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# **Subcommittee on International Human Rights of the Standing Committee on Foreign Affairs and International Development**

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**EVIDENCE**

**Tuesday, May 25, 2010**

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**Chair**

**Mr. Scott Reid**



## Subcommittee on International Human Rights of the Standing Committee on Foreign Affairs and International Development

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•(1305)

[English]

**The Chair (Mr. Scott Reid (Lanark—Frontenac—Lennox and Addington, CPC)):** I am going to call us into session right now. Those of you who are not near the table, Monsieur Dorion and Mr. Sweet, can listen up, because we're waiting for our witness. I don't want to eat into her time, but I want to address a couple of issues.

[Translation]

This is the Subcommittee on International Human Rights of the Standing Committee on Foreign Affairs and International Development. This is our 16<sup>th</sup> meeting.

[English]

We'll be talking about the Venezuela hearings, and we have a guest who will be joining us by video conference shortly. However, we also have some items relating to committee business and committee budgeting that I need to deal with, and I would like to do this before our witness is available. Otherwise, I'll have to kick her out early in order to deal with these things. I thought perhaps we could do them in advance.

We are going in camera temporarily.

[Proceedings continue in camera]

•(1305)

\_\_\_\_\_ (Pause) \_\_\_\_\_

•(1310)

[Public proceedings resume]

**The Chair:** All right. I'm just going to ask our witness, Guadalupe Marengo, can you hear us?

**Ms. Guadalupe Marengo (Deputy Director, Regional Program (Americas), Amnesty International):** Yes, I can. Can you hear me?

**The Chair:** Yes, we can. Perfect. Thank you so much.

I apologize for the late start. We had a couple of technical difficulties here in Ottawa.

We're very glad you could attend. I think what we ought to do is go directly into your presentation, and when you're finished we will then allow questions from each of the four parties who are present here with us.

**Ms. Guadalupe Marengo:** Thank you very much. Thank you very much for having me.

I'll try to be as brief as possible. I've got ten minutes, I've been told, to present to you the concerns of Amnesty International, in particular on the case of Venezuela.

I work in the Americas program here at the secretariat and I'm one of the program directors. If I can be brief on what Amnesty's concerns are with Venezuela, one of the main concerns we have is the issue of impunity. This has been a problem we've had in Venezuela for the past decades, including with this administration.

Human rights violations that are committed by the security forces are not thoroughly investigated and usually no one is brought to justice. This was the case 20 years ago and it's the case now. The office of the attorney general in 2008 admitted—transparently said—that they had received 6,000 complaints of alleged police killings between 2000 and 2007 alone. They stated that they would create a special team to investigate these alleged police killings, but so far we are two years down the line and we still don't know what has happened with those investigations.

Meanwhile, we continue to receive cases of people whose rights have been violated by the police. For example, in March in one of the states—the state of Anzoategui—three men were abducted by the police, we don't know exactly under what circumstances. Their families have put a complaint before the attorney general. No impartial investigation has happened. The men have still not been found and nobody has been brought to justice for this violation.

In another state, in the state of Aragua, we've got a campaign against a family that has been going on for about six years. In November 2003 they denounced the killing of one of their members by the police. Since then another three people in the family have been killed. The family has been continuously harassed. The Inter-American Commission on Human Rights has requested protection for the family. The protection has been sporadic. It has been, as you can see, ineffective, since three other members of the family have been killed since. Again, there has not been an impartial investigation and nobody has been brought to justice, and the family lives in fear with threats.

That's on the issue of impunity, which is a concern to us. Another concern we have is the concern about clamping down on critics of the government. As you know, President Hugo Chavez's government brought in legislation in 2001, legislation to change economic and social policies. That started to create a strong polarization in the country. It resulted in a coup in 2002 in which the president was ousted for 48 hours. Since that 2002 coup the country has become increasingly polarized. The polarization has also meant that for the past years the government and the authorities have become less and less tolerant of any criticism.

The first clear sign of this intolerance was in 2007, when the decision was taken not to renew the licence of one of the television stations, Radio Caracas Televisión. That television station had a clear anti-government line, and its licence was not renewed. That was one of the first signs of the increased intolerance.

Last year 34 radio stations also had their licences revoked or withdrawn, in this case due to administrative reasons, the authorities said. But what is interesting is that all of these 34 stations had an anti-government editorial line.

