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United States Commission on International Religious Freedom**

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**ON THE COVER:** Members of Pakistan's Women Action Forum in Lahore, Pakistan rally against the presence of Taliban and militants in the northwest of Pakistan on Thursday, February 12, 2009. The banners condemn religious extremism, domestic violence, and the burning down of girls' schools in Swat. (AP Photo/K.M. Chaudary)

## Venezuela

Since Hugo Chavez became president of Venezuela in 1998, the country has witnessed a steady increase in government rhetoric, and in some cases government actions, against the Venezuelan Jewish and Catholic communities and U.S.-based Protestant groups. These developments occurred against a backdrop of efforts by President Chavez to extend his political control over government institutions, the economy, and society, his backtracking on democracy, and his imposition of socialism. While there are no official restrictions on religious practice, actions by President Chavez and other government officials have created an environment where Jewish and Catholic religious leaders and institutions are at risk of attack. Furthermore, the Venezuelan government has failed to take adequate measures to hold perpetrators of attacks on Jewish and Catholic religious leaders and institutions accountable. For these reasons, the Commission places Venezuela on its Watch List and will continue to monitor closely the conditions in the country.

The Constitution of Venezuela provides for freedom of religion on the condition that its practice does not violate public morality, decency, or public order. While the government of Venezuela generally respects the rights of citizens and religious leaders to practice religion, religious communities and leaders viewed as political opponents are routinely targeted and harassed by government officials.

Religious groups are required to register with the Directorate of Justice and Religion (DJR) within the Ministry of Interior and Justice, but this is largely an administrative requirement. The DJR provides religious groups with subsidies to conduct educational and social programs, which has historically been distributed to Catholic organizations. Recent years have seen a reduction in subsidies provided to Catholic organizations and the Episcopal Conference of Venezuela, and an increase in funding to evangelical groups implementing government-approved social programs, as well as larger shares of government revenue directed to state-operated social programs.

Thousands of Jews have left the country in the 10 years since President Chavez came to power in part due to fear of potential negative results of the president's socialist agenda, but more recently because of anti-Semitism. The Jewish population today is estimated to be between 10,000 and 15,000, down from an estimated 22,000. The targeting of the Jewish community and subsequent emigration is new to the country. Prior to President Chavez's rule, the country was not known to have problems of anti-Semitism; rather it enjoyed a reputation of welcoming Jews during and after the Holocaust. However, the increase of societal incidents of anti-Semitism and the increasing rate of verbal attacks on the community by government officials is undermining that legacy and is creating fear in the Venezuelan Jewish community of future attacks.

For many years, President Chavez, government officials, government-controlled media, and President Chavez's supporters have used a variety of methods to intimidate the country's Jewish community. Anti-Semitism in the country has appeared in waves, with upsurges corresponding with important international events or domestic political periods, such as the 2006 Lebanon-Israel conflict and the lead-up to a 2007 national referendum on proposed changes to the Venezuelan constitution. Anti-Semitic rhetoric and acts in Venezuela escalated to a new level at the end of 2008 and in the early months of 2009, which fostered a climate permissive of anti-Semitic actions.

Observers note a pattern in the recent incidents of anti-Semitism, where the actions of the state of Israel are conflated with Venezuelan Jews, who are then held responsible for Israel's policies. During both the 2006 Lebanon-Israel and 2008-2009 Israel-Gaza conflicts, President Chavez and other senior government officials severely criticized the actions of Israel, often crossing the line into anti-Semitism. For instance, the President compared the actions of Israel to the Nazis. Government media then echoed these sentiments across the country. Anti-Semitic statements appeared in cartoons and opinion pieces in state media, were heard on state radio programs and in rallies, and were graffitied on

synagogues and other Jewish institutions. Anti-Semitic cartoons and graffiti repeatedly equated the Star of David with a swastika. While reports of anti-Semitism in Venezuela have decreased since February 2009, this pattern suggests that government and societal anti-Semitic statements and actions can target Venezuelan Jews at any time, especially if Israel undertakes policies criticized by the Venezuelan government.

While it is not anti-Semitic to criticize the policies of the state of Israel, such criticism can take on anti-Semitic qualities. Several international organizations in Europe have noted that anti-Semitism can include actions beyond verbal and physical assaults, such as promoting the stereotype that Jews control the media, economy, and government and social institutions; questioning the loyalty of Jews to Israel or their own nations; comparing Israel's actions to those of Nazis; and holding Jews responsible for Israeli actions.

