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# COVID-19 & QUARANTINE:

## FERTILE GROUND FOR AUTHORITARIANISM



COMMISSIONER TO  
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Bolivarian Republic of Venezuela

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## Introduction

On March 13, 2020, two days after the declaration of the coronavirus outbreak as a global pandemic, Maduro's regime announced the first two cases of COVID-19 in Venezuela, proclaiming a State of Alarm to address the coronavirus health emergency (COVID-19). This was followed, on March 16, by a declaration of the beginning of the quarantine as of March 17 at 5:00 am, after reporting 33 positive cases of COVID-19 in the country.

Venezuela, like many developing countries, does not have an adequate hospital infrastructure to deal with the consequences of an outbreak of COVID-19. Because of the particularities of the virus, even countries with the best public health systems have been severely hampered by the lack of supplies, personnel and infrastructure needed to deal with this pandemic. Venezuela is a country that was already in a situation of Complex Humanitarian Emergency, without the capacity to deal with the daily problems of its citizens, and therefore it is not in a position to combat the pressure that this outbreak of contagion is putting on the already weak health system.

Faced with this situation, the Nicolas Maduro regime adopted measures of social control, population control, financial control and humanitarian aid control in order to increase its level of authoritarianism. Additionally, the regime has blamed sanctions and quarantine for the shutdown of the economy, and its inability to respond to the pandemic.

A crisis of this magnitude is fertile ground for authoritarian governments, an excuse to increase the state's control over the lives of its citizens, with the justification that these are measures taken for the good of the citizenry. While some countries spy on their citizens, some even weld residents into their homes, and others suspend democratic guarantees, governing by decree<sup>1</sup>. It is for this reason that the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights issued "Essential Guidelines for Incorporating a Human Rights Perspective into Pandemic Care by COVID-19" where she states: "Restrictions defined to respond

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<sup>1</sup> Edward Santow. We must combat Covid-19 but creeping authoritarianism could do more harm than good. (traducción propia) <https://bit.ly/3bPsVk8>



to the virus should be motivated by legitimate public health objectives and should not be used solely to nullify dissent”<sup>2</sup>.

The greatest danger is that authoritarian governments will not relinquish the new powers acquired in the wake of the pandemic. For developed countries, the greatest concern is the use of digital surveillance systems to control contagion, and that these measures will be kept after the end of the pandemic. For other countries that are institutionally weaker and have autocratic regimes, such as Venezuela, this may mean greater repression, indefinite suspension of guarantees and violation of human rights.

This report describes the measures and actions taken by the Nicolás Maduro regime as a result of the COVID-19 coronavirus outbreak in Venezuela, as well as the direct and indirect effects of these measures on the population, from March 13 to April 17, one month after the declaration of the quarantine.

The report is structured as follows:

**Actions taken by Maduro's regime:** Despite having implemented many measures similar to those taken in other parts of the world, in Venezuela these have been used to increase the level of authoritarianism under the excuse of the virus spreading. In addition, economic protection measures are used as social control measures and benefit only the regime's supporters, and are unfortunately insufficient to help the most vulnerable people alleviate the direct and indirect consequences of quarantine.

**Access to food:** The report describes the effects of quarantine, loss of employment and income, on a population already suffering from food insecurity before the pandemic, as well as other factors, such as lack of fuel and restrictions on free transit, which affect the ability of Venezuelans to secure access to food.

**Access to health care:** In a poor health system, without access to hospital supplies and with an already compromised health infrastructure, the fight to save

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<sup>2</sup> Oficina de la Alta Comisionada para los Derechos Humanos “Directrices Esenciales para Incorporar la Perspectiva de Derechos Humanos en la Atención a la Pandemia por Covid-19” <https://bit.ly/3aJAFcY>



lives and prevent the spread of COVID-19 is even more difficult. The shortage of basic goods such as soap is combined with a lack of face masks, gloves and protective supplies for doctors, as well as an insufficient number of beds in intensive care units, and respirators, which are also unavailable in more developed countries. Even more critical is the inability to carry out a sufficient number of PCR tests, rather than rapid tests, which globally is the first recommendation made to effectively combat the contagion and spread of the COVID-19.

**Basic Services:** in the midst of a pandemic, when basic services such as electricity and drinking water are most needed to maintain a basic level of health and to avoid contagion, Venezuela is experiencing constant blackouts in most of the national territory. In addition, there are many areas that do not have drinking water service, and in almost all cases with disruptions in service. This situation is aggravated by the scarcity of fuel and domestic gas, as well as limited access and failures in the internet service, which makes it difficult to work and to school from home.

**Human Rights Violations:** The Maduro regime has used the quarantine and the pandemic as an excuse to intensify the harassment of its political opponents, by increasing intimidation and illegal arrests. In addition, the regime has increased its level of authoritarianism, with impunity, by using the quarantine to suppress the right to protest, and by violating other rights such as the right to repatriation, and also by using extreme and human rights violations in response to scenarios where the quarantine has been disrespected.

**Right to Information:** Following the spread of the COVID-19 virus, the Maduro regime has increasingly centralized information, in particular on the number of virus-related infections and deaths, to give a false sense of control over the situation. A clear demonstration of his authoritarianism, in fact, is the use of intimidation, police force and arrests as a way of preventing the spread of information by journalists and health workers about the real situation of both the spread of the virus and the situation in hospitals and clinics.

**Actions and Proposals by the Interim Government:** in clear contrast to the actions taken by the regime, the Interim Government has taken steps to



depoliticize Humanitarian Aid and has proposed to work with all political and social factors to seek a solution to the terrible situation in which Venezuelans find themselves



# MEASURES TAKEN BY THE NICOLAS MADURO REGIME

## State of Alarm

On March 13, with the notification of the first two cases, Maduro's regime declared a State of Alarm, which was made official in the Extraordinary Official Gazette (Gaceta Oficial) 6.519, Decree No. 4.160<sup>3</sup> of that same date, for 30 days, extendable for the same period until "the state of containment of the epidemic coronavirus disease (COVID-19) or its possible strains are deemed adequate, and its factors of contagion are controlled".

Many of the measures contemplated in the declaration of the State of Alarm, such as restriction of the public's movement, suspension of activities, obligatory use of face masks, suspension of public events and non-essential school and work activities, the adjustment of private health establishments to the protocols established by the Ministry of the People's Power for Health, suspension of flights and mandatory two-week isolated quarantine for those suspected of contagion, among others, are measures that have been taken in one way or another, and with different levels of severity, in many other countries.

However, according to lawyer Allan R. Brewer-Carias, this State of Alarm decree "is unconstitutional, poorly conceived, poorly drafted and with diffuse effectiveness"<sup>4</sup>. Moreover, as the lawyer says, "in issuing the decree, the existence of the National



<sup>3</sup> Gaceta Oficial Extraordinaria 6.519, Decreto N° 4.160 <https://bit.ly/2SqW8z0>

<sup>4</sup> Allan Brewer-Carias "El Decreto Del Estado De Alarma Con Ocasión De La Pandemia Del Coronavirus: Inconstitucional, Mal Concebido, Mal Redactado Y Bien Inefectivo" pg 3 <https://bit.ly/3bOkJR3>

**Photo ABC.es**



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Assembly, which according to the Constitution must carry out political control of state of emergency decrees, was completely ignored”<sup>5</sup>.

