



**CENTRO PARA
LOS DEFENSORES
Y LA JUSTICIA**

SITUATION OF HUMAN RIGHTS DEFENDERS IN VENEZUELA

2023

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01

524 VIOLATIONS OF THE RIGHT TO DEFEND HUMAN RIGHTS DURING 2023

The *Centro para los Defensores y la Justicia (CDJ)* documented **524 attacks and security incidents during 2023**, which represents an increase of 32% compared to the same period in 2022 when 396 attacks were registered.

As we enter the electoral period, restrictions on civic and democratic space increase, and criminalization, repression, and social control of civil society increase, including people and organizations that defend, demand, and promote human rights.

ATTACKS 2023



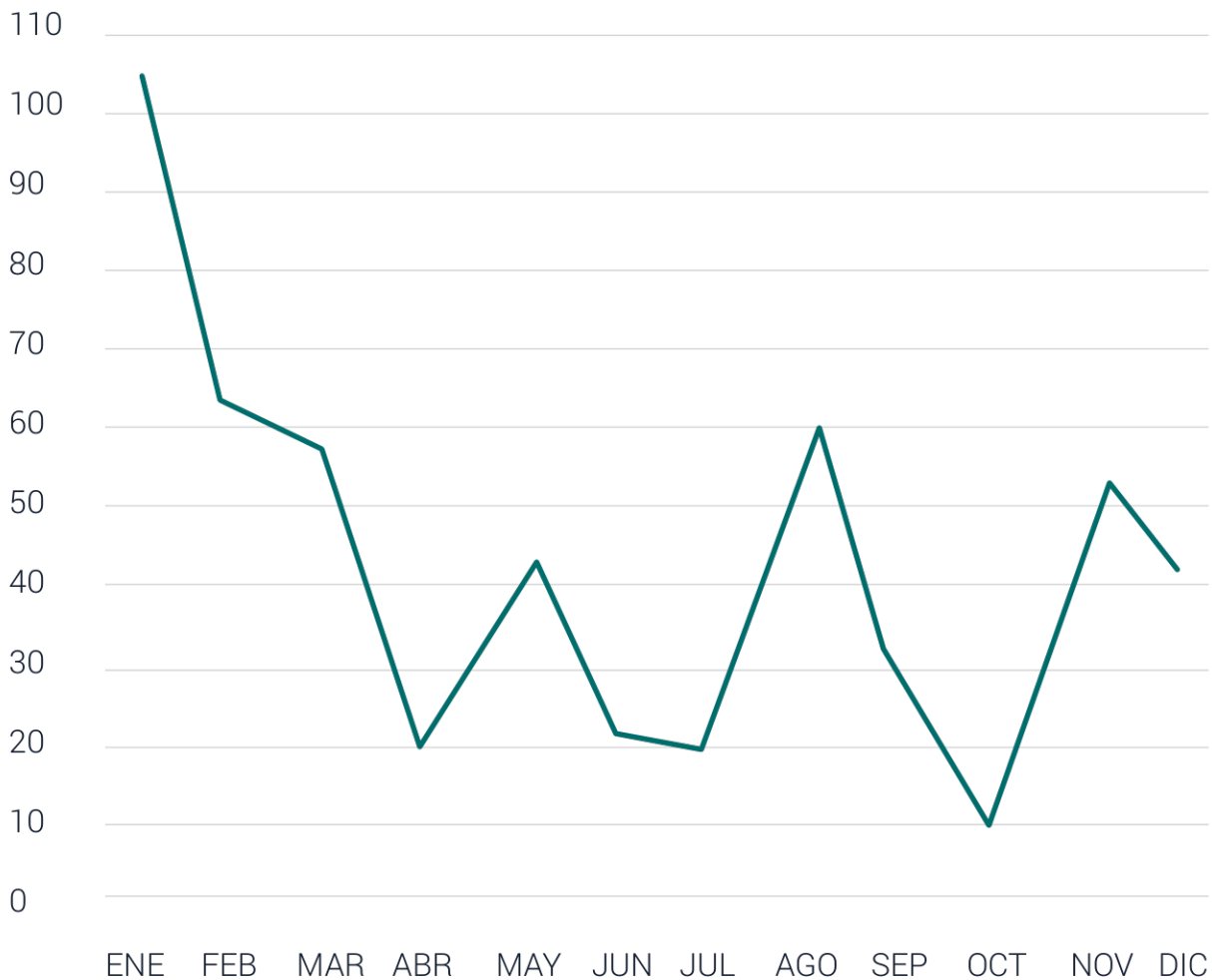
524 ATTACKS

2023 was characterized by the deepening of the Criminalization Policy and the increase in repressive and control actions against organizations and people defending human rights.

Civic and democratic space remains not guaranteed.

During the year, violations of the rights to association, assembly, demonstration, expression, opinion, and defense of human rights increased. It was a year of threats, harassment, intimidation, and the use of criminal prosecution as a mechanism to criminalize and fear civil society in Venezuela.

