 2006-10-13

Venezuela's government condemned military actions that left six people dead after soldiers attacked illegal miners in southeastern Venezuela. The government of President Hugo Chavez denounced the killings and promised to prosecute military officials involved in the massacre. Parts of the military also face murder allegations in an eight-person massacre in the Colombia border region, while several soldiers and police were sentenced to prison for shooting students one year ago in Caracas.

"Illegal" miners in Bolivar repressed with "excessive" force

Venezuela's army used "excessive" force in a clash with miners that left six people dead, Chavez said, as he pledged to bring the killers to justice. Preliminary investigations indicated the military is responsible for the massacre, Chavez said in a televised news conference Sept. 26 in Caracas. The country's defense and justice ministries were investigating, in conjunction with authorities in Bolivar state, where the killing occurred, he said. "We know at the very least there was an excessive use of firearms by a group of soldiers," Chavez said. "This government isn't covering up, nor will it cover up any abuse. This is a government that respects human rights." The killings are the latest twist in Venezuela's fight to eliminate illegal mining in the country. The government has repeatedly clashed with illegal miners, who often use mercury and water blasting to search for gold, causing environmental damage.

"The guilty will be punished," Heavy Industries and Mining Minister Jose Khan said in a televised interview. The confrontation may have begun when miners moved into a zone that was occupied by native Indians who subsequently asked the military to intervene, Khan said. The killings come as Chavez is running for re-election, with opposition candidate Manuel Rosales focusing on growing insecurity in the country (see NotiSur, 2006-09-01).

Venezuelans go to the polls on Dec. 3.

Protesters burned tires and blocked access to the town of La Paragua on Sept. 25, close to the scene of the killings and about 550 km southeast of Caracas, while rioters in nearby Maripa looted and burned the mayor's residence, Globovision reported earlier. Both villages are in Bolivar. On Sept. 23, Manuel Lizardi, a miner in Turumban on the La Paragua River, arrived wounded to the hospital in the regional capital of Ciudad Bolivar, reporting that military troops descended on the "bulla" (rural mine) the previous day and fired on miners. Four of his companions were killed, but he escaped after pretending to be dead. Judicial police also discovered the bodies of Jose Rondon and Ramon Garcia, as well as Brazilians Livardo Sanchez and Yovanny Lima.

The presence of Brazilian miners among the massacred turned the affair into an international incident, with the Brazilian government pressing for an investigation. Rumors spread through the 50,000-hectare area where some 40,000 miners work, said mining union leaders. Local residents rumored that there were more missing miners and were also saying that the military had allegedly seized 10 kilograms of gold when they were destroying the miner's equipment, materials and site in Turumban.

General Francisco Enrich, commander of Theatre of Operations 5, which covers all of southeastern Venezuela, first reported the incident as "a dispute among miners over a gold bulla." Defense Minister Gen. Raul Baduel, later spoke of a gun battle between gold miners and soldiers. According to Baduel, soldiers on board a helicopter spotted illegal mining operations in the area "and the aircraft barely had time to drop off the troops before it was forced to take off, after gunmen took cover in the surrounding jungle and began shooting at the troops. Weapons were seized at the site."

Engineer Victor Castillo, a resident of the riverside mining town of La Paragua, said the story he heard from Lizardi is that the soldiers landed and simply opened fire on the miners without saying a word. He also said some were shot again, after they were wounded and had fallen to their knees.

Javier Lezama, an advocate for the La Paragua miners, said that, "it is hard to believe that a few miners who have maybe one or two hunting or homemade weapons would attack army troops that arrived in a helicopter gunship armed with rifles and other automatic weapons." Baduel ordered an investigation, turned over the soldiers involved in the Turumban action to the Public Prosecutor's Office and said that, "The armed forces will not condone any illicit act."

Marino Alvarado, coordinator of the local human rights group Programa Venezolano de Educacion-Accion en Derechos Humanos (PROVEA), said that, "the Defense Ministry's strong stance, willingness to cooperate and the fact that the case is being dealt with in the sphere of civil justice are very positive developments."

On Sept. 24-25, hundreds of furious miners, their families and other local residents protested in the streets of La Paragua and Maripa, the municipal capital, whose mayor, Juan Carlos Figarella, was mentioned by Baduel as the person who made the complaint about the illegal mine. An army guard post and Mayor Figarella's house were overrun and torched, as were government trucks belonging to the Bolivar state government and the Environment Ministry. The road leading to the area was blocked for hours with burning tires and vehicles.