Lawmakers Angélica Calzadilla and Andrea Santacruz of the Bioethics and Law Observatory and the Human Rights Center of the Universidad Metropolitana, in their work "Reflexiones sobre la criminalización en el contexto de las pandemias, especial énfasis en la situación de Venezuela" (Reflections on criminalization in the context of pandemics, with special emphasis on the situation in Venezuela) argue that Decree No. 4,160 "restricts guarantees and rights in an excessively broad manner, which runs contrary to the proportionality and necessity of its declaration"<sup>6</sup>, which also contradicts one of the guidelines given at this moment by the High Commissioner for Human Rights, Michelle Bachelet, where she states that "the emergency response to the coronavirus must be proportionate, necessary and non-discriminatory"<sup>7</sup>.

## Economic Measures

Tareck El Aissami, the regime's Vice-President for the economic area announced on March 23 a series of measures that aim to reduce the impact of the quarantine on the economy and that include direct transfers of bonds to workers, the ratification of labor immobility, suspension of rent collection, the possibility of restructuring loans and the suspension of their enforceability and the setting of priorities for loans to sectors that are strategic at this time. In addition to assuming the payment of the payroll for small and medium businesses that register to request it.

Firstly, it should be noted that the issuance of bonds to workers and the payment of the payroll would be done within the Patria System, so it is a discriminatory measure that deepens the social control of the regime, as well as the delivery of the CLAP Boxes (Local Committee of Supply and Production), on which many families depend as their only source of food. Secondly, this bonus of 450,000BS, at the date of its approval, was not even equivalent to the price of a kilo of cheese,

<sup>5</sup> Allan Brewer-Carias "El Decreto Del Estado De Alarma Con Ocasión De La Pandemia Del Coronavirus: Inconstitucional, Mal Concebido, Mal Redactado Y Bien Inefectivo" pg 11 <https://bit.ly/3bOkJR3>

<sup>6</sup> Angelica Calzadilla y Andrea Santacruz "Reflexiones sobre la criminalización en el contexto de las pandemias, especial énfasis en la situación de Venezuela" <https://bit.ly/2XWS87X>

<sup>7</sup> Oficina de la Alta Comisionada para los Derechos Humanos "Directrices Esenciales para Incorporar la Perspectiva de Derechos Humanos en la Atención a la Pandemia por Covid-19" <https://bit.ly/3aJAFcy>



so without a doubt these measures are not sufficient to counteract the loss of income due to the quarantine. On the other hand, they mean a great fiscal impact for the public treasury, which in a scenario of decreasing income from lower oil prices, would imply an emission of inorganic money, which is transformed into higher inflation, in a framework of existing hyperinflation.

On April 12, another decree of extension, for 30 days, of the State of Alarm, was published in the Extraordinary Official Gazette. Until that date, the regime had declared 175 cases and 9 deaths.

## ACCESS TO FOOD

The food security assessment carried out by the World Food Programme (WFP)<sup>8</sup> from July to September 2019, and published in February 2020, highlighted the needs and vulnerabilities of households in Venezuela, a situation that is currently being aggravated by the COVID-19 pandemic that is affecting hundreds of countries around the world. However, although Venezuela is not the only nation experiencing an unfavorable socioeconomic situation, the current political conflict and the actions taken by the Maduro regime make the country one of the most vulnerable.

In the particular case of access to food, in February 2020, WFP stated that "at least one in three people in the country had difficulty putting food on the table and consuming the minimum nutritional requirements"<sup>9</sup>. Likewise, the evaluation estimated that 2.3 million people are severely food insecure and another 7 million are moderately food insecure<sup>10</sup>.



<sup>8</sup> WFP, «WFP Venezuela - Evaluación de seguridad alimentaria: Principales hallazgos | Datos recolectados de julio a septiembre de 2019». <https://bit.ly/3anTATD>

<sup>9</sup> Noticias ONU, «Una de cada tres personas en Venezuela no tiene suficiente comida» <https://bit.ly/2VnM0nB>

<sup>10</sup> WFP, «WFP Venezuela - Evaluación...»

**Photo runrun.es**



In the results analysis, the World Food Programme specified that by the time of the survey "many people could meet their food needs but at the great cost of sacrificing their assets and risking their livelihoods". And among other relevant data, it stated that 60% of households had reported reducing the portion size of their meals; 59% of households did not have enough income to buy food; and six out of ten families had spent their savings on food.

These figures provide an overview of the pre-existing situation in the country, before the arrival of the pandemic in Venezuela. A situation that is now aggravated. This forces thousands of families to struggle between going out to work in order to buy their food, or staying at home to avoid the spread of the coronavirus.

According to the results, as of April 17, 2020 of the National Impact Survey COVID-19, conducted by the Commission of Health Experts to address the Coronavirus pandemic, in partnership with the Office of the President in Charge, only 4.8% of shops remain open and with full supply of products, 12.5% do not have access to food, and at least 82.2% have failures in operations or products, with the states of Delta Amacuro and Amazonas the areas with the most failures in service.<sup>11</sup>

This survey produces day-by-day data of the "national evolution of food shortages", which, as of the date of analysis of this study, shows that during the last 30 days, food shortages increased from 88.9% to 97.4%<sup>12</sup>. Specialists view this situation with concern, considering that the overall quarantine is expected to be held for at least 30 more days and the figures for the shortage of gasoline, which is essential for the shipment and distribution of food, also continues to rise.

According to the same survey, when asking Venezuelan citizens what their income or savings capacity is and to what extent they believe that these can help them cope with the pandemic, only 1.4% of those surveyed said that they have the capacity to cover their needs for more than a month, and 90.1% said that they

<sup>11</sup> Centro de Comunicación Nacional. Publicación de Twitter. 18 de abril de 2020, 9:55 a.m. <https://bit.ly/3aqNpOs>

<sup>12</sup> Centro de Comunicación Nacional. Publicación de Twitter. 18 de abril de 2020, 9:55 a.m. <https://bit.ly/2VL0ayg>

<sup>13</sup> Centro de Comunicación Nacional. Publicación de Twitter. 18 de abril de 2020, 9:55 a.m. <https://bit.ly/3aqHpFz>



do not have any kind of savings or income<sup>13</sup>. It should be noted that in 30 days the nationwide evolution of people without any kind of savings has reflected an increase of 13.1%.<sup>14</sup>

The increase in food prices has also been a determining factor for millions of Venezuelans who today see their right to food violated. This is proven by journalist Alvaro Algarra who explained it in a report by La Voz de América:

(...) during a tour of several popular sectors of the Venezuelan capital, he was able to see how, as the days of confinement pass, citizens are increasingly concerned about the impossibility of working and the rising prices of basic necessities<sup>15</sup>

Nelio Ramírez, one of the citizens approached for the report, said:

Products are way too expensive, they have increased from yesterday to today by a high percentage. The minimum wage is half a box of eggs. That's not nearly enough. It mainly affects the stomach. There's too much hunger, too much.<sup>16</sup>

Algarra also refers to the data on inflation published in March by the National Assembly: during that month, inflation reached 21.2% and the accumulated inflation for the year is 145.3%. He also points out that according to the official dollar rate (for April 13, the date the report was published), the minimum monthly wage in the country, which includes salary and food allowance, is \$4.50.