DISTRIBUTION OF THE ATTACKS PER MONTH

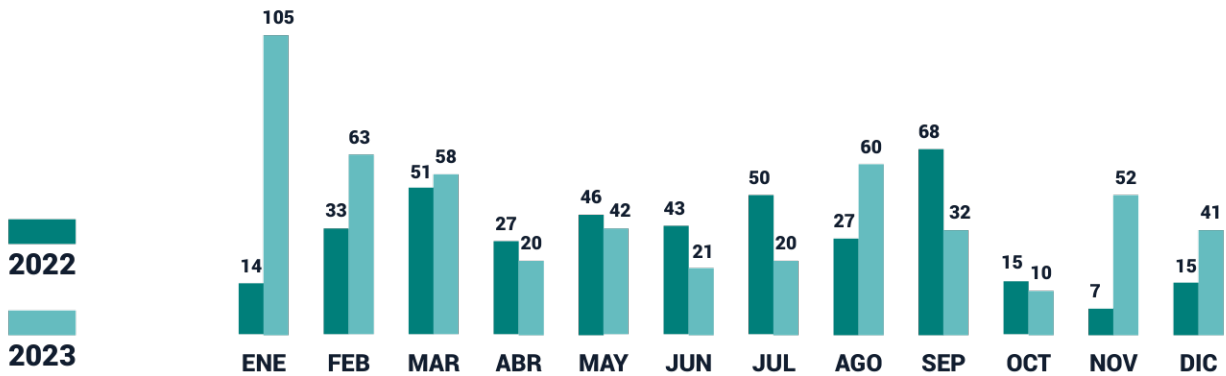


2023 was a year of challenges for the human rights movement and people who carry out citizen demand activities; in an electoral context, the environment for the exercise of activities related to the promotion and defense of rights becomes more adverse and hostile. The risks due to the exercise of their work increased.

Attacks and obstacles to the right to association, politically motivated persecution, threats, and intimidation against the work of defenders increased.

During the year, the Venezuelan State continued to fail to comply with its international obligations regarding human rights, criminalizing advocacy, interaction, and cooperation with international mechanisms and procedures.

COMPARATIVE GRAPHIC 2022 -2023

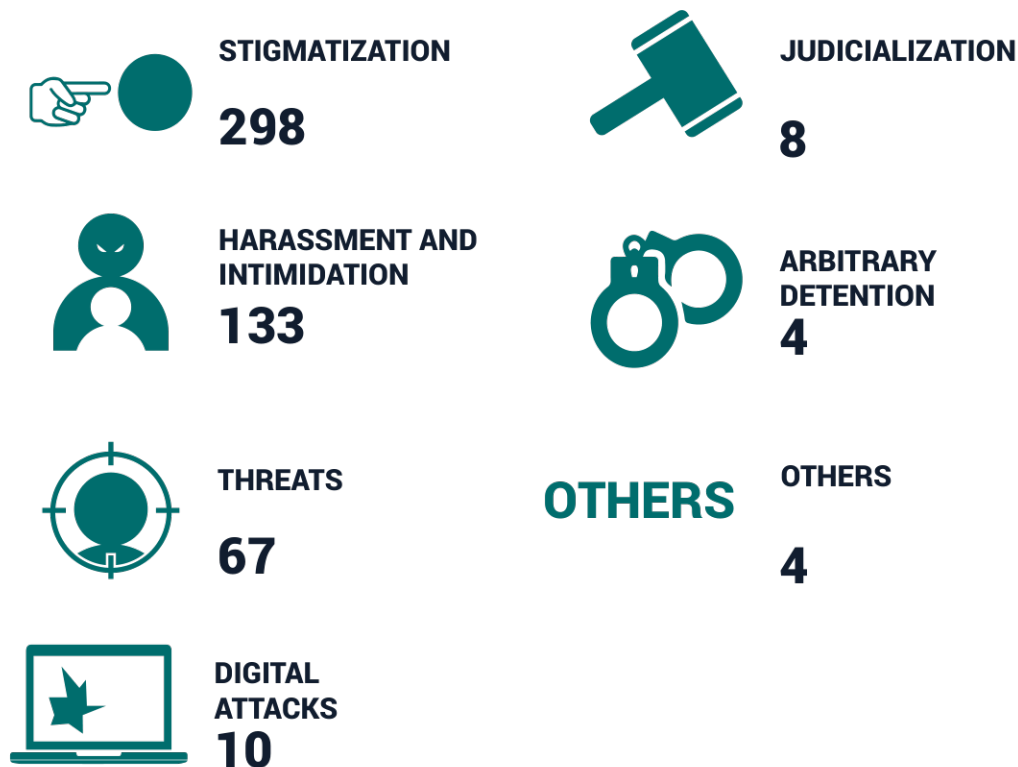


02 STIGMATIZATION, INTIMIDATION, HARASSMENT, AND THREATS REMAIN THE MAIN DOCUMENTED ATTACK PATTERNS

As a result of the continuous closure of the Civic and Democratic Space, the use of repressive and social control measures aimed at limiting and hindering the work of civil society increases. We observe more sophisticated repressive methods aimed at neutralizing the activities of those who promote, defend, and demand rights protected by a logic that seeks to frighten to neutralize the defending people and organizations.

The 524 attacks and security incidents documented in the period are mainly reflected in the following patterns of aggression:

CHARACTERIZATION OF THE ATTACKS



Stigmatization remains the main mode of attack. Protected by the thesis of the Internal Enemy, smear campaigns, disqualifying speeches, calls for violence, accusations of “enemies”, “traitors”, “destabilizing agents”, and “interventionists” among others are issued and disseminated. These speeches are usually accompanied by threats and have an intimidating purpose so that civil society is inhibited from continuing to act.

Likewise, the use of crimes classified in laws against terrorism and organized crime and other regulatory instruments of a criminal nature persists to intimidate, prosecute, and criminalize actions of documentation, denunciation, advocacy, cooperation, and strategic litigation in human rights.

It was observed that within the framework of the progress of processes in international bodies, accusations and threats increased. Likewise, organizations and people were victims of threats, intimidation, and harassment for documenting, denouncing, and making visible human rights violations and demanding investigation and accountability.