As stated above, President Chavez, members of the Venezuelan government, government-controlled media, and pro-Chavez media outlets have publicly made anti-Semitic remarks and published anti-Semitic cartoons and opinions. President Chavez and other government officials have blamed Israel and Jews for the world's problems and promoted stereotypes of Jewish financial influence and control. In 2005, President Chavez referred to Jews as the "descendants of those who crucified Christ and threw founding father Simon Bolivar out of Venezuela..." In the same speech, the President stated, "A minority has taken possession of all of the wealth of the world..." Government-affiliated media have called for Jews to be expelled from Venezuela and printed cartoons with the Star of David imposed over or adjacent to a swastika. Similar graphics have appeared as graffiti on synagogue walls.

The highest profile government actions against the Jewish community occurred in 2004 and 2007, when government security agents raided a Jewish community center in Caracas, La Hebraica, supposedly looking for weapons. The center is the focal point for Jewish communal life in the country, housing a private school and providing a venue for

weddings and other religious ceremonies, and the raids have been viewed as an attack on the entire Jewish community. The November 2004 raid occurred as parents and children were arriving for the start of the school day. The political context of the December 2007 raid was the referendum on constitutional changes proposed by President Chavez, which occurred that same day. Government security agents entered the facility as a wedding was taking place. Despite calls to do so, the government has not taken any action to investigate the raids. Since the two raids, enrollment at the Hebraica Community School has dropped by half.

These statements and incidents led the State Department to list Venezuela as a state sponsor of anti-Semitism in the March 2008 *Contemporary Global Anti-Semitism* report.

The government did make overtures to the Jewish community in 2008, including meetings between government officials and community leaders, and the signing by President Chavez of a declaration to condemn and fight anti-Semitism in South America. However, the situation worsened significantly during the Israeli-Gaza conflict at the end of 2008 and the beginning of 2009. During this period, President Chavez and other Venezuelan government officials escalated their denunciations of and opposition to the state of Israel, reportedly stating that Israel, as an "assassin government," was committing "genocide" in Gaza. Venezuela severed ties with Israel and President Chavez also called on all Jews in Venezuela to denounce Israel. He said, "I hope that the Jewish community in Venezuela pronounces itself against these barbaric acts. Do it! Don't you reject forcefully any act of persecution? Don't the Jews reject the Holocaust? And what are we living now? Do it! Put your hands in the air. Be fair." A similar anti-Semitic statement was made by Foreign Minister Nicolás Maduro.

As the official rhetoric against the state of Israel increased, some Venezuelans attacked the Jewish community in late 2008 and 2009. A rabbi was assaulted on the street; a death threat was sent to another; other rabbis were harassed and threatened,

causing some to flee the country; tear gas was thrown into a synagogue; synagogues and Jewish businesses were sprayed with anti-Semitic slogans; and there were calls for a boycott of all Jewish businesses in Venezuela. There were also reports that congregants at some synagogues in Caracas were filmed as they entered the houses of worship and that some Venezuelans questioned the “Venezuelanness” of the Jewish community and called on Jews to profess their loyalty to Venezuela.

On January 30, 2009, 15 masked men overran security guards and broke into, and vandalized, the Tiferet Israel synagogue in Caracas. For five hours the attackers threw Torah scrolls on the floor, and spray-painted hateful messages, such as “Death to all” and “Jews, get out.” The intruders also stole the synagogue’s computers which contained personal information about the congregants. This was the second time in a month that the synagogue was graffitied with anti-Semitic messages; earlier in January the message “Property of Islam” had been sprayed on the walls.

President Chavez publicly condemned the synagogue attack the next day, and the foreign minister and communications minister met with Jewish leaders. Following an international outcry, 11 individuals, including the bodyguard to a rabbi at the synagogue and eight intelligence officers, were arrested on suspected involvement in the attacks. The men have been charged with robbery, “acts of contempt against a religion,” and concealing firearms. However, President Chavez also used the synagogue attack as a political opportunity before the February 15 referendum on presidential term limits to assail his opposition, stating several times that the “oligarchs” and those opposed to his government were behind the attack. Further, many government officials described the attack as “just a burglary” rather than an incident of anti-Semitism.

Following the Tiferet Israel attack, a small grenade was thrown into the Beth Shmuel synagogue on February 26. No injuries were reported and no investigations have been made into this incident.

Since this last incident, the state has provided police protection to Jewish institutions.

There are also tensions between the Venezuelan government and the Catholic Church. Over the past few years, several Catholic leaders in Venezuela have criticized actions of the Chavez government. For example, Catholic leaders have stated that Venezuela had “lost its democratic course and presents the semblance of a dictatorship.”

In response, President Chavez has claimed that Venezuela’s Catholic Church and the Vatican are conspiring with the United States against his government, and on several occasions he has accused the Church of attempting a coup or being party to plans to assassinate him. In the past, President Chavez 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 stated that it is the Church’s duty to “defend the dignity of the human person” and reiterated the important role the Church plays in providing social and educational services to the people of Venezuela.

Thus far, this strong rhetoric has not been accompanied by any official actions against Catholic Church activities. However, there have been several reported attacks by pro-Chavez groups on Catholic leaders and institutions. The government has made no arrests.