● (1315)

The special rapporteur on freedom of expression of the Inter-American Commission on Human Rights has stated that it appears the real reason for these licences being withdrawn is because these 34 radio stations in the country have got an anti-government line in their editorial. During the past eight months or so, the clamping down on critics is getting more worrying. It isn't only about not renewing TV licences or withdrawing radio station licences. An increase in how the authorities are beginning to clamp down on critics is worrying.

Last August, for example, one of the prefects of Caracas, a person from the opposition, Richard Blanco, was detained. He was in detention from last August until this April, allegedly because he had assaulted a police officer and incited violence. There is no evidence. We haven't yet seen evidence of him assaulting a police officer and inciting violence. His arrest appears to be politically motivated. He has now been released but he still faces prosecution.

Also in the last few months, a judge, Maria Lourdes Afiuni, was detained in December 2009 and remains in prison. The United Nations working group on arbitrary detention, the special rapporteurs on the independence of judiciary and human rights defenders, have asked for her immediate release. In this case, the judge was detained immediately after President Hugo Chavez announced in his weekly television and radio program that she was corrupt for having ruled that a banker should be released on bail. This banker later fled the country. But it clearly appears she was detained only because the president said she was corrupt for having ruled on that matter. As I said, UN working groups and special rapporteurs have asked for her immediate and unconditional release. She is still in prison as we speak.

Also in the past few months, March appears to have been a difficult month because of clamping down on dissidents, of people against the authorities or who criticized them. The head of the Globovisión, another television channel known for its anti-government line, was arrested for a few days and still faces prosecution because of having talked to the Inter-American Press Association,

criticizing Chavez at that time. He was detained for a few days but still faces prosecution.

Another person also arrested in March was the former governor of the state of Zulia, Oswaldo Alvarez. He was detained until recently. He was detained for about two months or so, again because he said in an interview that Venezuela was a haven for drug trafficking. It appears that's the sole reason for his having been detained. He has now been released but again still faces prosecution for that.

So the use of the criminal justice system to punish people who have an anti-government line appears to be used more and more. The Inter-American Commission has stated very recently that this shows the lack of independence of the judiciary in the country.

We're also worried and concerned about the issue of human rights defenders. Human rights defenders appear to be intimidated, harassed, and attacked as well. Only recently, in November last year, a human rights defender in the state of Lara was shot dead by unknown men. He was working for the Committee of Victims Against Impunity, and they were making a film to show documented cases of people who had allegedly suffered human rights violations in the hands of the police in that state.

● (1320)

Mijail Martínez was shot dead. No thorough and impartial investigation has been carried out. Nobody has been brought to justice for this crime.

Only recently, a few weeks ago, at the beginning of May, a human rights defender in Caracas, Rocío San Miguel, was uncovering stories of what she alleged were members of the military breaching the constitution by siding with the ruling party. She received death threats.

Now, the worrying thing about these threats and attacks is that on the one hand there are no investigations and nobody is brought to justice, but on the other hand, there doesn't seem to be the political will to condemn these violations by the authorities.

I just want to spend the last few minutes talking about advances, because there have been advances in the last few years in Venezuela on human rights. For example, on violence against women, President Hugo Chavez promulgated in 2007 a very progressive law on the right of women to a life free from violence. A year later, Amnesty launched a campaign to push for the implementation of this very thorough law to fight violence against women in the country.

Special police stations have been created and special offices within the attorney general's office have been created, but this hasn't been enough. The office of the attorney general has already been transparent and has said that between January and August of last year alone they received 12,000 complaints of cases of violence against women, and they haven't been able to deal with but half of those cases due to lack of resources.

So it's a positive note, but still more resources need to be put in place to combat violence against women after a very good law was promulgated in 2007.

Also, it is important to note that there have been advances on social and economic rights. If one looks at the UN Development Programme report of 2009, access to primary health care has increased since this government came to office in 1999, and it is nearly 100%. Illiteracy has been nearly eradicated. Infant mortality has decreased by more than half. That same report, the latest one, which is from 2009, also puts Venezuela in the second tier of high human development countries. There are 45 countries in the world in that tier. The first tier is the first 38, and Canada and other western and European countries belong there, but there have been advances on those economic, social, and cultural rights.