The State moved forward with the creation of measures aimed at limiting and hindering the work of human rights organizations, and civil society in general, through the creation and possible imposition of new requirements for full functioning within the framework of new discretionary controls contrary to international law that are intended to be imposed through the *Draft Law on Supervision, Regularization, Performance and Financing of Non-Governmental Organizations and related organizations*¹, and the *draft Law on International Cooperation*², which has attempted to be approved on several occasions³.

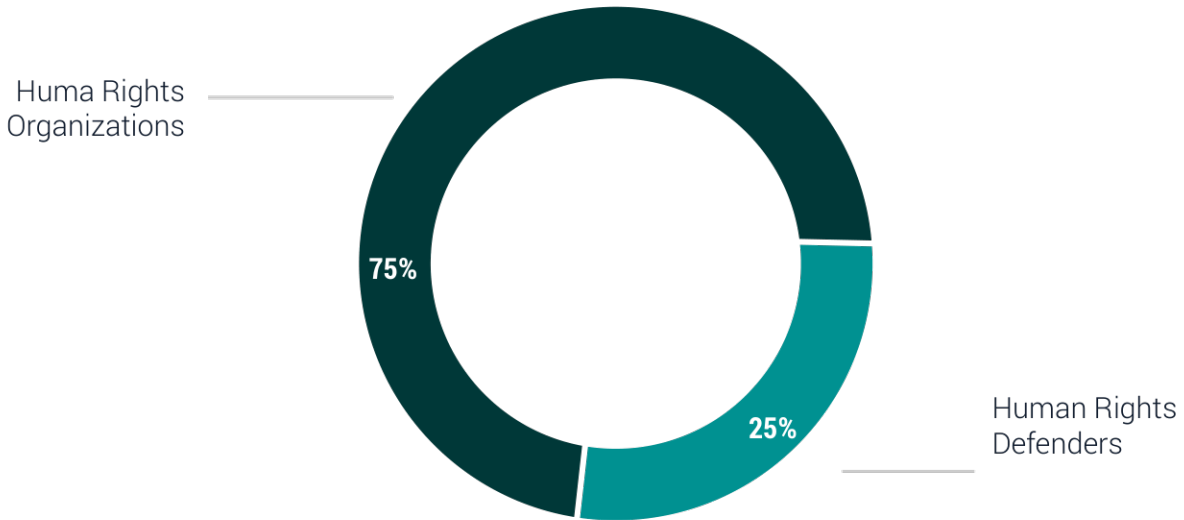
¹See draft of the project at: <https://centrodefensores.org.ve/wp-content/uploads/2023/02/LEY-DE-FISCALIZACION-REGULARIZACION-ACTUACION-Y-FINANCIACION-DE-LAS-ORGANIZACIONES-NO-GUBERNAMENTALES-Y-AFINES-v24.01h2.00-2.pdf>

²Twitter. Victoria Mata's tweet. 08.02.23. Available at: <https://twitter.com/MataVictoria/status/1623335236124790788?t=oH69IX-Js1MB6nCieOnFcMw&s=19>

³See: Center for Defenders and Justice (CDJ). SITUATION OF HUMAN RIGHTS DEFENDERS IN VENEZUELA – May 2022. At: <https://centrodefensores.org.ve/?p=423>

VICTIMS OF THE ATTACKS

During the year 2023, the organizations that are part of the human rights movement in the country were the most affected, with 394 attacks and threats against them, facing various acts carried out by the State to hinder or impede their work; equivalent to 75% of the documented total. While 130 of the recorded situations were committed individually against human rights defenders, representing the remaining 25%.



Of the people affected, at least **8 were women human rights defenders**, who repeatedly faced campaigns of stigmatization, intimidation, threats, and situations of violence related to their work defending human rights.

VICTIMS PER MONTH

JAN	FEB	MAR	APR	MAY	JUN
103 NGO 2 HRD	53 NGO 10 HRD	55 NGO 3 HRD	14 NGO 5 HRD	39 NGO 3 HRD	10 NGO 11 HRD
JUL	AUG	SEP	OCT	NOV	DEC
11 NGO 9 HRD	23 NGO 37 HRD	29 NGO 3 HRD	7 NGO 3 HRD	34 NGO 18 HRD	16 NGO 25 HRD

RELEVANT EVENTS THAT OCCURRED DURING THE YEAR:

The continuity of judicial harassment against the members of the FundaRedes organization Rafael Tarazona, Omar de Dios García, and Javier Tarazona; The latter, furthermore, as of the date of presentation of this report, has served more than 900 days in prison and has been the victim of violations to his personal integrity and his health has seriously deteriorated while in custody.

The persecution of the union movement and workers, within the framework of the criminalization of social leadership and the right to make citizen demands, the cases of conviction and subsequent release under measures of presentation of six union members, as well as the criminalization of *SIDOR* workers and the court ruling prohibiting their right to protest are some examples.

