

3/20/09: Venezuela: USCIRF Concerned About Increasing Acts of Anti-Semitism

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

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WASHINGTON, D.C. - The United States Commission on International Religious Freedom has appealed for international actors to call on President Hugo Chavez to end Venezuelan government-sponsored anti-Semitism. The Commission's letters seek to ensure protection of Venezuela's small Jewish community, many of whose members have fled the country under threats and intimidation in recent years.

The Commission sent letters earlier this month to U.S. Assistant Secretary of State for Western Hemisphere Affairs Thomas Shannon Jr. and to U.N. Special Rapporteur on Freedom of Religion and Belief Asma Jahangir expressing concern about increasing incidents of anti-Semitism in Venezuela, including the attack on the Tiferet Israel synagogue in Caracas. The Commission is assessing the situation and ways in which the United States can respond to protect religious freedom in Venezuela.

"Over the past several years, the Jewish community has suffered as President Chavez and government-affiliated media publicly made anti-Semitic remarks and published anti-Semitic cartoons and opinions," wrote Commission Chair Felice D. Gaer to Shannon. "Last August (2008), President Chavez said he would work with Brazilian President Lula and Argentina President Cristina Kirchner to end anti-Semitism in Latin America. We urge the State Department to undertake efforts to ensure that President Chavez keeps his promise, and ceases fomenting anti-Semitism in Venezuela."

The letter to Assistant Secretary Shannon calls on the U.S. government to work with countries that may have influence with the Venezuelan government to press the Chavez administration to prohibit the use of anti-Semitism in officially-related media and fully investigate all reported incidents of anti-Semitism in order to bring perpetrators to justice.

The Commission also urged the U.N. Special Rapporteur to issue a statement denouncing the anti-Semitic events and statements in Venezuela, demand that Venezuelan President Chavez cease actions that have put Venezuela's small, 15,000-member Jewish community at risk of attack, and request a visit to Venezuela to investigate threats directed against the Jewish community.

Following the February 1 attack on the Tiferet Israel synagogue, Foreign Minister Nicolás Maduro and Communications Minister Jesse Chacón met with Jewish leaders. Subsequently, 11 persons, including a rabbi's bodyguard and eight police officers, were arrested and President Chavez publicly condemned the attack on the synagogue.

However, the Commission is concerned that President Chavez used the attack to assail his opposition prior to contentious referendum, and that his failure to fully investigate all reported incidents of anti-Semitism suggests a lack of concern for the troubling and increasing anti-Semitic actions by his supporters within Venezuela.

The full text of the letters is below, and is also available in PDF on our Web site.

February 4, 2009

Thomas A. Shannon, Jr.

Assistant Secretary of State for Western Hemisphere Affairs

U.S. Department of State

2201 C Street, NW

Washington, DC 20520

Dear Assistant Secretary Shannon:

On behalf of the U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom, an independent, bipartisan federal commission, I am writing about the recent escalation of attacks on the Jewish community in Venezuela and to urge the Department of State to work with countries who may have influence over the actions of the Venezuelan government, to end anti-Semitic activities taking place there.

As you know, Venezuelan President Hugo Chavez has placed the small, 15,000-member Jewish population in Venezuela at risk of attack. Following the beginning of the crisis in Gaza, President Chavez, government officials, and the state media condemned the attacks, stating that Israel, as an "assassin government" was committing "genocide" in Gaza before severing ties with that state on January 14th. During this period, the President used a television interview to call on the Venezuelan Jewish community to also condemn the actions by Israel in Gaza. As President Chavez's rhetoric increased, some Venezuelan citizens demonstrated in front of and vandalized the Israeli embassy, and this escalated into vandalizing Jewish businesses with anti-Semitic slogans, and calling for a boycott of all Jewish businesses in Venezuela.