Beyond the figures, testimonies of citizens are more overwhelming every day: Herminia Fernández, a journalist from France24, managed to interview different residents of Petare, the largest slum in all of Venezuela and one of the largest in Latin America, and spoke with them about the situation they are suffering and how they are facing it. In the report, titled "Covid-19, an escalation of malnutrition

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<sup>13</sup> Centro de Comunicación Nacional. Publicación de Twitter. 18 de abril de 2020, 9:55 a.m. <https://bit.ly/3aqHpFz>

<sup>14</sup> Centro de Comunicación Nacional. Publicación de Twitter. 18 de abril de 2020, 9:55 a.m. <https://bit.ly/34Suhlj>

<sup>15</sup> Álvaro Algarra, «El coronavirus no detiene los precios en Venezuela, aumenta preocupación de los ciudadanos» <https://bit.ly/2VJyeMI>

<sup>16</sup> Álvaro Algarra, «El coronavirus no detiene...»



is estimated in Venezuela<sup>17</sup> is the testimony of Virginia Romero, a resident of Mariches who lives with five other people and at the time no longer had any food or resources because each family member has informal jobs that have been affected by the quarantine:

Romero has been waiting for two months for the Local Supply and Production Committee (CLAP) box given by the Government, but still has no idea when she will get it. Her case is very common among families in the popular areas.

In the same article, the journalist interviews Marianella Herrera, who is the director of the Venezuelan Health Observatory and is a specialist in nutrition. She states that the difficulties in obtaining food have become more serious, and that the boxes provided by the Local Supply and Production Committees (CLAP), on which many families depend at times like these, "do not bring enough food to guarantee the necessary nutrition" and that "a family of five eats only one week with its content"<sup>18</sup>.

It is necessary to emphasize that distribution of these food boxes does not have a specific periodicity: they can vary from weeks to months; and they are conditioned to the inscription in the Patria System and the subsequent use of the Carnet de la Patria, both denounced in several occasions for being used as mechanisms of social monitoring and political control by the Maduro regime. This implies that it is not a benefit to which the whole population has access.

In addition, as mentioned above, gasoline shortages prevent producers -mainly in the countryside - from shipping and distributing the food. On April 1, 2020, the president of the Confederation of Agricultural Producers' Associations (Fedeagro), Aquiles Hopkins, said that the demand for food had fallen by at least 20% in the last two weeks (corresponding to the first two weeks of total quarantine in Venezuela) as a result of the measures applied by the government, in order to stop the expansion of the Covid-19<sup>19</sup>.

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<sup>17</sup> Herminia Fernández, «Covid-19, se estima una escalada de desnutrición en Venezuela» <https://bit.ly/2RQcKk>

<sup>18</sup> Herminia Fernández, «Covid-19, se estima una escalada...»

<sup>19</sup> Juan Bautista Salas, «Aquiles Hopkins: Demanda de alimentos cae en -20% debido a la cuarentena por el Covid-19» <https://bit.ly/34RgTnz>



Hopkins also warned that harvests are being lost due to lack of fuel, and that land is not being prepared for the new planting cycle

The Executive Branch put all the weight on the businessmen. No one is guilty of the coronavirus, but the state is responsible for the gasoline shortage and the problems in public services. The producers have been forced to buy gas in the black market<sup>20</sup>. Also, we do not have the seeds and this is important, because what will be sown next is the food for the last four months of 2020<sup>21</sup>.

Later, on April 8, 2020, Hopkins pointed out that the sector he represents was only working at 30% of its capacity:

Prior to the COVID-19 pandemic crisis, it was due to misguided public policies over the last 20 years. Now, production may fall further due to the lack of bank financing for the sector, lack of foreign currency to import inputs and for the proper maintenance of facilities and plants, as well as the lack of fuel in the country. There is none and we do not know when imports will arrive<sup>22</sup>.

In conclusion, it is necessary to stress that the restrictions imposed by the Nicolás Maduro regime to prevent COVID-19 make the critical food situation of the Venezuelan population even more difficult. In a scenario in which a third of the population was already food insecure, due to shortages and difficult access to food, restrictions on transportation have been added, which mainly include fuel shortages and rationing, not only to allow the general population to move around and buy food but also to allow producers and distributors to bring supplies to the public.

This adds to the great difficulties in obtaining resources for shopping, since many Venezuelans depend on their daily work to replenish the food in their cupboards.

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<sup>20</sup> Término que deriva de la palabra “bachaqueo”: actividad que se caracteriza por la reventa de productos de primera necesidad a precios mayores de su valor oficial. Según Arias, et all. en «Bachaqueros. Un Trabajo del Mercado Negro Venezolano» <https://bit.ly/3bonXdL>

<sup>21</sup> Alberto News, «Águiles Hopkins: “Hay estados donde la mayoría de sus municipios no han recibido ni una gota de gasolina”» <https://bit.ly/2z8SmhZ>

<sup>22</sup> Runrunes, «Fedeagro vaticina aumento de la escasez de hortalizas y frutas» <https://bit.ly/2RQ3xm7>



Nowadays, the savings capacity of millions of people in the country is limited, therefore their supplies are too. This is a situation that the Maduro regime seeks to take advantage of politically, since the assistance options offered by the State to overcome the situation are usually related to the political affiliation and ideological orientation of the beneficiaries, which clearly translates into social control.

## ACCESS TO HEALTH CARE

The situation in Venezuela before COVID-19 already qualified as an emergency. Venezuelans are currently suffering the consequences of a Complex Humanitarian Emergency caused by the misguided decisions of the regime, and years of corruption and inefficiency that have resulted in a precarious state of health institutions.

By December 2019, three months before the first two cases of COVID-19 were confirmed in Venezuelan territory, the National Hospital Survey reported that: 78% of the country's health centers suffered from water supply shortages, 63% suffered from electrical failures, 51% of the country's operating rooms were inoperative, there were only 219 beds for emergency operations, there was a 49% shortage of basic medicines and at least 50% inoperative support services such as laboratories, x-rays and ultrasounds.<sup>23</sup>

According to numbers provided by Mark Lowcock, United Nations Assistant Secretary-General for Humanitarian Affairs and Emergency Relief Coordinator and Head of the United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs, by 2019, 7 million Venezuelans required humanitarian care and 1.9 million



<sup>23</sup> Encuesta Nacional de Hospitales, «Boletín final año 2019», <https://bit.ly/34MdDK6>

**Photo EILitoral.com**



required nutritional support, of which 1.3 million were children under five<sup>24</sup>. The Pan American Health Organization also reported the worsening and appearance of diseases that have already been eradicated, such as malaria and measles, in Venezuelan territory.

This pandemic has put the world's health systems to test, but in Venezuela it is an "emergency within the emergency", because of the already precarious and deteriorated public health system, about which, since 2016, the Ministry of Health has not published official records. The responsibility for publishing official information on the situation in the country's hospitals resides with the authorities, who currently not only usurp functions but also hide data and deny public access to it. The Nicolás Maduro regime keeps in its possession all the documentation that confirms the reality described above, therefore, all the facts and figures mentioned in this report are collected by non-governmental organizations and civil society, who, because of their work, are at risk of being attacked, threatened and persecuted.

