

40th session of the Human Rights Council

Oral update on the situation of human rights in the Bolivarian Republic of Venezuela

Statement by UN High Commissioner for Human Rights Michelle Bachelet

20 March 2019

Mr President,
Members of the Human Rights Council,
Excellencies,

Resolution 39/1 requested an oral update regarding the situation in the Bolivarian Republic of Venezuela. I am deeply concerned by the magnitude and gravity of the human rights impact of the current crisis, which is also a worrying destabilizing factor in the region.

A technical team from my Office is currently in the country. I view this as a positive first step, which I trust will lead to continued access for the Office in the future. It is important that the team have completely unhindered access, with no reprisals against any person who has met, or sought to meet, with them.

The enjoyment of economic and social rights has continued to deteriorate dramatically since June 2018. Vulnerable populations, such as children, pregnant women, the elderly and indigenous peoples have been particularly affected. For instance, dire living conditions forced a significant number of Warao Indigenous Peoples to cross the border into Brazil in search for food, health care and other basic services. The extent and severity of the crises in food, health care and basic services,

have not been fully acknowledged by the authorities, thus the measures they have adopted have been insufficient.

The recent nation-wide electricity blackout has exacerbated this situation, further reducing people's access to food, water and medication, and severely affecting hospitals. The full extent of the damage, and the number of direct casualties, is not yet known, but the unusually long blackout embodies the infrastructure challenges that Venezuela faces. Water shortages, scarcity of natural gas and the collapse of public transport also continue to affect many people, and together with hyperinflation, they generate dire economic conditions, which have triggered thousands of social protests.

The health system continues to deteriorate, with very significant impact on maternal mortality and morbidity and infant mortality. The spread of infectious diseases, which were previously under control, is the focus of the recent vaccination assistance by the Pan-American Health Organisation.

More than 1 million children no longer attend school, according to a recent survey, mostly due to the fact that parents cannot feed breakfast to their children, the failure of schools' food programmes, and lack of affordable public transportation, as well as the absence of teachers and related professionals, many of whom have left the country.

Although this pervasive and devastating economic and social crisis began before the imposition of the first economic sanctions in 2017, I am concerned that the recent sanctions on financial transfers related to the sale of Venezuelan oil within the United States may contribute to aggravating the economic crisis, with possible repercussions on people's basic rights and wellbeing.

I am also deeply concerned about the shrinking of the democratic space, especially the continued criminalization of peaceful protest and dissent. In the context of the latest surge of nation-wide anti-government protests in the first two months of this year, my Office documented numerous human rights violations and abuses by security forces and pro-government armed groups (*colectivos armados*), including excessive use of force, killings, arbitrary detentions, torture and ill-treatment in

detention, and threats and intimidation. Many of these concerns have been highlighted in our press statements, and our report to the June session of the Council will include extensive detail.

The Office has continued to investigate reports of possible extrajudicial executions by security forces. In 2018, the FAES were reported to have killed at least 205 persons. A further 37 were reportedly killed in the course of January 2019 in Caracas. It appears that some of these killings have followed a similar pattern. They take place during illegal house raids carried out by the FAES, which subsequently reports the death as resulting from an armed confrontation – although witnesses report the victims were unarmed. In some cases, relatives of the victims have alleged that the Attorney General's Office explicitly refused to initiate investigations against members of the FAES. Most of the victims lived in poor neighbourhoods and participated in anti-government protests, and I am particularly concerned about reports that indicate that this type of operation is used as a form of reprisal and intimidation.

I am also concerned about increasing restrictions on freedom of expression and of the press in Venezuela. The authorities have arbitrarily used the law against hatred, adopted in November 2017, to prosecute journalists, opposition leaders and anyone expressing dissenting opinions, leading to self-censorship. This context has significant impact on people's right to information.

As a direct result of this far-reaching human rights crisis, more than 3 million people have fled Venezuela, in search of food, health care, work and protection. Many leave in precarious health and with few or no financial resources; their difficulties are compounded by long-standing practises of extortion and appropriation by some border guards. Venezuelans also face enormous obstacles to obtain documentation that would facilitate regular migration, and access to education or work in other countries.

Countries in the region have been confronted with the massive arrival of people who often have urgent humanitarian and human rights protection needs. They require very significant, and jointly coordinated, efforts of regularization and family reunification, as well as access to healthcare, food, shelter, education or work. I applaud the efforts undertaken by receiving countries of the region to address the

needs of Venezuelan refugees and migrants and encourage them to continue to combat xenophobia and discrimination, and to maintain access to their territory.

Excellencies,

Divisions are exacerbating an already critical situation. There is a need for common agreement on a political solution by all stakeholders, with actions to improve a wide range of urgent human rights issues. I call on the authorities to take steps to demonstrate their real commitment to addressing the many challenging issues reported across the country. And I want to emphasise the continuing commitment of the Office to work with all relevant stakeholders in their efforts to improve the human rights situation in Venezuela.

Thank you Mr President