In January 2009, a pro-Chavez organization, “La Piedrita,” threw tear gas canisters into the house of the Apostolic Nunciature—reportedly the sixth attack by this organization on the Nunciature in the past year—and the attackers left pamphlets insulting Catholic leaders who have criticized President Chavez. The attacks are believed to be due to the Nunciature providing asylum to a student activist and opposition members. No arrests have been made in the attacks on the Nunciature, although President Chavez recently said a manhunt is underway for the leader of “La Piedrita.” In February 2008, some pro-Chavez supporters forcefully entered and occupied

the residence of the archbishop of Caracas and held a press conference to denounce leaders of the Catholic Church and the Papal Nunciature. No arrests have been made in this incident, which President Chavez described as an attempt by infiltrators to discredit his government.

In recent months, the Ibrahim al-Ibrahim mosque, the largest mosque in Venezuela and second largest in Latin America, has been robbed and vandalized twice, although the reasons for the attacks are unknown and the mosque is located in a crime-ridden part of Caracas. The most recent attack took place on March 23, 2009 when intruders stole jewels, computers, and other objects, threw sacred objects on the floor, and vandalized copies of the Koran. The mosque has asked for the government to provide protection for holy places in Venezuela.

The Venezuelan government has also restricted foreign missionary activity in the country. Foreign missionaries are required to hold special visas to operate in the country, and for several years the rates of refusal for first-time applicants have increased and the rates of renewals decreased, particularly for groups based in the United States.

In recent years, two U.S. Protestant groups have had to leave the country. In October 2005, President Chavez accused members from the New Tribes Mission (NTM) of being “agents of imperial penetration” that were “contaminating” the cultures of indigenous populations,” as well as “gathering strategic information for the United States.” The government rescinded the NTM’s permission, granted in 1953, to conduct social programs among indigenous tribes, and in November 2008 the Supreme Court affirmed the removal order. More than 100 NTM missionaries left the country in compliance with the government’s order. In 2005, 219 U.S. missionaries from the Church of Jesus-Christ of Latter-day Saints also withdrew from the country after having difficulties obtaining visas to conduct its activities.

According to Christian Solidarity Worldwide, in 2007 and 2008 the government requested Evangelical churches to provide it with the

names and addresses of any foreigners who attend services.

## **Recommendations for U.S. Policy**

The Commission recommends that the U.S. government should:

### **I. Stopping Abuses of Religious Freedom and Related Human Rights**

- at the highest levels, publicly denounce Venezuelan government rhetoric against and raids on, as well as societal attacks on, religious communities, institutions, and leaders;
- at the highest levels, speak out publicly and continue to draw international attention to state-sponsored anti-Semitism in Venezuela;
- urge the Venezuelan government to immediately stop the use of hostile rhetoric that places religious communities, institutions, and leaders at risk of attack;
- urge the Venezuelan government to arrest all persons responsible for attacks on religious communities, institutions, and leaders and vigorously prosecute and hold perpetrators accountable;
- monitor religious freedom in Venezuela, and if conditions deteriorate to where there are systematic, egregious, and ongoing violations of religious freedom, work to restrict the sale of oil from Venezuela;
- work within the current overall policy framework to ensure that violations of freedom of religion and belief, and related human rights, are included in all bilateral discussions with the Venezuelan government;
- ensure that funding for democracy and human rights promotion in Venezuela includes support for activities advancing freedom of religion or belief;



- instruct the Ambassador-at-Large for Religious Freedom and the Special Envoy to Monitor and Combat Anti-Semitism to travel to Venezuela and report on religious freedom abuses in that country;

**II. Undertaking Multilateral Approaches and Working with International Organizations to Improve Respect for Religious Communities, Institutions, and Leaders**

- work with countries who may have influence with the Venezuelan government to encourage the government to end anti-Semitic activities taking place in the country, including anti-Semitic statements by government officials and anti-Semitic cartoons and statements in the state media, as well as to fully investigate all reported incidents of anti-Semitism and bring perpetrators to justice;
- work with countries who may have influence with the Venezuelan government to encourage the government to fully investigate attacks on religious communities, institutions, and leaders, and hold perpetrators accountable;
- work with the Organization of American States, including the OAS General Assembly and the Inter-American Commission on Human Rights, to investigate and condemn instances of religious freedom violations in Venezuela, including state-sponsored anti-Semitism and attacks on religious communities, institutions, and leaders;
- encourage the UN Special Rapporteur on the Freedom of Religion or Belief and the UN Special Rapporteur on the Promotion and Protection of the Right to Freedom of Expression to request a visit to the country; and
- support a UN General Assembly resolution condemning severe violations of human rights, including freedom of religion or belief, in Venezuela, and calling for officials responsible for such violations to be held accountable.