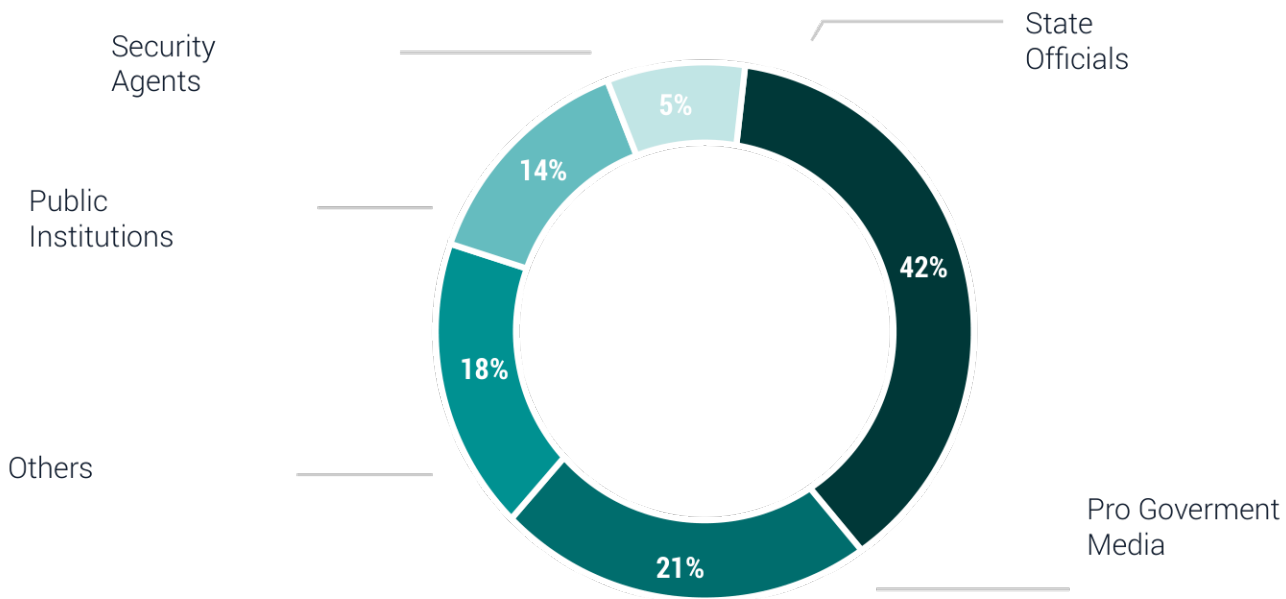
We also highlight the repeated threats and acts of stigmatization against the organization *Programa Venezolano de Educación-Acción en Derechos Humanos (Provea)* and members of its coordination; the repeated accusations, intimidation and digital attacks against *Transparencia Venezuela* and members of the team; stigmatization campaigns against the defender and journalist Luis Carlos Díaz, intimidation and harassment against members of the *Observatorio Venezolano de Conflictividad Social (OVCS)*, stigmatization of *Espacio Público (EP)*; *Instituto Prensa y Sociedad (IPYS Venezuela)*; Intimations and stigmatization against *Voto Joven* and its coordinator, threats and accusations against the human rights defender Rocío San Miguel.

PERPETRATORS

The main people responsible for the attacks and security incidents documented during 2023 were distributed as follows:

A total of 223 (42%) of the attacks were carried out by public officials, including members of the Executive, deputies, and ministers, among others, who made use of their profiles on social networks, or statements in government media to stigmatize, threaten and intimidate; 109 (21%) of the events were carried out from the State's traditional and digital media and their accounts on social networks; 93 (18%) were perpetrated by people or groups affected by the political interests of the State, members of the entities associated with or that make up the Popular Peace Protection System (SP3), journalists and opinion leaders affiliated with the United Socialist Party of Venezuela (PSUV); 75 were the responsibility of Public Institutions or government entities (14%); and 24 events were carried out by State security agencies (5%).

PERPETRATORS



The main people responsible for the attacks committed against those who defend and demand identified human rights were mainly State Officials who work in the Executive, Legislative, and Judicial Branches, responsible for committing systematic acts of stigmatization, and promoting violence against the defenders, through threats, incitement and acts of intimidation and harassment.

Television programs, radio stations, and digital platforms, members of the national public media system, served as a platform for stigmatization campaigns and calls for violence. Likewise, other media that act under the guidelines of the State were spaces to discredit and attack organizations. Among the most notable are Con el Mazo Dando, Misión Verdad, la Hojilla, Zurda Konducta, La Tabla, and Venezuela News.

Actors, including members of the structures part of the Popular Peace Protection System (SP3), carried out violent actions, threats, and acts of intimidation and harassment. Members associated with the United Socialist Party of Venezuela (PSUV), journalists, and opinion leaders identified with the national Executive are also part of the perpetrators.

Public institutions committed actions contrary to the rights of human rights defenders and organizations and also omitted their duties to act and investigate the attacks committed against them, and they also added and widely disseminated speech or statements that stigmatized people or human rights organizations.

For their part, security organizations such as the Bolivarian National Police, the Bolivarian National Intelligence Service (SEBIN), and state police, carried out arbitrary arrests, mistreatment, and other acts of intimidation and harassment.

03

CRIMINALIZATION OF THE DEFENSE, DEMAND AND PROMOTION OF HUMAN RIGHTS

At the end of 2023, the criminalization of the defense, demand and promotion of human rights continued to be affected by the actions used by the State to restrict civic and democratic space in the country. In this regard, the concern of the increase in limitations and restrictions in the framework of an electoral context must be kept in mind, in which documentation, incidence, visibility and enforceability of government representation become more relevant.

With the increase in attacks registered in the year, the lack of will on the part of the State to correct, reverse or stop putting into practice factual and legal measures and address the structural problems that allow or promote the commission of acts of aggression and intimidation against human rights defenders and organizations in Venezuela.