As for what the problem is, I'm just going to finish with this, and then I'll take questions, because I'm sure you'll have a few. Only recently, in February, the Inter-American Commission published a report on the human rights situation in the country. If you'll allow me, I'll just read two paragraphs from that report, and then I'll finish. It states:

...the observance of other fundamental rights cannot be sacrificed for the sake of realizing economic, social, and cultural rights. Human rights constitute an indissoluble whole, and, as the American Convention sets forth in its preamble, "the ideal of free men enjoying freedom from fear and want can be achieved only if conditions are created whereby everyone may enjoy his [or her] economic, social, and cultural rights, as well as his [or her] civil and political rights.

The Inter-American Commission concludes that "political intolerance", "the lack of independence" of the judiciary, the "constraints on freedom of expression", "the existence of a climate hostile to the free exercise of dissenting political participation", "citizen insecurity", and, in particular, "the prevailing impunity" that goes with that, are all factors that contribute to the weakening of the rule of law in Venezuela. Therefore, in Venezuela today people do not enjoy all the human rights guaranteed by the American Convention on Human Rights.

•(1325)

I will stop here, because I am conscious of time, and I'll take any questions or any comments you have.

Thank you.

**The Chair:** Thank you very much for that presentation.

We have four questioners, and we'll start with Mario Silva from the Liberal Party.

Mr. Silva, we'll give you eight minutes for the question and answer, and do the same for everybody.

**Mr. Mario Silva (Davenport, Lib.):** Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Thank you very much, Madam, for your presentation.

You outlined some very salient points about what's taking place and a very complex series of actions as well, which we are trying to get some handle on as a committee.

You went on at length about the issues of rule of law and independence of the judiciary, which we know and have read about, the fact that since the 2002 coup there has been a real politicization by the government to bring forward members of both the army and the separate army that they have in place as well in Venezuela, which does the bidding of the government. So I can see why there would be some issues about investigation, particularly of those people.

But in the other part of the rule of law, which is the judiciary, they have also appointed a whole series of members, who they call revolutionary socialist judges, to the courts, particularly to the Supreme Court and so forth. And I think they have even expanded the Supreme Court to allow for those additional members.

I'm trying to figure out, when we talk about the polarization of society, how extensive is it? What are the abilities of those in the opposition, for example, to question those appointments, from the legislative perspective, from the societal perspective, and from the NGO perspective? What role do they have in terms of questioning both the rule of law there, and those judicial appointments? Is there any space at all for them to even have any type of democratic voice to express their concerns about some of these human rights violations?

•(1330)

**Ms. Guadalupe Marengo:** Thank you.

It is our experience that the country is definitely very polarized. The example I gave you on the latest clamping down in the last six or seven months on dissent is actually worrying. I would say there is definitely still space to criticize, but the fact that the authorities in the past few months have begun to detain—and we have the four examples that Amnesty International has received in the past four months—sends the message that they are beginning to tolerate less and less criticism. So the rest of the population is beginning to worry as to how far they can criticize, how far they can voice their concerns or their opposition to the government. If people like the prefect that I mentioned are detained for a few months, if the judge who, on a ruling, was detained following President Chavez mentioning that he was corrupt, and a few hours later he was being detained, arrested and charged, those signals are beginning, I suggest.... The country is beginning to feel it is getting more and more difficult to express dissent.

Now, members of the Inter-American Commission have been pushing the authorities to ensure this doesn't happen, but I think more pressure needs to be put on the government at the moment for that, because up to around eight months ago a television station's licence hadn't been renewed. They have revoked the licences of television stations, but people really haven't been detained.

**Mr. Mario Silva:** We have never visited Venezuela, so all we have been getting is what we have been reading and of course hearing from the witnesses who have also been before this committee, but I want to get a clearer picture.

If the opposition media is being shut down by the government; if the government is appointing its own judges who have to be “revolutionary socialist judges” and have to be particular to the brand, the philosophy; if those are the only ones it is prepared to appoint; if it is creating a separate police force as well in the country to monitor, investigate, arrest—as they say, if necessary—and even kidnap people who are opposing the government; if it is bringing in certain laws that restrict the opposition's ability, where is the space for members of Parliament who are willing to stand up, and are there any? I realize they probably don't have much air time because all of it is covered by Chavez and his own media outlets, but where are the voices, where are the local NGOs, where are the parliamentary and political voices able to be heard throughout the country? Is that disappearing altogether?