In the most visible attack on the Venezuelan Jewish community, this past Saturday, February 1, with the break in and vandalizing of the Tiferet Israel synagogue in Caracas. Reports indicate that 15 masked men overran security guards, threw Torah scrolls on the floor and spray-painted hateful messages, such as "Death to all" and "Jews, get out" on the walls. This is the second time in a month that the synagogue was graffitied with anti-Semitic messages; in January the message "Property of Islam" was sprayed on the walls. While President Chavez publicly condemned the attack on the synagogue, his full response showed an apparent lack of concern for the community or the attack. Rather than stating that the perpetrators of the break in and vandalism will be held responsible, President Chavez used the attack as a political opportunity to assail his opposition, stating that the "oligarchy" and those opposed to his government were behind the attack.

Over the past several years, the Jewish community has suffered as President Chavez, and government-affiliated media, publicly made anti-Semitic remarks and published anti-Semitic cartoons and opinions, including a Christmas 2005 speech where President Chavez referred to Jews as the "descendants of those who crucified Christ and threw founding father Simon Bolivar out of Venezuela." Furthermore, Venezuelan police officers twice raided the Caracas Jewish community center La Hebracia for suspicious reasons and no formal investigations were ever made as to the reasons for the raids.

To be effective, the Commission calls on the State Department to work with the governments of Russia, France, Spain, Brazil, and Argentina to press the Venezuelan government to end its anti-Semitic actions including ending anti-Semitic statements by government officials, ending anti-Semitic cartoons and statements in the state media, and fully investigating all reported incidents of anti-Semitism and bringing perpetrators to justice.

Last August, President Chavez said he would work with Brazilian President Lula and Argentina President Cristina Kirchner to end anti-Semitism in Latin America. We urge you to ensure that President Chavez keeps his promise, and cease fomenting anti-Semitism in Venezuela.

Sincerely,

Felice D. Gaer

Chair

February 4, 2009

Asma Jahangir

Special Rapporteur on Freedom of Religion or Belief

Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights

Palais des Nations

CH-1211 Geneva 10, Switzerland

To Special Rapporteur Jahangir:

On behalf of the U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom, I wish to alert you to a number of serious religious freedom concerns in Venezuela and to urge you to issue a statement denouncing the anti-Semitic events and statements in Venezuela and demand that Venezuelan President Hugo Chavez cease actions that have put Venezuela's small, 15,000-member Jewish community at risk of attack. The Commission also calls on you to request a visit to Venezuela to investigate threats directed against the Jewish community, as well as confrontations, sometimes violent, with the Catholic leadership in Venezuela.

Over the past several years, the Jewish community has suffered as President Hugo Chavez, and government-affiliated media, publicly made anti-Semitic remarks and published anti-Semitic cartoons and opinions, including a Christmas 2005 speech where President Chavez referred to Jews as the "descendants of those who crucified Christ and threw founding father Simon Bolivar out of Venezuela." Furthermore, Venezuelan security officers twice raided the Caracas Jewish community center La Hebracia for suspicious reasons and no formal investigations were ever made into the raids. It is

noteworthy that these two high profile attacks on the community center occurred just days before Venezuelan citizens went to the polls, where the voters decided the degree to which the President would consolidate control of the government. With Venezuelan citizens returning to the polls again on February 15 to vote on a referendum to either drop or retain Presidential term limits, there is fear that the Jewish community in Caracas will once again be used for political purposes and be targeted for attack. The Jewish community remains apprehensive of the President's close relationship with Iranian President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad, who once referred to Israel as a "stinking corpse," and the government's relationship with Hamas, an organization on the European Union and US government's lists of terrorist organizations.