Current data, compiled by the Commission of Health Experts in the COVID-19 National Impact Survey, indicates that there is a 95% shortage of sanitizing gel in the health sector, 71% shortage of face masks, 61% shortage of gloves, and 80% shortage of soap.<sup>25</sup>

Medical personnel have repeatedly denounced the difficulty of getting to healthcare centers due to the great shortage of fuel and the high price of public transport due to the crisis. The union leader of Hospitals and Clinics, Mauro Zambrano, has been the spokesperson for the health sector and has reported, on numerous occasions, this problem:

Recently, he claimed that in 83% of the 58 health centers nationwide surveyed for this monitoring, the inflow of workers has decreased due to the lack of transportation. He explained that most of the staff has been affected by the shortage of cash, which prevents them from moving to

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<sup>24</sup> Jessica Carrillo, «ONU: «Más de 7 millones de venezolanos necesitan ayuda humanitaria»», Diario Las Américas, <https://bit.ly/3anU9g0>

<sup>25</sup> Centro de Comunicación Nacional, «Resultados de la encuesta nacional sobre el impacto de Covid-19 en Venezuela», <https://bit.ly/3ezcR7U>



their workplaces. Forty-three per cent of staff indicated that roads to hospitals are closed and they do not have passes that allow them to enter these roads.<sup>26</sup>

A recent report by the United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA) on the situation in Venezuela warns of the risk posed by pre-existing humanitarian conditions:

Limitations in the capacity of the health system to deal with a serious pandemic situation, due to the shortage of necessary supplies (protective equipment for health personnel, biomedical equipment, drugs and medical supplies); water shortages, sanitation and hygiene services in health facilities; Reduced capacity to prevent and control infections, as well as insufficient operation of critical services such as emergencies and pre-hospital care. Some of the population faces difficulties in accessing health system services, due to several factors, including poor coverage by transport fleets, lack of fuel and lack of economic resources<sup>27</sup>.

These limitations are added to the little information available in Venezuela. Since March 13, there has been a centralization of information and control of the COVID-19 imposed by the regime, data on the performance of tests, the number of tests and the results are valuable information to which citizens have no access.

The World Health Organization has also recommended that immediate diagnostic tests or rapid tests should be discontinued because of the number of errors, between negative and positive cases, that they produce. However, according to the latest statements from spokespersons for the dictatorship, 159,597 tests have been conducted in Venezuela, of which only 3,100 have been PCR tests according to the capacity of the National Institute of Hygiene. In other words, only 100 PCR tests are conducted daily in the country, which is a very low percentage in order to know the real situation. Health experts have reported

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<sup>26</sup> Tal Cual, «Personal de la salud en Caracas es obligado a surtir gasolina por número de placa», <https://bit.ly/2XhNSQk>

<sup>27</sup> OCHA, «Plan Intersectorial de Preparación y Atención COVID-19 Venezuela», <https://bit.ly/2XUw2D9>



these irregularities, showing concern about the large number of rapid tests being performed that do not give reliable results for important decision-making.<sup>28</sup>

Another very serious health situation is found within Venezuela's prison population, which is one of the most vulnerable groups in the face of the COVID-19 pandemic, due to overcrowding and the few precautionary measures available in prisons and detention centers. Various political activists and human rights advocates have denounced the unhealthy conditions in Venezuelan prisons, where prisoners are held in overcrowded cells measuring 2m x 2m and with no water for bathing, which, combined with the lack of prevention taken by their custodians, could lead to a fast increase in cases of contagion, and for which they request the release of political prisoners and common prisoners with minor crimes who are eligible for this benefit.<sup>29</sup>

## BASIC SERVICES

For years, the country has been in the midst of a serious crisis in basic services, which has been exacerbated in recent months and has profoundly affected the way in which the COVID-19 pandemic is adequately dealt with, making it difficult to comply with quarantine and social distancing. The risks of contagion are greater because of the limited availability of basic services, such as drinking water, which is essential to protect people's health from the virus.



<sup>28</sup> Christine Armario, Scott Smith y Fabiola Sánchez, «Las pruebas de coronavirus en Venezuela plantean dudas», AP, <https://bit.ly/3eyiYJL>

<sup>29</sup> Christine Armario, Scott Smith y Fabiola Sánchez, «Las pruebas de coronavirus en Venezuela plantean dudas», AP, <https://bit.ly/3eyiYJL>

### Photo Ruters



While in other countries efforts are being made to lighten the burden of quarantine on people's lives, Venezuela is increasing consumption rates for services such as sanitation and telecommunications, when there are almost daily power failures, increased water rationing and one of the slowest internet connectivity in the region<sup>30</sup>.

## Electric Service

The study carried out by the Venezuelan Observatory of Public Services (OVSP) with the latest data obtained in December 2019, revealed that:

Forty percent of those surveyed have daily power failures in their homes, and 19.2% of this group indicated that the failures occur several times a day. In addition, 22.6% said to have interruptions of service with a frequency of 1 to 3 times a week, 9.6% from 4 to 6 days a week, 3.0% every fifteen days, 3.5% once a month and 20.1% said that 'almost never' their service is interrupted<sup>31</sup>.

Considering the above data to frame the situation that Venezuela is going through, the failures in the electrical system have increased in the last month in which the country has been affected by the COVID-19 pandemic. According to a survey published by the National Communication Center (CCN) of the Interim Government, **between March 18 and April 17, the national trend in electricity service failures increased from 86.1% to 94.8%**. The following information stands out:

- 89.2% have power supply with interruptions or failures in the service.
- 5.6% is out of service 24 hours or more days.
- 5.2% has regular and reliable power supply<sup>32</sup>.

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<sup>30</sup> Armas, Pons, «Venezuela aumenta tarifas...»

<sup>31</sup> Comunicaciones OVSP, «OVSP revela importantes frecuencias de interrupciones del servicio eléctrico», Observatorio Venezolano de Servicios Públicos (marzo. 2020): <https://bit.ly/2x98Kyp>

<sup>32</sup> Centro de Comunicación Nacional, «Resultados de la encuesta nacional sobre el impacto de Covid-19 en Venezuela», Cuenta Oficial de la Presidencia (E) de la República Bolivariana de Venezuela (abril. 2020): <https://bit.ly/3ayfHXu>



During this last month, there have been three additional blackouts in the west of the country as a result of failures in different thermoelectric plants or explosions in a substation due to lack of maintenance, affecting mainly the state of Zulia, and the states of Falcon, Barinas, Mérida and Táchira<sup>33</sup>.

## Water Service

The drinking water service is as unsteady as the electrical system, according to the study prepared by OVSP, for December 2019, it indicates that:

Only 16.7% of those surveyed in 10 of the country's main cities stated that they receive drinking water service on a continuous basis in their homes, even though 91.8% of the total sample reported having access to pipelines (...).<sup>34</sup>

The OVSP also recorded that 55 per cent of households in the capital city are without water between one and four days a week, while in the countryside the drought is worsening.<sup>35</sup>

With this background information, it should be noted that in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic, handwashing with soap and water has been recommended as the main measure; therefore, in a country like Venezuela, where water supply is inefficient, this measure becomes very difficult to implement in many households. In addition, based on the study published by the CCN, **nationwide trends in water service scarcity index increased from 90.3% to 95.2% between March 18 and April 17 of this year**. Highlighting the following data at the national level:

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<sup>33</sup> Equipo de comunicadores venezolanos en el exilio, «¿Qué está pasando?», ¿Qué está pasando en Venezuela? y El Pitazo (marzo-abril. 2020): <https://bit.ly/2KAth2b>

<sup>34</sup> Comunicaciones OVSP, «OVSP: Sólo un 16,7% de los hogares recibe agua de manera continua», Observatorio Venezolano de Servicios Públicos (abril. 2020): <https://bit.ly/354GfP3>

<sup>35</sup> Ibis León, «La ayuda internacional es clave para afrontar el COVID-19 en Venezuela (VIII)», Efecto Cocuyo (abril. 2020):<https://bit.ly/3cMAFTX>



- 73.8% of respondents have irregular and/or poor drinking water supply.
- 21.4% of those surveyed said that they had not been provided for more than 7 days.
- 4.8% have a clean and continuous supply of drinking water.<sup>36</sup>

This highlights the terrible reality that hospitals and health centers across the country are going through on a daily basis, as it does not allow for the proper implementation of sanitation measures to protect the health of patients and medical workers from the COVID-19 virus.