**Ms. Guadalupe Marengo:** I don't think we can categorically say that, because there are still plenty of television stations and newspapers that have an editorial line that is anti-government. It is true that lately there has been a bit more intimidation than there was two years ago, so we are beginning to worry as to how far this will go, but at the moment there are plenty of television stations, radio outlets, and newspapers that have an editorial line.

Our worry is that in the past eight months it has become a bit more crucial because people have begun to be detained. These four cases are an example of what has been happening in the past eight months, which wasn't necessarily the case before.

**Mr. Mario Silva:** On the issue of polarization, has it become sort of a class warfare between rich and poor, or is it much more complex than that?

• (1335)

**Ms. Guadalupe Marengo:** I would say it is far more complex than that. It is true that during the last election—I can't remember the exact percentages—Chavez won by not an overwhelming amount, not over 80% but by less. So it is getting to be more complex than that, I would say.

**Mr. Mario Silva:** Can you just elaborate on your knowledge of the legislature in Venezuela? I don't have a lot of access to that information. What is the ability of the opposition to actually voice its concerns in the Parliament? Could you just elaborate for us on what is taking place there?

**Ms. Guadalupe Marengo:** Yes, they can elaborate their concerns within Parliament. The problem is that most members of the Parliament are part of the party of the president at the moment, and that has been the case for a few years. So there is very little manoeuvring within that space.

**Mr. Mario Silva:** Are those voices, those parliamentarians who are dissenting against Chavez, able to actually speak to the national media? Or is there a similar procedure to here in Canada, where the media comes to them after there is a statement in Parliament?

**Ms. Guadalupe Marengo:** That is definitely the case. Yes, they definitely have been able to do that. But again I stress that lately, because of this stronger clamp-down on people being detained for saying things, I think they are becoming wary as to how intimidated they might or might not feel. But there is definitely space for that.

**Mr. Mario Silva:** Thank you for clarifying these points, because we've never been able to get access to that. I appreciate that information. Thank you.

**The Chair:** Thank you, Mr. Silva.

[Translation]

Mr. Dorion, you have the floor for eight minutes.

**Mr. Jean Dorion (Longueuil—Pierre-Boucher, BQ):** Ms. Marengo, can you hear me okay?

[English]

**Ms. Guadalupe Marengo:** Yes, I can, thank you.

[Translation]

**Mr. Jean Dorion:** One of Venezuela's political problems, problems that have probably also contributed to the totalitarian nature of the regime, is that the opposition boycotted the last elections en masse, which led to almost the entire legislature supporting Mr. Chavez.

Do you think that the decision to boycott the elections was justified? Was it a wise decision at the time?

[English]

**Ms. Guadalupe Marengo:** Yes. Unfortunately, at Amnesty International we have no position on that particular boycott you're mentioning. We are mainly concerned with the human rights violations that happen in the country. As Amnesty International, we haven't taken a position on whether or not it was a good idea to boycott those elections. We campaign for human rights violations not to occur and for people to be protected from human rights violations. So we have no position on that particular question you're asking.

[Translation]

**Mr. Jean Dorion:** Could you not be criticized for isolating the human rights issue from its larger context, which is obviously very political in the case of Venezuela?

[English]

**Ms. Guadalupe Marengo:** Definitely. The context is incredibly important. That's why we are pushing. Our concern is for there to be transparency, for there to be accountability, and for whichever government is in power to prevent human rights violations, to protect people from human rights violations, and to investigate human rights violations.

One of the things we find at the moment with the cases of impunity we have documented, the ones I mentioned here and others we have documented, is that not only are there no investigations and nobody is brought to justice, but nobody at the higher level appears to be saying that they're not going to tolerate these human rights violations. That's our concern.

[Translation]

**Mr. Jean Dorion:** Aside from human rights violations by the authorities, the government, are human rights violations also committed by the opposition? Is there intimidation, and so on? Could those accusations also be levelled at the opposition?