The governor of the state of Bolivar, Francisco Rangel, said he would take steps to guarantee public order and contain the violence, with army support. Opposition parties blasted the use of violence against the miners, and former leftist governor of Bolivar, Andres Velasquez, said, "even in the case of illegal mining, no one has the right to take the lives of miners." Venezuela has repeatedly promised to overhaul the country's mining legislation to provide more land for small- and medium-sized miners to stop illegal mining.

Khan said a final vote on legislation that would eliminate some mining concessions, part of Chavez's bid to take control of idle gold and diamond fields in the country, would be delayed to allow more

conversations with small- and medium-sized mining operations. Venezuela produced 20.5 metric tons of gold in 2004, compared with Peru, the largest producer in South America with 173 MT, according to London-based GFMS Ltd., a precious metals researcher. William Saud, head of a mining union, said, "the problem is that the government decided that the environment in the zone should be protected, and that we have to shift to different kinds of work. That's fine. But where are the programs, and until they're implemented, how can miners make a living for their families?..There are about 40,000 of us in the area we support about 200,000 people in Bolivar," a state of 1.5 million inhabitants.

A local gold and diamond miner who gave his name as Manuel told Inter Press Service that on a really lucky day, a miner can earn up to US\$1,500, whereas government programs offer only a maximum of this amount over three months to encourage people to work in agriculture, reforestation, crafts or tourism. As of last August, the government banned all mining activity in the Caroni basin, whose largest tributary is the La Paragua River.

In recent months it also set up a program to relocate some of the miners to other regions of Bolivar and provide financial assistance to the rest to help them become farmers, reforestation workers, artisans, tourist guides or other kinds of service providers. 24 sentenced for killing of students In August, the military and police faced sentencing in a human rights violation case from 2005. A court sentenced 19 soldiers and five police to prison terms of 10 to 30 years in the shooting deaths of three university students, authorities said Aug. 31.

Policeman Felix Martinez and military intelligence inspector Jose Pena Pena were given 30-year sentences, the maximum under Venezuelan law, the Justice Ministry said. Others in the group face 10 to 22 years in jail, the ministry said in a statement. The three male students were shot to death a year ago while dropping off a friend at her home in a dangerous slum in Caracas. Authorities said one of the agents opened fire on the students' car after they failed to stop at a makeshift road checkpoint.

One survivor later testified that the agents had been wearing masks, carried automatic weapons and were using unidentified vehicles. Armed robbery is common in Caracas' slums, and false checkpoints have sometimes been used in kidnappings. Investigations revealed that the students were not criminals, as the agents initially claimed, and were pursued into an alley and riddled with bullets. The killings prompted Chavez to eliminate an entire division of military intelligence and pledge a radical reform of the country's police, who have long been accused of corruption, crimes and excessive use of violence.

8 killed on Colombian border

Another instance of multiple killing by military personnel came to light earlier in July with the discovery of the remains of seven adults and one child in the region of the border with Colombia. Vice President Jose Vicente Rangel said July 26 that, "One soldier killed those people with an old FAL rifle." The mass murder occurred in the Los Angeles plantation between the border towns of La Vitoria and El Nula, some 500 km south of Caracas in the state of Apure.

Venezuelan military command repudiated the crime and promised a full investigation. Defense Minister Baduel denied indications that the accused and detained soldier was mentally ill, saying, "there is nothing that gives evidence of abnormal conduct in the [soldier], Luis Jefferson Lira Rodriguez." When asked whether several people were involved in the killing, Baduel said ballistic evidence showed only one firearm was used. Nevertheless, PROVEA said in a press release that judicial police were working from a hypothesis that included "the participation of other people in the massacre." "That same version is held by residents of La Victoria who have mobilized to demand that other presumed members of the Army who presumably participated in the massacre be investigated."

Venezuela's dense jungle border with Colombia has become a lawless region with increased troop presence, although incidents like this one are diminishing public confidence in armed forces. Incursions by leftist rebels, rightist paramilitaries and drug traffickers have led to a greater deployment of Venezuelan forces there. Top Venezuelan defense officials condemned the slayings, blaming Lira for being in a murderous rage. The results of a confidential investigation conducted by civilian prosecutors had so far been shown only to victims' relatives in mid-August. One relative, speaking on condition of anonymity because the results were not supposed to be released, said they indicate rape was the motive and that the soldier acted alone. Still, the killings have made it more difficult for the soldiers to assert their authority.

Resentment boils, seen in graffiti such as "Get out, army murderers!" and a protest shortly after the massacre that drew nearly 1,000 people. Some residents say the Venezuelan soldiers can be abusive and ineffective at times, conducting random interrogations for hours, stripping people of documents, even robbing homes and firing at people for minor infractions. In one military operation that went awry last year, a 14-year-old boy was riddled with bullets after soldiers mistook him for a guerrilla.

-- End --