The Venezuelan government's actions this past appear to constitute anti-Semitic actions or a failure to investigate or take action against those perpetrating such attacks on the Jewish community. Responding to the Israeli-Gaza conflict at the end of 2008 and the beginning of this year, President Chavez escalated his denunciations of and opposition to the state of Israel, reportedly placing the small Jewish population in Venezuela at risk of attack. Following the beginning of the crisis in Gaza, President Chavez, government officials, and the state media condemned the attacks, stating that Israel, as an "assassin government," was committing "genocide" in Gaza before the President severed ties with that state on January 14th. During this period, the President used a television interview to call on the Venezuelan Jewish community to also condemn the actions by Israel in Gaza. As President Chavez's rhetoric increased, some Venezuelan citizens harassed and threatened rabbis (forcing some to flee the country), vandalized Jewish businesses with anti-Semitic slogans, and called for a boycott of all Jewish businesses in Venezuela.

The most visible attack on the Venezuelan Jewish community took place this past Saturday, February 1, with the break in and vandalizing of the Tiferet Israel synagogue in Caracas. Reports indicate that 15 masked men overran security guards, threw Torah scrolls on the floor, and spray-painted hateful messages, such as "Death to all" and "Jews, get out" on the walls. This is the second time in a month that the synagogue was graffitied with anti-Semitic messages; in January the message "Property of Islam" was sprayed on the walls. While President Chavez publicly condemned the attack on the synagogue, his full response showed the government's lack of concern for the community or the attack. Rather than stating that the perpetrators of the break in and vandalism will be held responsible, President Chavez appears to be using the attack as a political opportunity before the February 15 referendum vote described above to assail his opposition, stating that the "oligarchy" and those opposed to his government were behind the attack.

The leadership of the Catholic Church has also been subject to the ire of President Chavez. In the past couple of years, Catholic leaders have publicly criticized President Chavez for his encroachments on democracy and his leadership style, referring to him several times as a dictator. In response to these criticisms, President Chavez has claimed that Venezuela's Catholic Church and the Vatican are allied with the United States and conspiring to damage his government and attempting a coup. The President has also in the past referred to the Church as a "tumor" and its leaders as "mental retards" and the "devil." Senior government officials have called on Church leaders to refrain from making political statements, saying it should instead focus only on its spiritual mission. In response, the Vatican has stated that it is the Church's duty to "defend the dignity of the human person" and has reiterated the important role the Church plays in providing social and educational services to the people of Venezuela.

In some instances, Venezuelan citizens and Chavez supporters have violently attacked clergymen and Catholic institutions and the response of the Venezuelan government to these attacks has been questionable. Most recently, on January 22, the Apostolic Nunciature was attacked when a pro-Chavez terrorist organization, "La Piedrita," threw tear gas canisters into the house. It is believed that the attack, and previous ones by the same organization on the Nunciature, is due to its housing of student activist and opposition member. Reportedly, the attackers also left pamphlets insulting Catholic leaders who have criticized President Chavez. In April 2007, a Catholic priest working with the Bishops Conference of Venezuela was kidnapped and killed under what the State Department described as "suspicious circumstances." The Catholic Church clashed with government officials after the Attorney General engaged in repeated public commentary on the case, blaming the priest for being partly responsible for his own death. Each side accused the other of using the case for political gain. In March 2007, a suspect in the murder was sentenced to 15 years in prison.

The government has taken some administrative actions to reduce the influence of the Catholic Church in society. The government has reduced the amount of state subsidies it normally provides to the Church for its social service work. And the government has publicly supported and funded a church which calls itself the true Catholic Church in Venezuela. In 2007, it renewed the broadcast license of a regional Catholic Church-affiliated network, NCTV after an agreement was reached to allow the network to continue to operate only in Zulia and Carabobo.

As can be demonstrated in these few instances detailed above, the Venezuelan government has created an atmosphere where members of some religious groups are harassed, or worse, are in danger. Once again, the Commission urges you to issue a statement denouncing the anti-Semitic events and statements in Venezuela and demand that Venezuelan President Hugo Chavez cease actions that have put religious communities in danger.

Should you wish, we would endeavor to provide you further information regarding these concerns.

Sincerely,

Felice D. Gaer

Chair