Stigmatization continues to be presented as the main pattern of attack against the human rights movement in the country. Disqualifying and intimidating speeches are used as a starting point to endorse and promote other attacks against human rights defenders and organizations⁴. To this end, not only is the use of digital platforms and traditional media belonging to the National Public Media System maintained, but anonymous users of social networks also echoed stigmatizing statements, thus expanding the reach of messages against the victims and deepening the matrix of opinion antagonize the work of the human rights movement. The narrative against them persists and deepens in the argument of the alleged use of international cooperation for interventionist, destabilizing purposes or associated with crimes of organized crime or terrorism⁵.

Acts of intimidation and harassment and threats persist, increase and worsen as a form of attack. These patterns have a double purpose: to attack, affecting the integrity of people, and at the same time, they are aimed at frightening under a logic of terror in order to inhibit those who defend and demand human rights from their actions.

The threats were focused on the approval of the International Cooperation Law and the Law on Supervision, Regularization, Performance, and Financing of Non-Governmental and Related Organizations, as well as the opening of investigation processes. On the other hand, events were documented in which security and intelligence officials carried out surveillance and monitoring actions, including harassment at airports against certain people or organizations. In this order of ideas, the use of images of defenders was recorded, along with stigmatizing messages in programs, media, and channels with high reach at the national level. This is of special concern, since it is necessary to remember that these events can trigger in other actors, including those dedicated to intelligence and social control, the intention to commit violent acts against organizations or defenders that they identify as enemies.

Regarding the threats related to the approval of the Law on Supervision, Regularization, Performance, and Financing of Non-Governmental Organizations and Related Organizations, we highlight that, at the date of presentation of the report, consultation on this law had already begun after a discussion session in the plenary session of the National Assembly⁶. In this discussion, accusations and questioning of the human rights movement for its work prevailed, using this as justification for the need for this new instrument. This is even though in Venezuela there are already regulations aimed at international cooperation.

On the other hand, the instrumentalization of criminal law and judicial harassment continued to be present in the types of attacks recorded by the CDJ this year. In this regard, we mainly highlight the continuous violations of due process in the case of human rights defenders Javier and Rafael Tarazona, and Omar de Dios García, who at the end of the year were still awaiting the trial hearing⁷. As of the date of presentation of this report, Rafael Tarazona continues to be arbitrarily deprived of his liberty. At the same time, we highlight the sentencing to 16 years in prison of the union members Gabriel Blanco, Emilio Negrín, Reynaldo Cortes, Alonso Meléndez, and Alcides Bracho, among others, for the crimes of association to commit a crime and corruption established in the Venezuelan Penal Code and the Organic Law against Organized Crime and Financing of Terrorism, although the social leaders were released from prison in December, they continue to be subjected to judicial harassment with periodic appearances before courts and prohibitions on leaving the country.

With the close of 2023 and the beginning of 2024 as an electoral year, the CDJ expresses its concern over the possible increase in attacks against civil society organizations, as well as a possible worsening and increase in acts of electoral violence, persecution, and other acts of harassment that may limit, hinder and enclose the work of the human rights movement.

04

INTERNATIONAL RESPONSE TO THE CRIMINALIZATION OF THE DEFENSE OF HUMAN RIGHTS IN VENEZUELA

Given the continuity of the criminalization policy and the restrictions of the civic and democratic space in Venezuela, international organizations for the protection of human rights, international organizations with a mandate to protect human rights defenders and representatives of the international community, maintained monitoring, monitoring, and accompaniment of civil society in the country, demanding the end of criminalization, persecution, repression, stigmatization and harassment exercised by the State.

During the year we recorded a series of pronouncements made regarding the protection of people and the need to protect civic space in the country, among them are:

On January 28, at the Press Conference of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights after completing his visit to Venezuela, Mr. Volker Türk indicated that he had raised concerns about the situation of civic space and specified "having been able to share observations -and concerns- from a human rights perspective about the proposed law which regulates NGOs. "I strongly urged the authorities to take their comments into account"⁸.

⁶Asamblea Nacional. Disponible en: <https://www.asambleanacional.gob.ve/noticias/parlamento-inicia-consulta-publica-de-la-ley-para-el-control-de-las-ong>

⁷https://www.swissinfo.ch/spa/venezuela-derechos-humanos_una-ong-venezolana-exige-la-liberacion-de-su-director-general-detenido-hace-30-meses/49097388

⁸ <https://www.ohchr.org/es/statements/2023/01/un-high-commissioner-human-rights-volker-turk-concludes-official-mission>

On January 30, the independent international Fact-Finding Mission on the Bolivarian Republic of Venezuela (FFM) expressed its deep concern “about the possible implications of the draft Law on the supervision, regularization, performance, and financing of the non-governmental and related organizations, adopted in first reading by the National Assembly on January 24.” For the Mission, the new regulation imposes additional requirements for the operation and creation of non-governmental organizations and other non-profit entities, non-compliance with which is subject to strong sanctions, including their ex officio dissolution. Mrs. Marta Valiñas, president of the Mission, indicated that “If sanctioned, the law on NGOs could represent a point of no return in the closure of civic and democratic space in Venezuela.” For his part, the expert Francisco Cox stated that “the regulation would impose on NGOs, existing and in the process of formation, a set of formal requirements so onerous that it would grant the State a quasi-permanent power to suppress them” (...) “The law It is aimed at limiting, not facilitating, the exercise of the right of association.” They also noted that “NGOs dedicated to promoting human rights face progressively more limitations to their operation, both legal and operational, including the key aspect of financing”⁹.