## Fuel Supply

Among the measures implemented by the regime is the regulation of the supply of fuel, leaving the military in charge of the control of the gas stations, giving priority to medical personnel; yet, nationwide, different health professionals have claimed that the Bolivarian National Guard rejects their passes and often prevents them from refueling.<sup>37</sup>

The scarcity of gasoline is due to the fact that for several years now, the country's refineries have been paralyzed and up until recently the fuel was imported by the Russian firm Rosneft and the Spanish firm Repsol and other small operators. After the cessation of operations of Rosneft and Repsol in Venezuela, the little gasoline that is imported comes from small opportunists who are still willing to do business with the regime of Nicolas Maduro.<sup>38</sup>

In addition, the worldwide fall in oil prices has seriously affected the oil market. Even though the revenues of the regime had already been damaged before the collapse of the price of the barrel due to the considerable drop in production, this situation deepens "the balance of payments deficit of the Venezuelan state"

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<sup>36</sup> Centro de Comunicación Nacional, «Resultados de la encuesta nacional...»

<sup>37</sup> León, «La ayuda internacional...»

<sup>38</sup> Antonio María Delgado, «De la más barata a una de las más caras, el alocado cambio de la gasolina venezolana», El Nuevo Herald (abril. 2020): <https://hrlid.us/35bC7N4>



since oil production is not profitable because the price of the barrel is below production costs. All of this "prolongs the shadow of a possible default" by increasing the inability to meet payments on imports and debt commitments.<sup>39</sup>

According to data obtained from the survey published by the CCN, the nationwide evolution of the fuel shortage index increased from 87.7% to 98.3% between March 18 and April 17, a period in which queues have increased all over the country to refuel including the capital city, as of March 23<sup>40</sup>, which until now was safeguarded from this situation. The following results obtained at national level can be highlighted from the study:

- 85.5% claimed a lack of gasoline supply.
- 12.8% admit having supply failures.
- 1.6% claim to have no information about it.
- 0.1% have a steady supply.<sup>41</sup>

As a result, demonstrations have taken place throughout the country due to the lack of fuel. Special emphasis should be placed on the situation faced by health professionals, who are not being allowed to fill up with gasoline when they are part of the first line of defense against the COVID-19 pandemic. In light of this, Congressman José Manuel Olivares stressed that "84% of health workers have not been able to refuel their vehicles, and 62% have not been able to go to the hospital this week due to lack of gasoline."<sup>42</sup>

To top it all off, the price many Venezuelans have paid to be able to fill up to 20 or 30 liters of gasoline is exorbitant; especially considering that for years they have been used to refueling their vehicles with less than 10 US cents. Today "they pay

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<sup>39</sup> Gonzalo Domínguez Loeda, «Hidrocarburos. Caída del petróleo: ¿qué pasará con Venezuela?», Clarín (abril.2020): <https://bit.ly/2KFFqr5>

<sup>40</sup> Pedro Luis Flores, Equipo de comunicadores venezolanos en el exilio, «¿Qué está pasando?», ¿Qué está pasando en Venezuela? (marzo. 2020): <https://bit.ly/3bFbe6B>

<sup>41</sup> Centro de Comunicación Nacional, «Resultados de la encuesta nacional...»

<sup>42</sup> Alberto News, «Dip. Olivares aseguró que es imposible levantar la cuarentena en el mes de abril tras la propagación del COVID-19», Alberto News (abril. 2020): <https://bit.ly/3eTnh3S>



up to \$4 per gallon of gasoline, at a time when the country with the largest reserves of crude oil on the planet is running out of fuel”.<sup>43</sup>

If we add to this the serious economic crisis in which Venezuela is immersed, that price is not accessible to the majority of Venezuelans who subsist on a minimum wage that only amounts to \$4 a month. "At that price, Venezuelan gasoline is one of the most expensive in the world, equivalent to what the consumer pays in non-producing countries like Chile or Aruba".<sup>44</sup>

For this reason, fuel shortages have become a lucrative business for National Guard agents and members of the paramilitary bands linked to the regime (known as *colectivos*)<sup>45</sup>, who have taken control of gas stations and force citizens to pay their prices in exchange for being able to fill up after long queues for days.

## Domestic Gas Service

Like the other services mentioned above, domestic gas supply suffers from the same difficulties as other services in the country. According to the study published by the NCC, the following data were obtained:

- 52.4% of those surveyed have no domestic gas supply.
- 24% have gas service at least once between 15 days and a month.
- 18.3% say they have gas service at least once a week.
- 5.3% of those surveyed do not know or are not users of domestic gas.<sup>46</sup>

Considering all the difficulties that Venezuelans go through daily with the provision of other basic services, such as water and electricity, not even those who have gas stoves can be slightly relieved of the constant pressure they experience in trying to give stability to their families, because of the long lines to buy the gas cylinder.

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<sup>43</sup> Delgado, «De la más barata a una de las más caras...»

<sup>44</sup> Delgado, «De la más barata a una de las más caras...»

<sup>45</sup> Delgado, «De la más barata a una de las más caras...»

<sup>46</sup> Centro de Comunicación Nacional, «Resultados de la encuesta nacional...»



## Internet Service

As a result of the quarantine, citizens have had to make greater use of their telephone lines due to the failure of Internet services in their homes. From the monitoring of news made by the OVSP during the month of March, it has been found that it has been frequent the denunciations of citizens throughout the country to failures or total interruptions of the fixed service of Internet. Some say that there were failures before the preventive measure of the pandemic, but others say that connectivity has been affected after social distancing was announced.<sup>47</sup>

The organization VE Sin Filtro reported that the Internet connectivity provided by CANTV fell below 50%<sup>48</sup>. In addition, "results obtained by OVSP show that only about 40% of those surveyed have internet service at home, and 51% of this group presents connection failures on a daily basis."<sup>49</sup>

Bearing these results in mind, we must take into account how education is affected by the suspension of schools at all levels, since March 16. Virtual education has become a real challenge for teachers, students and parents, since they must deal in many cases with deficiencies in service by not having connectivity as well as failures in it, hindering the entire learning process.<sup>50</sup>

Also, in a country where traditional media outlets are in the hands of the regime, it becomes essential for all Venezuelans to be informed about what is going on in the country and internationally about events related to the COVID-19 pandemic.

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<sup>47</sup> Comunicaciones OVSP, «En días de cuarentena ante el COVID-19, el consumo de datos móviles se ha incrementado», Observatorio Venezolano de Servicios Públicos (marzo. 2020): <https://bit.ly/3cT5zu7>

<sup>48</sup> Equipo de comunicadores venezolanos en el exilio, «¿Qué está pasando?», ¿Qué está pasando en Venezuela? (abril. 2020): <https://bit.ly/2VDhVAH>

<sup>49</sup> Comunicaciones OVSP, «En días de cuarentena...»

<sup>50</sup> Comunicaciones OVSP, «En días de cuarentena...»



