

VENEZUELA

Attacks on education in Venezuela took the form of violent repression of university student protests, as government forces accompanied by armed civilian groups used teargas, rubber bullets, and live bullets against demonstrators. Security forces also reportedly arrested and detained hundreds of students and higher education personnel.

Context

Venezuela's political and social context was increasingly unstable after the death of President Hugo Chavez in March 2013 and the ascent of Vice President Nicolas Maduro to the presidential office. Chavez had made efforts to accumulate power in the executive branch and used it to repress dissent. During Maduro's rule, reforms to consolidate the concentration of power in the executive branch were progressively implemented, until the government-controlled Supreme Court stripped the legislature of its authority and formed a Constituent Assembly that took over the opposition-led parliament's functions in August 2017.²⁴⁷⁷

Widespread anti-government protests, triggered by food shortages, restrictions on democracy, and insecurity, peaked from February to July 2014 and again from April to August 2017. Security forces violently quelled protests, often accompanied by armed civilian groups known as *colectivos*, which also used excessive force against unarmed protesters, including university students and other civilians.²⁴⁷⁸

The UN Committee against Torture found that 3,306 protesters, including 400 adolescents, were detained between February and June 2014. The committee expressed concern over reports that detained protesters were tortured, and that the perpetrators went unpunished.²⁴⁷⁹ OHCHR found similarly that more than 5,000 people were detained between April 1 and July 31, 2017, during which time violence progressively escalated and security forces moved from using teargas to guns against protesters, according to medical personnel.²⁴⁸⁰ Security forces were also reported to be responsible for the arbitrary detention of students, and in some cases, of presenting them before military courts even though they were civilians.²⁴⁸¹ Once in detention, men and women protesters, as well as their relatives, were threatened with rape and other sexual and physical violence.²⁴⁸² The worsening humanitarian situation caused the exodus of hundreds of thousands of Venezuelans to other Latin American countries and the United States.²⁴⁸³

The *Associated Press* reported that children lost an average of 40 percent of their class time during 2016.²⁴⁸⁴ In 2017, loss of teaching personnel due to the economic and humanitarian crisis was reported in 90 percent of the nation's schools, and Miranda state reported 20 percent absenteeism at the beginning of the 2017-2018 school year.²⁴⁸⁵ In November 2015, there was a proposal that teachers and other education personnel form "combatant corps" to provide "assistance" to security forces during emergencies, including armed conflict.²⁴⁸⁶ Reports indicated that the government used higher education as a political instrument by applying political pressure at universities and by vote-mongering on campuses in October 2015. For example, the director of the National Experimental Polytechnic University told professors that each of them was in charge of guaranteeing 10 votes for the ruling United Socialist Party of Venezuela (*Partido Socialista Unido de Venezuela*) and ensuring that five students also guaranteed 10 votes, thereby making each professor responsible for 60 votes.²⁴⁸⁷

Venezuela did not meet the criteria for inclusion in *Education under Attack 2014*, so no comparison with the previous reporting period can be made.

Sexual violence by armed parties at, or en route to or from, school or university

Police forces were reportedly responsible for perpetrating sexual violence on at least one female student detained on a university campus. On July 2, 2017, Human Rights Watch reported that Venezuelan police detained students at the Universidad Pedagógica Experimental Libertador in Aragua state. The students' lawyer told Human Rights Watch that a police agent touched the female student's breasts, put her head close to his genitals, and told her, "This is what you like."²⁴⁸⁸

Attacks on higher education

According to UN, NGO, and media reports, state security forces used widespread violence against university students who were protesting against the government. This violence occurred from February to July 2014 and from April to August 2017.²⁴⁸⁹ It included physical attacks using teargas, rubber and live bullets, and other means, as well as arbitrary detention and imprisonment.²⁴⁹⁰

State security forces, sometimes supported by *colectivos*, used teargas, rubber bullets, live ammunition, and explosive devices to crack down on student anti-government protests in 2014. In addition, hundreds of students were detained in connection with student and civilian anti-government protests, and as many as 331 students were reportedly abused while in police custody in February 2014 alone, according to Scholars at Risk.²⁴⁹¹ One year later, in 2015, Attorney General Luisa Ortega Diaz admitted that 27 people, including two students, were still in detention, according to Human Rights Watch.²⁴⁹² Violent attacks on university campuses or at student protests in 2014 included the following incidents, in which at least 38 students were injured and one killed:

- Security forces accompanied by *colectivos* used rubber bullets and teargas against students demonstrating at the Lisandro Alvarado Centro Occidental University in Barquisimeto, Lara state, on March 11, 2014, according to testimony collected by Human Rights Watch.²⁴⁹³
- Human Rights Watch also documented an attack by a *colectivo* member on March 19, 2014, when approximately 150 students were holding a student meeting in the lobby of the School of Architecture of the Central University of Venezuela in Caracas. The students saw that eight men were replacing a nonpartisan banner they had hung from the building with a pro-government sign. As students started leaving the lobby, a man with a firearm entered, identified himself as part of a *colectivo*, and threw two teargas canisters into the remaining group of 50 students. More intruders arrived and beat the students with their fists, tubes, and sticks, as well as kicking them and forcing several of them to undress. At least 30 students were injured in the attack.²⁴⁹⁴
- Scholars at Risk and international media reported that on April 3, 2014, during a protest at the Central University of Venezuela in Caracas, state security forces used grenades and teargas to prevent students from leaving the campus to march through the city. Vigilantes also entered the campus and attacked students with metal pipes and other makeshift weapons, leaving at least three students severely injured.²⁴⁹⁵
- According to Scholars at Risk, on May 29, 2014, a student was shot and killed when police allegedly used live ammunition in a crackdown on a student protest near the campus of Rafael Bellosó Chacín University in Maracaibo city, Zulia state.²⁴⁹⁶
- The campus of Fermin Toro University in Barquisimeto, Lara state, experienced a series of three attacks in May and June 2014, according to Scholars at Risk. Pro-government assailants launched an arson attack on university buildings in mid-May. One month later, on June 10, 2014, security footage reportedly showed the same attackers launching teargas cans onto the campus, which caused respiratory problems for several students.²⁴⁹⁷ Two days later unidentified assailants threw teargas canisters onto the campus, injuring 14 people.²⁴⁹⁸
- Scholars at Risk reported that on June 4, 2014, police tried to stop students outside the Metropolitan University in Caracas from protesting the use of police force and detention of fellow students. Students threw stones and firecrackers at the police, who reportedly responded with teargas and rubber bullets, injuring five students.²⁴⁹⁹

GCPEA collected information on five incidents of security forces and *colectivos* using disproportionate violence against student protesters in 2015, a decrease from the previous year. In these five examples, at least 37 students were injured in attacks that used buckshot, teargas, and other means:

- According to Scholars at Risk, on January 15, 2015, security forces accompanied by *colectivos* raided the campus of Los Andes University, Tachira, firing steel shells, buckshot, teargas, pepper spray, and marbles at students. Twenty-two students were reportedly injured in the incident.²⁵⁰⁰
- Scholars at Risk and media sources reported that on February 25, 2015, students gathered on the Merida campus of Los Andes University to protest the death of a 14-year-old boy killed a day before in a confrontation between

police and protesters in San Cristobal. Security forces reportedly fired buckshot into the crowd of students, injuring five.²⁵⁰¹

- On October 25, 2015, education personnel and students from the Central University in Caracas attempted to march to protest unfair wages and demand quality education. Scholars at Risk and local media reported that the police prevented the march from proceeding by firing teargas into the crowd and pushing and kicking participants.²⁵⁰²
- According to local media and Scholars at Risk, on November 2, 2015, students from various universities gathered outside the vice president's office in Caracas to protest delays in the start of the semester, as classes were supposed to begin 63 days earlier but were postponed due to strikes over higher education budget cuts. The protest was dispersed by the police, who allegedly beat and injured 10 students.²⁵⁰³
- Scholars at Risk reported that two days later, as a group of university officials and students convened at the Central University in Caracas, unidentified hooded assailants used trash to barricade the doors of the building, preventing approximately 60 people from leaving. The assailants also vandalized university buildings.²⁵⁰⁴

According to Scholars at Risk and the US Department of State, 2016 saw continued violence in four incidents involving looting and robbing of the Institute of Tropical Medicine at the Central University in Caracas, and three attacks on university student protesters by national security forces using teargas, buckshot, and other means, as in previous years. GCPEA also gathered information relating to at least one incident in which a professor was detained and threatened by police and armed assailants. For example:

- There were four attacks on the Institute of Tropical Medicine at the Central University in Caracas during 2016. On February 29 and March 1, unidentified assailants raided the laboratories, stealing a total of 25 computers in addition to microwaves, printers, and other equipment. The intruders also destroyed microscopes and a camera. University personnel alleged that *colectivos* were responsible for the robberies.²⁵⁰⁵ On July 4, 2016, unidentified individuals reportedly entered the institute and stole computers, equipment, drinking water, clothes, and approximately 20 years of research and patient data. One week later, on July 11, unknown assailants reportedly entered the university again and stole medical supplies and equipment.²⁵⁰⁶
- On March 31, 2016, police officers temporarily detained Professor Benjamin Scharifker, rector of the Metropolitan University in Caracas, while he was out jogging in the morning. Professor Scharifker was taken to his home in a police car and questioned about his identity and profession, while unknown armed individuals reportedly stood watch. The police then left his home.²⁵⁰⁷
- On May 18, 2016, students and education personnel of Los Andes University, Merida campus, reportedly gathered to protest working conditions and demand higher wages. Police tried to break up the protest using teargas, buckshot, and stones. Meanwhile, unidentified armed civilians on motorbikes allegedly broke into the university's Faculty of Medicine, where they shot and injured several students, set fire to two vehicles, looted offices, and stole computers. The police did nothing to stop this raid.²⁵⁰⁸
- On October 24, 2016, four days after the Venezuelan government suspended a recall referendum against President Maduro, students from the Central University in Caracas and other universities nationwide marched to protest the government's actions. The march reportedly left the Central University campus and was met by police who used teargas, pepper spray, and buckshot to force the students to disperse. At least 27 students were allegedly injured.²⁵⁰⁹
- On November 3, 2016, a Los Andes University student was detained in connection with the burning of a police vehicle during a demonstration. The student was reportedly arriving on campus for another protest when unidentified individuals forced him into an unmarked van and drove away. A fellow student who was also detained reported that, while detained, the assailants covered his face, threatened him with a gun, and interrogated him, before releasing him in the outskirts of Caracas 10 hours later.²⁵¹⁰