•(1340)

[English]

**Ms. Guadalupe Marengo:** Definitely. Yes, in particular during demonstrations.

As you know, during the past few years there has been a lot of social unrest, demonstrations for various laws the home government proposes or things the government wants to change. During demonstrations, the clashes are between those who are pro-government and the opposition. Both parties use excessive force. We're calling for that to stop. Yes.

[Translation]

**Mr. Jean Dorion:** Recent media reports have stated that important government figures have quit—perhaps you remember the names, I forget them—people who were close to Chavez and have since left.

Did the human rights issue influence their decision?

[English]

**Ms. Guadalupe Marengo:** I don't know what part. I suppose you mean people like.... If I'm not mistaken, the minister for justice left, as well as various other ministers. A few generals have left during the past ten years. We haven't spoken to them directly. We don't know exactly their reasons for leaving. Again, as Amnesty International, we don't get into those considerations.

[Translation]

**Mr. Jean Dorion:** The government obviously justifies its crackdown on some media by saying that they were not only critical, but also extremely aggressive, misleading, and so on.

Is there any truth to the government's accusations?

[English]

**Ms. Guadalupe Marengo:** Our reading of this is that licences are not extended or are withdrawn because of administrative issues or because they have expired; however, if you look at those 34 radio stations, for example, whose licences were withdrawn because of administrative reasons, all actually had an anti-government editorial line. So you would perceive the actual reason their licences were removed is their anti-government line. This is not only what we, Amnesty International, have said, but if you were to look at the reports of the Inter-American Commission on Human Rights or at the reports of UN special rapporteurs on freedom of expression, of independence of the judiciary, they would also say that it appears to be because they have an anti-government line.

[Translation]

**Mr. Jean Dorion:** We are aware of the close ties between the governments of Cuba and Venezuela. Do you think that has an influence on Venezuela's progress in terms of human rights?

[English]

**Ms. Guadalupe Marengo:** Again, Amnesty International has no position on that. The position we have is that human rights have to be protected. As you know, Amnesty International has problems with human rights violations in Cuba, but we also have problems in Mexico, where I come from, and in the rest of Latin America. That's our main concern.

[Translation]

**Mr. Jean Dorion:** Thank you, Ms. Marengo.

[English]

**Ms. Guadalupe Marengo:** Thank you.

**The Chair:** Merci, Monsieur Dorion.

Mr. Marston, you have eight minutes.

**Mr. Wayne Marston (Hamilton East—Stoney Creek, NDP):** Good afternoon.

I listened to your testimony in comparison to previous testimony we've heard at this committee, and we've had witnesses stating that Venezuela is hugely better off since this government came to power. They spoke particularly about the constitution. As they described it, people carried the constitution with them. It was something they discussed in public; it was a living document for them. And as a result, they felt empowered.

We've heard people talk today about the different levels, for lack of a better word, the class structure of that community, where the well-to-do may not be doing as well as they once were and those who weren't doing well are doing much better. That balancing isn't something I would particularly argue against.

There was one thing that struck me about the television station losing its licence. If you took any other country in Central America, or perhaps even Canada, if you had a television station that was part of leading a coup against the government, who would license it after that? A question that comes to my mind is that of the 34 administrative licences being blocked, were any of those involved with the coup?

•(1345)

**Ms. Guadalupe Marengo:** I don't know whether any of them were involved with the coup. But as I said, for the past eight months or so, it appears there is beginning to be a stronger line against those who are against the government. In 2007 we started with not extending the licence of Radio Caracas. The licence doesn't have to be extended, as you said; there's no law that says you have to extend the licence.

But with the 34 stations last year, if you put that together with those people who have been recently arrested, the judiciary has been used to detain and to punish them, and the evidence we have is that it's mainly for political reasons, you start to ask—and again, I think this is not only the position of Amnesty International, but the position of the special rapporteur in the Inter-American Commission on Freedom of Expression and also UN bodies—why these stations have been looked at. Is it because of their editorial line, or because administratively they were not doing things the right way?

**Mr. Wayne Marston:** Well, most countries' response to some kind of a coup attempt is usually fairly harsh. I've not heard that evidence coming out yet, but there may well have been a deterioration as a result of that, or...

One of the things that was said here is that there was a disconnect between the government and the police, that to some extent the police were running on their own and the government hadn't reined them in as people wanted them to and that the police were almost as bad as some gangs in some countries.