# HUMAN RIGHTS VIOLATIONS

CAs previously mentioned, the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights, Michelle Bachelet, established that quarantines and other similar measures to contain and combat the spread of the COVID-19 virus must be carried out under the parameters of human rights.<sup>51</sup>

The Nicolas Maduro regime, however, since it decreed a state of alarm throughout the national territory on March 13, 2020, has taken measures that aggravate human rights violations in Venezuela, all under the guidelines of the "Bolivarian Fury" plan. This plan consists of the harassment, persecution and kidnapping of lawmakers, political leaders and their families, human rights defenders, health professionals and President Juan Guaidó, as well as his office.<sup>52</sup> In a speech on March 29th of this year, Nicolas Maduro said that: "Justice will come to everyone, I don't like to talk for the sake of talking, I only say today, March 29th, that justice will come, Operation Knock Knock, to all terrorists, to all violent people, to all conspirators and to all plotters."<sup>53</sup> The report on the repression in Venezuela by the NGO Foro Penal (Penal Forum) states that between March 1 and April 7, 2020, a total of 50 people were arrested and 33 were arbitrarily detained.<sup>54</sup>



<sup>51</sup> Noticias ONU, «Las medidas contra el coronavirus no pueden atentar contra los derechos humanos», Noticias ONU, <https://bit.ly/35bl5NZ>

<sup>52</sup> Despacho Internacional de la Presidencia Encargada de Venezuela, «Situación de derechos en Venezuela ante pandemia COVID-19» Despacho Internacional de la Presidencia Encargada de Venezuela, [file:///C:/Users/Comunicaciones/Downloads/17-04\\_8h00-%20Derechos%20Venezuela%20COVID19%20-%202017-04-20.pdf](file:///C:/Users/Comunicaciones/Downloads/17-04_8h00-%20Derechos%20Venezuela%20COVID19%20-%202017-04-20.pdf)

<sup>53</sup> Gabriel Bastidas, vía Twitter, <https://bit.ly/3aCNleQ>

<sup>54</sup> Foro Penal, «Reporte sobre la represión en Venezuela. Marzo 2020», Foro Penal, <https://bit.ly/2xdOv2I>

## Foto Provea



In this period of the State of Alarm, political persecution in Venezuela has increased significantly. Nicolás Maduro's regime has taken advantage of the situation of vulnerability to attack his political adversaries in order to harass, persecute and imprison them by force, without the slightest respect for their human rights and dignity.<sup>55</sup> At this moment, five members of President Guaidó's team have been kidnapped by the state security forces without warrants: Demosthenes Quijada, Victor Manuel Silio, Sergio Termini, Maury Carrero and Romulo Garcia.<sup>56</sup> At the same time, with the intention of also kidnapping Rafael Rico, a member of President Guaidó's team, security forces arbitrarily detained his girlfriend Andrea Bianchi, in order to obtain information on his whereabouts. In addition, members of the General Office of Military Counter-Intelligence (DGCIM) raided the residence of Fernando López, head of the office of the Commissioner for Foreign Relations, Julio Borges. Similarly, the home of parliamentarians Karim Vera, Bolivia Suárez, Carlos Michelangeli, Héctor Cordero, Larissa González and Armando Armas were spray-painted on March 29 with threatening messages from the Bolivarian Fury.<sup>57</sup>

Even though the High Commissioner for Human Rights said in a statement: "Now more than ever, governments should release all prisoners detained without sufficient legal grounds, including political and other prisoners who were imprisoned simply for expressing critical ideas or dissent"<sup>58</sup>, There are still 342 political prisoners in Venezuela at this time. On March 24, human rights advocate Tamara Sujú condemned the fact that more than 100 DGCIM officials broke into the Ramo Verde military prison at night to torture and mistreat common and political prisoners and to steal their supplies, food, and belongings.<sup>59</sup> Such actions were carried out in breach of the prevention measures to avoid the spread of COVID-19.

During this period, persecution, intimidation and imprisonment of health workers also stand out, particularly those who ask for optimal working conditions

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<sup>55</sup> Centro de Comunicación Nacional «Alerta Internacional ante amenazas a la vida e integridad física del presidente (e) Juan Guaidó, su familia y su círculo más cercano», Centro de Comunicación Nacional, <https://bit.ly/357vETH>

<sup>56</sup> El País, «Los presos del coronavirus en Venezuela», El País, <https://bit.ly/2Ky9znC>

<sup>57</sup> Crónica Uno, «Lo más reciente del 29 de marzo de 2020», Crónica Uno, <https://bit.ly/3cNVRZL>

<sup>58</sup> Noticias ONU, «Las medidas contra el coronavirus...»

<sup>59</sup> Tamara Sujú, vía Twitter, <https://bit.ly/2S2n3fC>



to carry out their work. Nurse Rubén Duarte was arrested and later released by DGCIM officials after requesting biosecurity equipment for the hospital where he works.<sup>60</sup> NGO Provea requested the cessation of the persecution against health workers and claimed that Julio Molinos, a health professional, was arrested after asking for better working conditions, and charged with the crimes of inciting panic and unrest. Carlos Carmona and health worker Maglys Mendoza were also harassed by the Monagas state police.<sup>61</sup>

Human rights activists have also been persecuted during this period. José Gregorio and Elvira Pernaleté, parents of Juan Pablo Pernaleté who was killed during the 2017 protests, were harassed by members of the Community Council and a mission of Cuban doctors on the grounds that they needed to examine them because they had been out of the country doing advocacy work as human rights defenders.<sup>62</sup>

In a similar way, the Nicolás Maduro regime has used paramilitary groups and collectives to enforce the quarantine in places where access to the state security forces is difficult, such as the case of the 23 de Enero parish where three people were killed for violating the quarantine<sup>63</sup>. Congressman Freddy Superlano also denounced the fact that groups of irregulars dressed in military clothing are walking the streets of El Cantón in the state of Barinas, threatening those who live there.<sup>64</sup>

Measures taken by the regime towards people who have not complied with the quarantine are, in addition to being denigrating, in many cases unjustified and in contravention of security measures to prevent the spread of COVID-19. This is due to the fact that by increasing the number of people in a limited space, the minimum distance of 2 meters between one person and another to prevent contagion is not fulfilled. Unlike other countries, where fines are imposed on those who fail to comply with the quarantine, in Venezuela people are detained

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<sup>60</sup> Provea, vía Twitter, <https://bit.ly/3cHdb2q>

<sup>61</sup> Provea, vía Twitter, <https://bit.ly/3eHIWui>

<sup>62</sup> CDH-UNIMET, vía Twitter, <https://bit.ly/2znRQwF>

<sup>63</sup> AlbertoNews, «Colectivos paramilitares asesinan a tres personas por «no acatar la cuarentena» en el 23 de enero de Caracas», AlbertoNews, <https://bit.ly/2S61cDY>

<sup>64</sup> El Pitazo, «Diputado Superlano denuncia que grupos irregulares patrullan pueblos de Barinas», El Pitazo, <https://bit.ly/2Y40UKS>



and in many cases even arrested. In the city of Carúpano, Sucre state, 700 people were detained between March 28 and April 5 for failing to comply with the social quarantine<sup>65</sup>, and 25 people have been brought to the Public Prosecutor's office for violating the quarantine in the state of Aragua.<sup>66</sup>

