

Venezuela: Authorities should immediately release human rights defenders Javier Tarazona, Rafael Tarazona, and Omar García of Fundaredes

Arbitrary detentions, denying the right to a reasonable defense, obstructing justice and due process, and use of the justice system as a tool for political persecution may amount to crimes against humanity, as recognized by the United Nations.

The undersigned organizations wholly reject and express profound concern about the July 2 detention and incarceration of the three human rights defenders (HRDs) from the NGO Fundacion Redes (Fundaredes), including the organization's director, Javier Tarazona, as well as activists Rafael Tarazona and Omar García. Their detention is the latest event reflecting rapidly escalating political persecution and criminalization of the HRDs in Venezuela who independently monitor, document, and report on the country's critical human rights situation.

On July 2, the Bolivarian Intelligence Service (SEBIN, by its Spanish acronym) detained the three activists, along with a fourth, Jhonny Romero of the NGO CONFAVIT, outside the office of the Prosecutor General of the state of Falcon. The activists had been denouncing harassment by SEBIN the previous day, during a training for HRDs. After several hours, Romero was released. However, the three Fundaredes' activists were transferred to Caracas and presented before a terrorism tribunal, where they were charged with inciting hatred, treason, and terrorism—charges frequently used in Venezuela to criminalize HRDs and journalists seeking to defend fundamental freedoms. All three activists remained in prison after being denied access to their lawyers, and instead assigned a public defender. Meanwhile, their lawyers were denied access to the case filings, hampering any possibility of providing an adequate defense.

In light of these events, we remind Venezuelan authorities that arbitrary detentions and incarceration, imposing false charges for political reasons, denying the right to a reasonable defense, obstructing justice and due process, as well as the consistent use of the justice system as a tool for political persecution, all amount to possible **crimes against humanity**, as recognized by the United Nations' Independent Fact-Finding Mission for Venezuela. Moreover, the detention of the Fundaredes' activists only one day after the publication of the UN Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights' (UNOHCHR) report on Venezuela's feeble compliance with UN recommendations, reinforces the Maduro government's consistent lack of commitment to international cooperation or respect for international standards.

Venezuela should guarantee the basic conditions for HRDs to perform their work freely and safely, without fear of reprisal or incarceration. We demand that Venezuelan authorities immediately release Javier Tarazona, Rafael Tarazona, and Omar García, and cease to criminalize the critical work of HRDs to document abuses and defend the rights of Venezuelans.

Signed:

1. Amnesty International
2. Centro para la Apertura y el Desarrollo de América Latina (CADAL)

3. Civil Rights Defenders
4. Due Process of Law Foundation (DPLF)
5. Fundación Ciudadanía y Desarrollo
6. Freedom House
7. International Institute on Race, Equality and Human Rights
8. International Service for Human Rights
9. Instituto de Prensa y Libertad de Expresión
10. Programa Venezolano de Educación Acción en Derechos Humanos (PROVEA)
11. Robert F. Kennedy Human Rights

Background:

Fundaredes is one of the few organizations that monitor, document, and report on violence and human rights abuses committed by armed groups in Venezuela's border regions—dangerous and difficult-to-access areas where access to information is scarce. Most recently, Fundaredes has been documenting the armed conflict between Venezuela's armed forces and a faction of former FARC dissidents that began in March 2021 in the state of Apure. Fundaredes' activists have consistently faced harassment by Maduro government officials for their work, such that the Inter-American Commission on Human Rights (IACHR) issued precautionary measures for Tarazona, its director, in June 2020, citing an urgent risk.

The conflict in Apure displaced more than 5,000 Venezuelans across the border to the Colombian department of Arauca. Since conflict erupted, Fundaredes has faced increasing surveillance and harassment by state security forces for documenting and reporting on grave human rights violations, including presumed extrajudicial killings, arbitrary detentions, and forced disappearances occurring there.

Fundaredes' documentation on the links between Maduro government officials and the Colombian guerilla groups ELN and FARC dissidents have also fed recent accusations. On July 6, Venezuela's Prosecutor General Tarek William Saab further justified the activists' detention, arguing that Fundaredes' reporting is baseless and undermines Venezuela's security.