**AMNESTY INTERNATIONAL**

**PRESS RELEASE**

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**Venezuela: Lack of justice for grave abuses during protests gives green light to more violence**

Venezuela’s failure to effectively investigate and bring to justice those responsible for the deaths of 43 people and the injury and torture of hundreds during protests in 2014, is effectively giving a green light to more abuses and violence, said Amnesty International in a new report today.

*The faces of impunity: A year after the protests, victims still await justice* examines the stories of those who died or were arbitrarily arrested and tortured in detention during and after the protests that rocked the country between February and July 2014. Amongst the dead and injured were protesters, passers-by and members of the security forces. Some are still behind bars pending trial.

“People in Venezuela should be able to peacefully protest without fear of losing their lives or being unlawfully detained,” said Erika Guevara Rosas, Americas Director at Amnesty International.

“Every day that passes without addressing the catalogue of human rights abuses that took place during the protests is another day of heart-breaking injustice for the victims and their families. This must stop.”

During the protests 3,351 people were detained, scores arbitrarily. Most were released without charges. However, 1,404 individuals are facing charges and 25 are still in detention awaiting trial.

Amnesty International had access to the files of five people being held in detention facing charges and concluded that they were arbitrarily detained. Two have since been released pending trial.

Evidence shows that members of the police allowed pro-government armed groups to abuse protesters and passers-by, and even illegally enter people’s houses, including with fire arms.

Guillermo Sánchez died after he was beaten and shot by a pro-government armed group in La Isabelica (Valencia State) in March 2014. His wife, Ghina Rodríguez, and their two children had to flee the country after they received death threats for demanding justice. They are still waiting for those responsible for Guillermo’s death to be held to account.

The relatives of other victims and their lawyers have also reported being harassed and intimidated because of their campaigns to obtain justice and reparations. Human rights defenders who have reported serious abuses have also been the target of attacks.

Excessive use of force against protesters and arbitrary arrests have continued since the end of the protests. In recent weeks a 14-year-old boy was killed by police in Táchira on 24 February. The Mayor of Caracas, Antonio Ledezma, was arrested on 19 February, under dubious circumstances.

Rather than address this issue, the Ministry of Defence issued a resolution at the end of January 2015 allowing all sections of the armed forces to be deployed in public order operations, including the policing of public protests. They have also authorized the use of firearms in such operations.

“The use of unnecessary or disproportionate force is precisely what exacerbated the wave of tragic events last year. Instead of adding fuel to the fire by making provisions for the army to take to the streets, the Venezuelan authorities should send an unequivocal message that the use of excessive force will not be tolerated,” said Erika Guevara.

**People killed and injured during the protests**

The Amnesty International report documents events of February 2014 when thousands of anti-government protesters took to the streets, resulting in the death of 43 people, including eight law enforcement officials, and the injury of 878 people, including nearly 300 security forces personnel.

It pieces together victim testimony with photographic evidence, establishing that security forces beat, tortured and even fired live ammunition at protesters.

**Torture and other ill-treatment while in detention**

Amnesty International has documented scores of cases of detainees who were subjected to torture and other ill-treatment. Prisoners have been beaten, burnt, sexually abused, asphyxiated, electrocuted and threatened with death while in custody.

Wuaddy Moreno was on his way back home form a birthday party when he was arrested on 27 February 2014 on suspicion of having participated in the protests.

Police officers beat and burnt him in the public square in La Grita, Táchira state before taking him to the police station and later releasing him without charge. The police officers who abused him are still in active service and intimidated and harassed Wuaddy and his relatives after they called for justice.

**Thousands detained**

Amongst those still behind bars are Leopoldo López, opposition leader, Daniel Ceballos, Mayor of San Cristóbal in Táchira state, and Rosmit Mantilla, LGBTI activist. All three are from the opposition party Voluntad Popular (Popular Will). They should all be released.

Two people who had been arbitrarily detained were released recently. Lawyer Marcelo Crovato was released on 25 February and placed under house arrest; and Christian Holdack was released on bail on 17 March.

**Investigations**

In the majority of cases, those responsible for the abuses have not faced justice.

The Public Prosecutor’s Office has investigated 238 reports of human rights violations, but only 13 have resulted in charges being brought.

Also, according to the Attorney General, 30 police officers have been charged in connection with the deaths of protesters, excessive use of force, and torture and other ill-treatment. So far, three law enforcement officials have been convicted of ill-treatment and 14 officers have been detained. An arrest warrant has been issued for another officer, but has not been carried out yet. The remaining 12 officers have been granted conditional release.