Due to the lack of access to basic services, fuel, food and medicine, protests have been held throughout the country during this period of the State of Alarm. On April 4, a demonstration took place in the Bella Vista sector of Zulia state, carried out by the Wayuu indigenous community who demanded attention from the government, and was reprimanded by members of the Bolivarian National Guard (GNB)<sup>67</sup>. At La Concepción sector of the Falcón-Zulia national highway, officials from PoliFalcón, GNB and the Bolivarian National Police (PNB) ended another protest by using buckshot, the protesters were asking for access to drinking water and food.<sup>68</sup>

Another human rights violation in the context of the COVID-19 quarantine is that of tourists, travelers and migrants. On March 12, Nicolas Maduro ordered a ban on all flights from Europe and Colombia, which was extended three days later to flights from the Dominican Republic and Panama.<sup>69</sup> According to Humberto Figuera, president of the Venezuelan Airline Association (ALAV), this measure left about 21,000 stranded Venezuelans around the world.<sup>70</sup>

Due to humanitarian flights and the opening of border crossings in specific situations, the United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA) estimates that by April 14, 6,447 Venezuelans returned to the country, including some who had emigrated and are now returning<sup>71</sup>. Many of them decided to return to Venezuela due to complications that the COVID-19 has

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<sup>65</sup> El Pitazo, «En Carúpano detuvieron a 700 personas por incumplir cuarentena», El Pitazo, <https://bit.ly/35aiITC>

<sup>66</sup> El Pitazo, «Violación de cuarentena ha generado 25 detenciones en municipio aragüeño», El Pitazo, <https://bit.ly/351ePtr>

<sup>67</sup> La Patilla, «GNB reprimió protesta de la comunidad Wuayuu en La Guajira», La Patilla, <https://bit.ly/2VzSRuj>

<sup>68</sup> AlbertoNews, «En la Falcón-Zulia: Dispersaron manifestación que tenía retenida a tres gandolas de combustible», AlbertoNews, <https://bit.ly/3aH3akN>

<sup>69</sup> Efecto Cocuyo, «6.447 venezolanos retornados se encuentran en cuarentena preventiva», Efecto Cocuyo, <https://bit.ly/3bRCP4V>

<sup>70</sup> Efecto Cocuyo, «6.447 venezolanos retornados...»

<sup>71</sup> Efecto Cocuyo, «6.447 venezolanos retornados...»



brought to several economies around the world. Of the 91 facilities that have been set up for preventive quarantine, only 73 are currently working, under the most difficult circumstances: lack of infrastructure in these facilities, lack of access to food and water, and excessive security controls by the State police forces..<sup>72</sup>

Many international responses have come from agencies, institutions and NGOs regarding human rights violations during this period of the State of Alarm. The Inter-American Commission on Human Rights (IACHR) reminded the regime that it "has the obligation to protect the health, physical integrity and life of the people under its custody, particularly in the face of the COVID-19 pandemic"<sup>73</sup>. OAS Secretary General Luis Almagro condemned the increased repression by the regime and has demanded the immediate release of political prisoners .<sup>74</sup> Amnesty International stated "the biggest concern about COVID-19 affecting Venezuela is the implementation of a policy of repression by Maduro, which could be exacerbated to limit access to information".<sup>75</sup> Marie Arena, president of the European Parliament's Subcommittee on Human Rights, expressed her concern about illegal detentions during this pandemic period in Venezuela.<sup>76</sup>



## RIGHT TO INFORMATION

Article 19 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights reads:

Everyone has the right to freedom of opinion and expression; this right includes freedom to hold opinions without interference and to seek, receive and impart

<sup>72</sup> Efecto Cocuyo, «6.447 venezolanos retornados...»

<sup>73</sup> Comisión Interamericana de Derechos Humanos, vía Twittter, <https://bit.ly/3cJ20GC>

<sup>74</sup> Despacho Internacional de la Presidencia Encargada de Venezuela, «Situación de derechos en Venezuela...»

<sup>75</sup> Despacho Internacional de la Presidencia Encargada de Venezuela, «Situación de derechos en Venezuela...»

<sup>76</sup> Parlamento Europeo, vía Twitter, <https://bit.ly/2Y73XIN>



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information and ideas through any media and regardless of frontiers.<sup>77</sup>

According to the report "Situation of rights in Venezuela in the face of the COVID-19 pandemic" issued by the International Office of the President in charge, from March 13 to April 17, approximately 123 complaints were made in Venezuela regarding human rights violations and about 28 complaints of violations of freedom of expression. Sources: NGO Espacio Público:

Intimidation, censorship and official restrictions increased the number of registrations, mostly related to reporting on quarantine, arbitrary arrests and censorship through the prohibition of broadcasting information.<sup>78</sup>

In addition to these arrests and intimidations of media workers, radio stations and media outlets were also affected by violations of freedom of expression, such as the shutting down of radio stations, the hindering by the Bolivarian National Guard (GNB) of trucks carrying newspapers, the blocking of websites or threats by regime officials. In the report on violations of freedom of expression in Venezuela from the State of Pandemic Alarm, issued by the NGO Redes Ayuda, approximately 10 media outlets were affected as well as approximately 28 journalists.<sup>79</sup>

Journalists in Caracas and in the countryside have faced these violations, some being detained for more than 40 minutes, threatened with having their recorded material deleted or having their work discredited by regime officials. One of the most serious violations is the case of journalist Darvinson Rojas.

On 21 March, with no warrant and in an irregular manner, 15 officials of the Special Action Forces (FAES) arbitrarily arrested journalist Darvinson Rojas and his parents,<sup>80</sup> who were beaten, while in their home. Officials said, " someone made a call to report a possible case of coronavirus in the reporter's home".<sup>81</sup>

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<sup>77</sup> Organización de las Naciones Unidas, «Declaración Universal de los Derechos Humanos», Organización de las Naciones Unidas, <http://bit.ly/3cJEA4D>

<sup>78</sup> Espacio Público, «Marzo: cuarentena informativa en Venezuela», Espacio Público, <https://bit.ly/2RVxSQi>

<sup>79</sup> Redes Ayuda, «Represión a la libertad de expresión durante la pandemia», Redes Ayuda, <https://bit.ly/3eEDmZp>

<sup>80</sup> Espacio Público, vía Twitter, <https://bit.ly/2RU8w5m>

<sup>81</sup> Reynaldo Mozo, «Excarcelan a periodista Darvinson Rojas después de 13 días de prisión», Efecto Cocuyo, <https://bit.ly/2KkkAbV>



During this procedure, his parents overheard officials asking Rojas to reveal the source of the COVID-19 statistics in Miranda State. The crime reporter had been covering the pandemic situation in the country.

After several hours without knowing his whereabouts, his parents informed that he was at the FAES headquarters at UD5 in Caricuao. On March 23, Rojas was brought clandestinely and irregularly before the courts, where, according to Efecto Cocuyo: "he was denied the right to private defense and was allegedly assigned a public defender".<sup>82</sup> The journalist was also charged with incitement to public hatred and instigation and was subsequently released on Thursday, 2 April.

Other relevant case was the one of journalist Eduardo Galindo, who was arbitrarily arrested, along with his wife and nephew, on April 15 in San Fernando de Apure and then released on Sunday, April 19. Galindo was detained for more than 90 hours at the headquarters of the National Anti-Extortion and Kidnapping Command (CONAS), without communication with his lawyers. Galindo was brought to court two days after the period stipulated by Venezuelan law.<sup>83</sup> According to the website El Pitazo, "the reporter is accused of faking a publication regarding fuel distribution on his website".<sup>84</sup>

In addition to the persecution of media and journalists, the right to be informed has also been violated. The regime is not transparent with numbers of virus infections and deaths related to the pandemic. Communications are manipulated to generate a false sense of control over the situation and to make Venezuelans believe the capacity of the health system and the hospital network are in optimal conditions to deal with the pandemic.