On March 21, 2023, within the framework of the 52nd period of sessions of the Human Rights Council in the oral update and interactive Dialogue on the human rights situation in Venezuela, the High Commissioner for Human Rights expressed that “the defenders of Human rights and journalists continue to suffer attacks, intimidation, and criminalization. For example, six union members and union leaders have been detained for more than nine months on charges of conspiracy and association to commit a crime,” as well as the draft Law against NGOs “and the recent presentation of a bill to regulate even more to NGOs has raised serious concerns, which I share. “I provided detailed observations on this issue to the authorities and reiterated my call for any legislation to conform to international human rights standards”¹⁰.

On March 22, the FFM at the 52nd session of the Human Rights Council in the oral update and interactive dialogue on the human rights situation in Venezuela, reiterated its concern about the increasing focus of repression against society. civil society, stating that “attacks and threats against organizations and people defending human rights, trade unionists, journalists, humanitarian personnel and other actors of organized civil society in Venezuela persist and, in some cases, have increased.” They spoke out about the case of Javier Tarazona and the increase in persecution of union leaders. Finally, they reiterated their concern about “laws and administrative procedures that hinder the free functioning of civil society organizations”¹¹.

Likewise, on March 21 and 22 at the 52nd session of the Human Rights Council in the oral update and interactive Dialogue, members of the council and other delegations spoke about concerns about the closure of civic space in Venezuela and legislative advances that seek to curtail it even more, calling for an end to criminalization against people and organizations defending human rights and civil society in general¹².

⁹<https://news.un.org/es/story/2023/01/1518227>

¹⁰<https://www.ohchr.org/es/statements/2023/03/turk-updates-human-rights-council-situation-venezuela>

¹¹<https://media.un.org/en/asset/k1z/k1z0825tdz>

¹²<https://media.un.org/en/asset/k1b/k1b6yvtv5> y <https://media.un.org/en/asset/k1z/k1z0825tdz>

On July 5, the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights at Session No. 53 of the Human Rights Council presented an update and follow-up report on recommendations made to the Venezuelan State. In the text, he expressed concern about the impacts on peasant defenders, threats, and intimidation of indigenous defenders. Likewise, it was warned that “during the reporting period, OHCHR continued to document restrictions on civic space, including restrictive legal frameworks that remained in place, which limited the work of civil society organizations and allegations that dissident voices They were subjected to arbitrary judicial and administrative procedures, as well as stigmatization. OHCHR documented 21 accounts of threats and harassment, 46 cases of stigmatization on social media or public broadcasts by state officials, and 17 cases of criminalization, including 10 cases of arbitrary detention against human rights defenders, journalists, and other actors in society. civilian, including eight women. OHCHR encourages Venezuela to intensify its efforts to guarantee an open and pluralistic civic space” (...). Likewise, a series of recommendations were issued aimed at the protection of defenders and the exercise of their rights¹³.

Likewise, within the framework of the presentation of the report of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights at Session No. 53 of the Human Rights Council, different countries such as Belgium on behalf of several countries, the Delegation of the European Union, Portugal, Peru, Ecuador, France, Canada, United States, United Kingdom, Switzerland, Spain, Georgia, Australia, Uruguay, spoke out regarding the closure of civic and democratic space in Venezuela, in particular about the importance of respecting the work of organizations and defenders and cease the attacks against them¹⁴.

On August 11, the special rapporteurs of the United Nations on the promotion of human rights in the fight against terrorism, Ms. Fionnuala Ní, Aoláin; and on the rights to freedom of peaceful assembly and association, Mr. Clément Nyaletsossi Voulué, issued a press release in which they warn that “Venezuela abuses anti-terrorist laws to condemn trade unionists and union leaders”¹⁵. The Experts expressed concern about the sentence issued on August 1 of this year that condemns six union members and union leaders using the Organic Law against Organized Crime and the Financing of Terrorism. They indicated that “it is evident that we are witnessing a chronic abuse of anti-terrorist measures against those who defend the rights of workers, seek to improve working conditions, and participate in union organizations in Venezuela.” Likewise, they indicated that “in a process judicial marked by irregularities and exceptionalities, such abuse of anti-terrorist measures is contrary to international law.” Likewise, they emphasized that the use of anti-terrorist measures must be necessary, proportional, and non-discriminatory; recalling that the United Nations Security Council and human rights bodies maintain that the use of any anti-terrorist action, within the law and in practice, must be implemented with due respect for human rights. Likewise, within this press release, deep concern was expressed about the exceptionally long prison sentences that were awarded to the union members. “We consider that such high prison sentences are an attempt to remove civil society actors from circulation and damage civic space in Venezuela,” the experts noted. “These sentences are an attack on freedom of association, directed against organizations whose raison d’être is to attract individuals to collective action to improve their lives and those of their communities,” they stated. Finally, they urged the Venezuelan courts to urgently review the sentences, applying international standards consistent with human rights in matters of adjudication and review, urging that “the use of anti-terrorist legislation against civil society actors and human rights defenders must stop immediately”.

¹³A/HRC/53/54 Situation of human rights in the Bolivarian Republic of Venezuela - Report of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights. https://www.ohchr.org/sites/default/files/documents/hrbodies/hrcouncil/sessions-regular/session53/advance-versions/A_HRC_53_54_AdvanceUneditedVersion.docx

¹⁴24th Meeting - 53rd Regular Session of Human Rights Council. 5th July 2023 <https://media.un.org/en/asset/k1y/k1yv45xqv6>

¹⁵<https://www.ohchr.org/es/press-releases/2023/08/venezuela-un-experts-condemn-use-counter-terrorism-laws-convict-trade>

In October, the Special Rapporteur on the situation of human rights defenders, Mary Lawlor, presented a report in which she analyzed that women who fight for peace are also defending human rights and are victims of attacks, among the findings made reference and alert on how women defenders in Venezuela are being affected¹⁶.

