

## VENEZUELA

Violations of freedom of religion or belief continue in Venezuela. These violations include: government failure to investigate and hold accountable perpetrators of attacks on religious leaders and houses of worship, and virulent rhetoric from President Hugo Chavez, government officials, state media, and pro-Chavez media directed at times against the Venezuelan Jewish and Catholic communities. Based on these concerns, USCIRF again places Venezuela on its Watch List in 2011. Venezuela has been on USCIRF's Watch List since 2009.

### BACKGROUND

Since 1998, there has been a steady increase of government rhetoric, and in some cases government actions, against the Venezuelan Jewish and Catholic communities and Protestant groups supported by U.S.-based counterparts. These developments occurred against a backdrop of efforts by President Hugo Chavez to extend political control over the economy, nongovernmental organizations, and society, as well as his backtracking on democracy and respect for human rights. While there are no official restrictions on religious practice, actions by President Chavez and other government officials have created an environment in which Jewish and Catholic religious leaders and institutions are vulnerable to attack. The Constitution of Venezuela provides for freedom of religion on the condition that its practice does not violate public morality, decency, or public order. Religious groups are required to register with the Directorate of Justice and Religion (DJR) in the Ministry of Interior and Justice, and no groups were refused registration in the past few years.

While the government has chosen not to implement them in recent years, laws still exist that could lead to the creation of ruling party-dominated "communal councils" to oversee the curriculum, teachers, and school administrators of all public and private schools, including religious schools and the confiscation of Catholic Church property, including churches, schools, and other ecclesiastical buildings. A draft law also exists that, if passed, would require all non-governmental organizations that receive at least 10 percent of funding from foreign sources to obtain advance government approval of their activities and funding sources and provide the government with information on their sources of funding, organizational leadership, and activities. Despite threats at the end of 2010 that it would do so, the National Assembly still has not enacted this law.

### RELIGIOUS FREEDOM CONDITIONS

The government of Venezuela has not brought the perpetrators of egregious attacks against Jews and Christians to justice, continues to sponsor anti-Semitism, and creates tensions with the Catholic Church.

**Impunity:** The government of Venezuela has yet to take sufficient action against the perpetrators of two attacks in January 2009, one on a Jewish synagogue and the other targeting a Catholic institution, nor against the perpetrators of other attacks on religious institutions. The investigation into the 2009 attack against the Tiferet Israel Synagogue remains open, with no one having been detained or prosecuted. Representatives of the Jewish community do not expect the case to ever be brought before a judge. State actions have not been initiated in response to tear gas canisters being thrown into the Apostolic Nunciature. The Nunciature was attacked because it provided asylum to student activists and opposition members. Although a pro-Chavez organization, "La Piedrita," publicly has taken credit for the attack as well as earlier ones against the Nunciature, no investigations or arrests have been made despite this public statement. In addition, no arrests or prosecutions have occurred for the February 2009 forceful entry and occupation of the residence of the Archbishop of Caracas by Chavez supporters, the vandalism of the Beth Shmuel synagogue, or the March 2009 robbery and vandalism of the Ibrahim al-Ibrahim mosque.

**Anti-Semitism:** There were some welcomed improvements for the Jewish community during the past year, especially the reduction of anti-Semitic statements in the state media and the government's efforts to provide security to synagogues during the Jewish holidays. However, the Jewish community continues to believe that President Chavez, government officials, government controlled media, the President's supporters and others will hold them responsible for actions taken by the government of Israel. Following the June 2010 Gaza flotilla incident, President Chavez called Israel a "genocidal state" and implied that the Venezuelan Jewish community must choose between its ties to Venezuela and Israel. Following such incidents and statements in past years, Jewish institutions were vandalized and individual Jews were

threatened. The Venezuelan Jewish community also has expressed concern about the increasingly-documented diplomatic, military, financial, and trade ties between Venezuela and Iran, and the growing relationship between President Chavez and Iranian President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad.

**Government-Catholic Church Tensions:** Given that more than 90 percent of Venezuelans are Catholic, the Catholic Church is a large and influential entity in Venezuela, and therefore viewed as a potential threat to President Chavez. President Chavez and his supporters often try to discredit the Church in the state media to try to counter the Church's criticisms of government actions. Tensions between the Catholic Church and the Venezuelan government increased in 2010 as Church leaders intensified their criticism of government actions against independent media and the opposition. In response, President Chavez has claimed that Venezuela's Catholic Church and the Vatican are conspiring with the United States against his government. On several occasions, he has accused the Church of attempting a coup or being party to plans to assassinate him, and has called Catholic leaders "oligarchs" and "the devil," and such statements have begun to appear in state and pro-Chavez media. In July 2010, the President threatened to end the Concordat, an agreement between the Vatican and the state of Venezuela recognizing the privileges of the Catholic Church in the country, following criticism by Catholic leaders, although leaders of the Catholic Church did not think he would follow through on his threat.

### **RECOMMENDATIONS FOR U.S. POLICY**

U.S.-Venezuelan relations remained poor during the past year and deteriorated further in late 2010 when President Chavez refused to accept the U.S. Ambassador to Venezuela, Larry Palmer. Concerns about President Chavez's health are expected to further complicate the relationship. USCIRF recommends that the U.S. government take a number of critical steps to advance religious freedom in Venezuela through key programs and policies and through multilateral efforts. Importantly, considering the poor state of relations between the two countries, all activities need to be conducted so as to minimize the risk to religious communities. USCIRF urges the U.S. government to:

- Increase its efforts to promote freedom of religion or belief in Venezuela, stress the importance of holding perpetrators of attacks on religious institutions accountable and continue to speak out against attacks on religious leaders and institutions when they occur;
- Work with countries such as Brazil that have influence with the Venezuelan government to encourage it to end issuing anti-Semitic statements; fully investigate attacks on religious communities, institutions and leaders; and hold perpetrators accountable; and
- At the highest levels, speak out publicly and continue to draw international attention to state-sponsored anti-Semitism and to recently intensified efforts to pressure and silence the Catholic Church in Venezuela.

**Please see USCIRF's 2011 Annual Report for a more extensive review and recommendations on Venezuela.**