A key example of this situation can be seen when the vice-president of the regime, Delcy Rodríguez, tweeted two charts stating that "Venezuela maintains its flattened curve and is the leader in Latin America in the number of tests

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<sup>81</sup> Reynaldo Mozo, «Excarcelan a periodista Darvison Rojas después de 13 días de prisión», Efecto Cocuyo, <https://bit.ly/2KkkAbV>

<sup>82</sup> Reynaldo Mozo, «Excarcelan a periodista Darvison Rojas»...

<sup>83</sup> Efecto Cocuyo, «Periodista Eduardo Galindo recibe medida sustitutiva de libertad», Efecto Cocuyo, <https://bit.ly/2Vnc2Y3>

<sup>84</sup> María Eugenia Díaz, «Tribunal de Apure otorga libertad condicional al periodista Eduardo Galindo», El Pitazo, <https://bit.ly/2XYcCgy>



conducted".<sup>85</sup> However, Congressman José Manuel Olivares, through a Twitter thread, denied such assertions and stated: "Venezuela is NOT the country with the highest number of tests per million people; on the contrary, it is the country that does the least."<sup>86</sup>

In fact, the Inter-American Commission on Human Rights (IACHR) and its Office of the Special Rapporteur for Freedom of Expression (RELE) issued a statement:

There is also concern about the publication of unscientific information by high authorities in Venezuela, Cuba, Brazil and Nicaragua, which could contribute to the dissemination of unreliable information and generate uncertainty in the population. (...) In Venezuela, journalists have been stigmatized and harassed, and have allegedly received threats and had their homes painted with graffiti.<sup>87</sup>

Freedom of expression and access to information must be guaranteed by the State without any discrimination, yet the regime has been responsible for increasingly limiting them. With the State of National Alarm, announced on March 13, the Nicolas Maduro regime has "managed to protect " itself from this situation in order to further restrict these rights which are repeatedly and constantly violated.

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<sup>85</sup> Delcy Rodríguez, via Twitter, <https://bit.ly/2zaanwm>

<sup>86</sup> José Manuel Olivares, via Twitter, <https://bit.ly/2xg48qg>

<sup>87</sup> Alberto News, «CIDH expresa preocupación por las restricciones a la libertad de expresión en Venezuela en medio de la pandemia», Alberto News, <https://bit.ly/2YIkNUJ>



# INTERIM GOVERNMENT'S ACTIONS AND PROPOSALS FOR COVID-19

Given the severe complex humanitarian emergency affecting Venezuela, which has been aggravated by the declaration of a pandemic due to the spread of the COVID-19 virus in the world, and the notification of the first case in Venezuela on March 13, 2020, the Interim Government of Venezuela, under the leadership of President (E) Juan Guaidó, has taken multiple measures to help Venezuelans cope with this situation.

The first step taken was the declaration, on March 14, of the creation of the Commission of Health Experts with the following main purposes:

1. To collect and keep updated scientific and worldwide data on Coronavirus.
2. Provide this information to health institutions in the country.
3. Assist in the development of educational prevention campaigns for the population.
4. To provide the vast experience of its members in health contingency matters to all organizations that may require it.
5. To advise on the development of measures or plans to prevent and combat this pandemic.

This committee is integrated by doctors and academics who are experts in several specialties. Among them are Julio Castro, from the Venezuelan Society of



Infectious Diseases; Gustavo Villasmil, from the Venezuelan Society of General Medicine, and Edgar Capriles, a specialist in Health Economics, among others.<sup>88</sup>

In addition, on March 28, interim President Juan Guaidó proposed the creation of a National **Emergency Government** with all political and social sectors in Venezuela, in order to implement a nationwide salvation plan, named Plan José María Vargas, in view of the COVID-19 emergency. This plan includes:

1. Access to supplies for health personnel and hospitals.
2. The arrival of food aid and the direct allocation of money to enable families who depend on day-to-day income to remain in their homes, starting with the most vulnerable sectors.
3. Building underground wells to provide water to hospitals.
4. The request of \$1.2 billion from foreign financial institutions for the country's recovery

The Government of National Emergency delegates to a Council of State the basic decisions regarding the management of the State: Emergency care, stability and reconciliation of the country. This also includes a humanitarian route for the immediate arrival of international aid and the approval by the National Assembly of a new Law of Guarantees, Democratic Stabilization and National Reconciliation, within the framework of respect for human rights, while waiting to hold free and fair presidential elections within a period of 6 to 12 months.

To date, more than 45 countries, the OAS, the EU, the Lima Group and the Institute for Global Change have endorsed the proposal to establish a National Emergency Government.

Other measures taken by the Interim Government of Venezuela include using the funds recovered from the regime's corruption, 20 million of which will be used to make donations to United Nations agencies and other bilateral organizations. These resources will be used to purchase supplies to protect health personnel working on the front lines fighting the spread of the COVID-19 virus and caring for

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<sup>88</sup> Recuento de las capacidades construidas por el Gobierno Encargado ante el Covid-19 - al 10/04/2020. Documento del Despacho Internacional de la Presidencia Encargada de Venezuela



the sick, and for other prevention, care and support programs in the context of the pandemic.

In addition, a remote consultation service was launched, consisting of a free medical orientation service at a distance where volunteer doctors help in screening and guiding the symptoms of COVID-19.

In parallel, a Virtual Wallet Program was created to deliver \$100 bonuses to health workers in Venezuela for three months to provide financial support while they work to save lives.



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## CONCLUSIONS

COVID-19's spread from Wuhan, China to the rest of the world has caused problems worldwide. Decisions have been made by governments to preserve lives while trying to protect the economy and livelihoods of their citizens.

Venezuela faces the pandemic as a failed state, with non-existent institutions, crumbling infrastructure, basic and primitive services, and under the geographical control of a usurper and authoritarian regime.

A situation that has been extremely difficult for many developed countries, finds a Venezuela already in great difficulty that is now aggravated by the COVID-19 contagion.

The regime has not only implemented inaccurate, weak, inefficient and unconstitutional measures to try to help Venezuelans mitigate the effects of a quarantine that is necessary given the characteristics of the virus, but because of its criminal background it has subjected the people to a situation where they will hardly have access to the international funding that is indeed needed to deal with the consequences of this pandemic.

Only a Government of National Emergency will be able to regain the confidence of the international institutions, restoring the constitutional framework to the country and bringing it back to the democratic path and towards free and fair elections.

The National Assembly and the Interim Government continue to work on providing solutions for Venezuelans and fighting so that on the other side of the pandemic we can build together the Venezuela we all long for.

\*\* Following the period covered by this study (13 March to 17 April), on 24 April, the Nicolás Maduro regime took economic measures to control prices and to take over and control some food-producing companies. Such measures, taken on



other occasions by the regime, cause shortages of the regulated goods, creating a black market to obtain those products, and generally do not curb hyperinflation, which is why we foresee an increase in the food insecurity situation of Venezuelans.

Attacks on media freedom and human rights violations have also been escalating, and we expect the situation in Venezuela and the regime's level of authoritarianism to significantly worsen in the coming months.



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