



UNITED STATES COMMISSION ON  
INTERNATIONAL RELIGIOUS FREEDOM

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 14<sup>th</sup>. 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

*The U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom was created by the International Religious Freedom Act of 1998 to monitor the status of freedom of thought, conscience, and religion or belief abroad, as defined in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and related international instruments, and to give independent policy recommendations to the President, Secretary of State, and Congress.*

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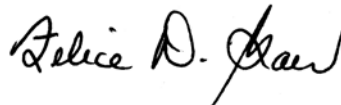
vandalism will be held responsible, President Chavez used the attack as a political opportunity to assail his opposition, stating that the “oligarchy” and those opposed to his government were behind the attack.

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,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Felice D. Gaer". The signature is written in a cursive style with a long, sweeping tail on the letter "r".

Felice D. Gaer  
Chair