On October 10 and 11 of this year, the UN Human Rights Committee prepared the fifth periodic report of the Bolivarian Republic of Venezuela on compliance with the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR), the Committee's experts expressed their concern due to the closure of civic space, violations of freedom of association and acts of intimidation of defenders, including those who participated in the session.

For its part, on April 22, the Inter-American Commission on Human Rights (IACHR) published its annual report, in which part of the content of its chapter IV.B highlights the situation in Venezuela, and presents findings on the "monitoring of the Commission to the serious human rights crisis in the country, derived from the absence of the rule of law; and documents the progressive weakening of democratic institutions and the deterioration of the human rights situation"¹⁷. The analysis highlights the situation of the defenders, and the concern that the IACHR maintains, while acts of persecution against them continued to be documented, "the violence they face and the adverse context to exercise their defense role, in the "that intense campaigns of discredit, stigmatization and acts of harassment predominate as retaliation for this activity." The report refers to cases and situations that occurred during the year 2022 and reiterates "the importance that the work of defenders has for the construction of a solid and lasting democratic society, and the leading role they represent in the process for the full achievement of the Rule of Law and the strengthening of democracy. In that sense, remember that States must comprehensively protect the right to defend rights. Therefore, it is essential and urgent that the State refrains from generating a hostile environment and, on the contrary, promotes a culture of rights and an environment free of violence and threats; recognize the value and importance of the work of defenders and seriously and effectively investigate any violation of human rights against them"¹⁸.

Finally, the Commission presented recommendations regarding the situation of defenders, urging the State to: "Refrain from criminalizing human rights defenders who work in favor of the sexual and reproductive rights of girls, women and pregnant people of all ages." And, "refrain from demanding the registration of human rights organizations with anti-terrorism agencies, especially if part of the requirements is to report on the beneficiaries of their work, since among these there may be victims of human rights violations"¹⁹.

Likewise, in a press release published on June 27 about violence against defenders in the region, the Commission expressed its concern about Venezuela "about the approval of the first debate of the draft "Law on supervision, regularization, action and financing of non-governmental and related organizations" in Venezuela, which in addition to limiting the activities that can be carried out by organizations, grants the State authorities the power to unilaterally dissolve those that participate, in its discretion, in political activities or that "attack national stability and the institutions of the Republic"²⁰.

¹⁶<https://documents-dds-ny.un.org/doc/UNDOC/GEN/N23/198/51/PDF/N2319851.pdf?OpenElement>

¹⁷https://www.oas.org/es/cidh/docs/anual/2022/capitulos/9-IA2022_Cap_4B_VE_ES.pdf Párrafo 98

¹⁸ibidem. Parag 112

¹⁹ibidem. Página 744

²⁰<https://mailchi.mp/oas.org/cidh-persiste-la-violencia-contra-personas-defensoras-en-el-primer-cuatrimestre-de-2023?e=8271a8a5d2>

On August 21, the Inter-American Commission on Human Rights (IACHR) and its Special Rapporteur for Freedom of Expression (RELE CIDH) presented a press release in which they rejected attacks on freedom of association in Venezuela²¹, considering the recent decisions of the Court Supreme Court of Justice (TSJ) relating to the matter. Experts call to protect civic space and guarantee participation in matters of public interest without any type of discrimination. On August 4, through ruling No. 1,057, the TSJ dismissed the National Steering Committee of the Venezuelan Red Cross and appointed an “Ad Hoc Restructuring Board” with powers to reorganize it. This decision would be contrary to what is established in the organization’s internal statutes regarding its governance and would grant powers contrary to the constitutional agreement. In the same way, on August 11, the TSJ announced ruling No. 1,160, through which it arbitrarily appointed an Ad Hoc Board of Directors for the political organization Communist Party of Venezuela (PCV). The IACHR and its RELE expressed that situations of this type have been observed for several years in the country; explaining that these judicial decisions, basically arbitrary, “affect freedom of association and political participation free of discrimination and, even more seriously, deepen distrust in the electoral system, creating new obstacles to overcome the institutional crisis in a country characterized by absence of the rule of law”.

International organizations also joined the complaints against the bill that seeks to criminalize and hinder the work of civil society organizations in Venezuela:

On January 25, Amnesty International issued a global Urgent Action, warning about the risk of NGOs in Venezuela. The organization indicated that the bill presented “seeks to control, limit and possibly criminally prosecute non-governmental organizations that operate in Venezuela”; Likewise, they called for “immediately ending this bill in the National Assembly and stopping all efforts to attack, control, prosecute or censor civil society organizations that work to protect the rights of all people in Venezuela”, particularly those most in need²².

On January 25, the Peace and Reconciliation Foundation (Pares) published an article in which the main concerns of Venezuelan defenders and organizations regarding the project are expressed²³.

On January 26, the Center for Justice and International Law (CEJIL), the Robert F. Kennedy Human Rights, the Due Process Foundation (DPLF), the Global Center for the Responsibility to Protect (GCR2P), the Office in Washington For Latin American Affairs (WOLA), the World Organization Against Torture (OMCT), the International Institute on Race, Equality and Human Rights and Human Rights Watch (HRW), expressed “deep concern about the approval in the first round of a draft law that seeks to criminalize and further hinder the work of civil society organizations in Venezuela” (...) indicated that “if approved, this law would have the effect of seriously hindering and potentially criminalizing the work of civil society organizations in the country, and would increase the closure of civic space. This is another strategy of the government to limit the fundamental work of civil society organizations, which legitimately defend rights and work on behalf of the victims of human rights violations, and the humanitarian emergency in Venezuela.” Finally, they urged actors from the international community to “reject this bill and call on the government of Venezuela to end the criminalization and persecution of human rights defenders and CSO”²⁴.