Government repression of dissent, including student protests worsened in 2017, peaking between April and July. Crack-downs, often violent, affected more students and personnel than in any previous year, and Human Rights Watch docu-

mented a pattern of abuse.²⁵¹¹ An OHCHR report on the generalized violence in Venezuela between April 1 and July 31, 2017, found that the attorney general's office registered 124 deaths in connection with protests during that period. The majority of the 124 victims were students or people who had recently finished their education.²⁵¹² The document also stated that medical personnel reported treating more injuries from teargas used by security forces against protesters at the beginning of this period, and more gunshot wounds inflicted by security forces in June and July.²⁵¹³

GCPEA collected information on at least 22 attacks in 2017. Over 200 people were reportedly injured or detained in this violence, although it was not clear that all of them were students. In one case, a student was killed.²⁵¹⁴ These attacks were reported by Scholars at Risk, Human Rights Watch, OHCHR, the media, and other sources, and included the following:

- On February 14, 2017, security forces opened fire and launched teargas into a group of student protesters at Los Andes University in Tachira. In addition, unidentified individuals threw explosive devices onto the campus and burned down a gate. Parts of the campus were damaged in the incident and 40 students were injured.²⁵¹⁵
- On March 22, 2017, security forces and *colectivos* used teargas, bottles, and stones to disperse a Caracas march by the National Inter-Federal Command of the University Sector, a union of education professionals that was protesting the governments' failure to include them in education policy discussions. At least 16 participants were reportedly injured in the incident.²⁵¹⁶
- According to OHCHR, security forces shot teargas onto the campuses of the Metropolitan University of Caracas and the Catholic University of Táchira between April 1 and July 31, 2017, for unspecified reasons.²⁵¹⁷
- Police used teargas and shotgun pellets in response to a student anti-government protest at the Experimental University in Tachira on April 5, 2017. Twenty-one students were injured.²⁵¹⁸ A similar incident occurred one day later on the campus of the University of Carabobo in Valencia, where 27 students were reportedly injured.²⁵¹⁹
- On May 4, 2017, a gunman entered a student assembly at the Territorial Polytechnic University in El Tigre and fired several shots into the group of students, reportedly killing one, leaving one in critical condition, and injuring two others.²⁵²⁰
- On May 24, 2017, security forces arrested and detained 18 students from Oriente University in Ciudad Bolívar. The students were protesting the armed forces' infringement on the university's autonomy. The eight female protesters were released on the same day they were detained, and the 10 male protesters were held for an unknown period of time.²⁵²¹
- According to Human Rights Watch, on June 22, 2017, security forces and *colectivos* entered the Sucre campus of Oriente University. The *colectivos* destroyed several classrooms before detaining seven students and handing them over to security forces, who charged them with the intention to commit a crime and released them on the condition that they not participate in further protests.²⁵²²
- On the morning of July 2, 2017, security forces entered the Libertador Experimental Pedagogical University in Ciudad Bolívar, according to information obtained by Human Rights Watch. The national forces beat multiple students and university security personnel and detained at least 27 students, who were sent to military court. The court held the students there until 7 AM on July 4 for an all-night hearing, during which they were charged with instigating rebellion. The 22 male detainees were reportedly sent to prison and the 5 women were put under house arrest. News sources reported that family members were unable to visit the detainees.²⁵²³

²⁴⁷⁷ Human Rights Watch, *World Report 2015*, Venezuela chapter. "Joint statement: Venezuela's Crisis Should be a Human Rights Council Priority," Human Rights Watch and other NGOs, September 8, 2017. "Final Curtain for Venezuela's Democracy as Parliament is Dissolved," ICG, August 22, 2017.

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²⁴⁷⁹ UN Committee against Torture, "Concluding observations on the combined third and fourth periodic reports of the Bolivarian Republic of Venezuela," CAT/C/VEN/CO/3-4, December 12, 2014, paras. 8, 9, 10.

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²⁴⁸¹ *Runrunes*, "Detainees submitted to military justice for looting and protests in Carabobo" ("Someten a justicia militar a detenidos por saqueos y protestas en Carabobo"), May 5, 2017.

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- ²⁴⁸⁹ Human Rights Watch, *Punished for Protesting*. Human Rights Watch, *Crackdown on Dissent*.
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