Do you see that separation between government and the police in that regard? In other words, the government has the army and then the police are over here doing their own thing.

**Ms. Guadalupe Marengo:** Well, the fact is that the office of the public ministry has said that in the first seven years of this decade they have received 6,000 complaints of alleged killings by police. They haven't yet investigated that number of police killings, so something has to be done.

Also, it isn't clear whether there is the political will to send the clear message that police brutality is not going to be tolerated and that these alleged violations are going to be investigated. Time and again with the information on the cases we've received, and I've outlined them here, they are not investigated and nobody is brought to justice. It seems there is not the political will to put in the resources to ensure these things don't happen on the ground.

**Mr. Wayne Marston:** As regards my question more directly, there is a separation between the police forces and the government. You're saying the government is failing to act as it should in order to control the police, but the police on their own hook over here seem to be functioning as an organization separate from the government. That's what I was looking at.

Again, witnesses here have told us that things are hugely better than what they were under the previous government. Would you agree with that statement? You've already listed primary health care and other things.

**Ms. Guadalupe Marengo:** Yes. Violence against women, health, education.... On the issue of social and economic rights, one can see from the various reports that have appeared, not only ours, but also that of the UN Development Programme, that there has been huge progress on those issues within the country.

**Mr. Wayne Marston:** So then the real concern, from your perspective, is what we would call human rights violations. In that context, how would you say Venezuela, Colombia, and Bolivia would compare?

• (1350)

**Ms. Guadalupe Marengo:** Amnesty International doesn't compare. One human rights violation is enough.

There have been improvements in human rights, because social and economic rights are actually human rights. However, we continue to worry about the issue of impunity, which already existed before this administration, and the apparently increasing intolerance to criticism of the government. We are concerned with those issues now, as well as with the implementation, for example, of a very good law regarding violence against women. However, more resources will have to be put towards that to actually advance on it.

**Mr. Wayne Marston:** In Canada there are huge concerns about missing aboriginal women, and exactly the same case can be made here, that the resources haven't been put forward by our country. In fact, the UN review of Canada raised that particular issue.

I'm trying to put into context, relative to the area, whether the line is totally moving forward. You've indicated that in the last eight months you've had some significant concerns, and I share those concerns with you, but to my mind, things are comparative in the

sense of those other countries. I know that any violation is an inequity, and it should be addressed.

We've just concluded a free trade agreement with Colombia. When you compare the dialogue and what's happening around Colombia and the various things we've heard about the state of government and the state of life in that country, and then you hear the comments that come out about Mr. Chavez and other people, and if you listen to CNN or some of the more mainstream American media, they really come down very hard on them. That's why I was searching out that comparison that I was asking for before.

**Ms. Guadalupe Marengo:** I think the comparison I would like to make, since we don't compare countries, is between what was happening in Venezuela 15 or 20 years ago and what is happening now with social and economic rights and other rights. Progress has definitely been made.

**Mr. Wayne Marston:** Thank you.

**The Chair:** Thank you, Mr. Marston.

That was perfectly timed: eight minutes and fourteen seconds.

Mr. Sweet, go ahead, please.

**Mr. David Sweet (Ancaster—Dundas—Flamborough—Westdale, CPC):** Thank you very much.

I want to try to tie down some things from some of the statements that were made. You opened your remarks by saying that 20 years ago things were the same as they are today. I think you were talking specifically about the crackdown on those who oppose the government and about impunity and so on. In that case, you're saying that not only was it the same 20 years ago as it is today—although we've had groups say it's much better—but that in the last few months it's gotten much more severe. Is that correct?

**Ms. Guadalupe Marengo:** I think maybe I wasn't specific or clear enough. The issue of impunity is something we've been worried about for many years in that country, as well as in the rest of the region, in Latin America. Impunity continues to be a concern. Human rights violations are rarely investigated; rarely are people brought to justice; rarely do the victims receive redress. That's one thing, the issue of impunity.

Clamping down on dissidence is the latest development we've seen in the past few months. The authorities are beginning to clamp down and to be less tolerant than they used to be only two years ago. Now people are being detained. Just in the past six or seven months, three or four prominent anti-government people have been detained and are facing prosecution for this. One in particular, a judge, remains in prison. Others were in prison for six or seven months. That wasn't happening two years ago within this administration. There seems to be an increase in intolerance of those who do not agree with the government.

I don't know whether I've clarified anything.

**Mr. David Sweet:** In fact, to the point of my colleague Mr. Silva, even those with Oswaldo Álvarez, even political opponents are being incarcerated now, and there's some charge called "media terrorism". Do you know what that is?



•(1355)

**Ms. Guadalupe Marengo:** No, I don't know what that is. A charge against who?

**Mr. David Sweet:** This is Oswaldo Álvarez.

**Ms. Guadalupe Marengo:** Yes, against Oswaldo Álvarez, who was only recently released. And he's the Governor of Zulia, am I correct? Yes, Oswaldo Álvarez.

**Mr. David Sweet:** I believe he's the former governor, yes, and ran as a presidential candidate—one of the opposition voices.

**Ms. Guadalupe Marengo:** Exactly, and he was detained.

**Mr. David Sweet:** So to my colleague's point, in fact it is quite dangerous to voice your opinion if you're a political opponent in Venezuela.

**Ms. Guadalupe Marengo:** That's what we're beginning to see. As we have said in all sorts of other bodies, there is more intimidation than there used to be, and that is intimidating or could be seen as intimidating the rest of the population, and particularly, of course, those who want to voice their opposition to the government.

**Mr. David Sweet:** Yes.

We had an organization here called Hands Off Venezuela. I don't know if you're familiar with them.

**Ms. Guadalupe Marengo:** No, I'm not.

**Mr. David Sweet:** They said that freedom of expression prevails in Venezuela. That was their testimony before us. It seems to me that with 34 radio licences revoked and presidents of TV stations being incarcerated after they criticized the government, and of course a licence being revoked, this is very serious. And I have to say that the Chavez administration, if my colleague Mr. Marston is right, is very patient. They'd wait seven or eight years after a coup before they'd revoke the licence.

The general population of Venezuela relies, as our population does, on the media to tell them what's going on, to give them a view of what their government is doing, of freedom and democracy and human rights, and for that voice to be muzzled is a very serious thing.

**Ms. Guadalupe Marengo:** At Amnesty International we are definitely taking it seriously, and you can see from reports from the Inter-American Commission on Human Rights and UN bodies that they are also taking it very seriously. Recently a lot of concerns have been expressed by various bodies on these developments in the country.

**Mr. David Sweet:** What kind of response are you getting from the Venezuelan government? First, are you getting an audience with somebody of substantive rank in the government? Are they listening? Obviously, by their actions, it doesn't seem as if they are when you're saying that people are incarcerated or missing and

there's not any investigation. But are you at least getting an audience with a level that's commensurate with your concerns?

**Ms. Guadalupe Marengo:** I think lately we're beginning to be concerned that we aren't listened to. For example, only a few months ago, when the Inter-American Court of Human Rights called on the government to reinstate three judges they had pulled out a few years ago, the government threatened withdrawal from the Inter-American Commission on Human Rights. So those threats are worrying.

And no, in the past few years we haven't received any answers from the authorities on our urgent actions on the cases we have presented to them.

We did have a very good campaign on violence against women, and the interaction with the government and our particular campaign on violence against women was very positive and very good.

**Mr. David Sweet:** I appreciate too that you mentioned there were advances there. And I think credit should be given where credit is due. However, if it's at the expense of other human rights, if the whole notion is to try to give themselves space so they can govern with impunity, then that's not acceptable at all.

Thank you very much.

**Ms. Guadalupe Marengo:** Amnesty International strongly believes that human rights are indivisible and universal. All human rights have to be protected: economic, social, civil, and political, which is what we are saying, not only to this government but to others as well.

**Mr. David Sweet:** I think you'd have full agreement from this committee.

Thank you very much.

**The Chair:** Thank you, Mr. Sweet.

All right, that concludes the questions.

I want to thank our witness, Ms. Marengo, for attending today. We do very much appreciate your willingness to make yourself available. This is very helpful to all of us.

I should just ask before I let you go, is there any final statement you want to make?

•(1400)

**Ms. Guadalupe Marengo:** That was my final one just now, on the indivisibility of rights and how you can't just have some and not others, which is our main concern in Venezuela at the moment, all human rights.

Thank you.

**The Chair:** Thank you very much. We do appreciate it.

The meeting is adjourned.





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