²¹<https://www.oas.org/es/CIDH/jsForm/?File=/es/cidh/prensa/comunicados/2023/189.asp>

²²<https://www.amnesty.org/en/documents/amr53/6379/2023/en/>

²³<https://www.pares.com.co/post/ley-para-regular-las-ong-en-venezuela-aprobada-en-primer-debate-por-asamblea-nacional>

²⁴<https://cejil.org/comunicado-de-prensa/organizaciones-internacionales-denuncian-proyecto-de-ley-que-busca-criminalizar-y-obstaculizar-el-trabajo-de-las-organizaciones-de-la-sociedad-civil-en-venezuela/>

On February 2, the Regional Alliance for Free Expression and Information, made up of 15 organizations from America, together with Civicus, IFEX-ALC, and Voces del Sur; rejected the new legislative initiative that “enables the criminalization of legitimate organizations and activities of Venezuelan civil society protected by the human right to freedom of association.” The signatories asked the international community for “support with actions that prevent this and other similar legislation in the region from continuing to proliferate, since they only seek to reduce civic space” (...) and argued that “if this law is approved, the work of the “non-governmental organizations in Venezuela would be under serious threat, which would increase restrictions in an already narrow civic space in the country”²⁵.

On February 14, the Observatory for the Protection of Human Rights Defenders made up of the International Federation of Human Rights (FIDH) and the World Organization Against Torture (OMCT), spoke about the draft Law on Inspection, Regularization, Performance and Financing of Non-Governmental Organizations and related organizations. In their statement, they “strongly reject the approval” since it “seriously restricts the right to freedom of association in the country.” In addition, they expressed concern that “if the law is approved, the consequent closure of Venezuelan civil society organizations will also cause an increase in mobility and forced migration of the Venezuelan population to countries in the region.” Finally, they urged the State “to immediately put an end to all attacks, acts of criminalization, intimidation, harassment and discredit against organizations and individuals defending human rights in the country, and to take all necessary measures to guarantee the right to freedom of association in Venezuela, under international and regional human rights standards”²⁶.

In July the International Federation of Human Rights (FIDH), warned of the closure of civic space and attacks on defenders and union leaders; the International Commission of Jurists (ICJ), spoke out for the protection of human rights defenders and civic space; Civicus who exposed cases of defenders and union leaders who were victims of criminalization. Amnesty International, spoke out about the threats to civil society and the case of Javier Tarazona; The International Human Rights Service (ISHR) expressed concern about the situation of defenders in the pre-electoral context; and the World Organization against Torture (OMCT) spoke out about the criminalization of human rights defenders²⁷.

El 21 y 22 de marzo en el 52º período de sesiones del Consejo de Derechos Humanos en On March 21 and 22 at the 52nd session of the Human Rights Council in the Oral Update and Interactive Dialogue, organizations such as Amnesty, the International Commission of Jurists (ICJ), the International Service for Human Rights (ISHR), Human Rights Watch, Civicus, the International Federation for Human Rights (FIDH) and the World Organization Against Torture (OMCT) spoke out about the situation of criminalization and the new restrictive regulatory proposals²⁸.

On December 15, Human Rights Watch published an extensive report on the most relevant situations in 2023 in Venezuela. Regarding the situation of human rights defenders, they expressed concern about the bill that grants the executive branch broad powers to control, register, sanction, and dissolve non-governmental organizations (NGOs). They warned about intimidation, arbitrary prosecution, and detention of defenders, violations of freedom of association, among others²⁹.

²⁵<https://www.alianzaregional.net/unamos-fuerzas-en-defensa-del-espacio-civico-en-venezuela/>

²⁶<https://www.fidh.org/es/region/americas/venezuela/venezuela-aprobacion-de-proyecto-de-ley-restringe-gravemente-el>

²⁷ibidem

²⁸<https://media.un.org/en/asset/k1b/k1b6yvtv5> y <https://media.un.org/en/asset/k1z/k1z0825tdz>

²⁹<https://www.hrw.org/world-report/2024/country-chapters/venezuela#7ae00d>

05 CONCLUSIONS Y RECOMMENDATIONS

The exercise of the right to defend, demand, and promote human rights freely and without reprisals continues to be threatened by regulatory restrictions, obstacles, and violent actions that add to the precariousness of basic services and social conditions that further affect and condition the work of defenders and the full operation of their organizations.

2023 evidenced the increase in repression and violence exercised against people and organizations and the increase in restrictions on civic and democratic space in an electoral context.

The lack of guarantees for the defense, demand, and promotion of human rights shows the authoritarian nature of the State and the lack of interest in assuming international recommendations and solving the socio-political and human rights crisis facing the country.

Given the crisis of systematic violations of human rights in Venezuela, documentation, reporting, dissemination of the human rights situation, and accompaniment of victims are legitimate activities and must be carried out without fear of reprisals or arbitrary restrictions and discretionary.

From the CDJ we insist that the defense, demand, and promotion of rights are essential for respect for human dignity and the maintenance of democracy and the rule of law. By criminalizing and attacking those who carry out these actions, the State transgresses its international obligations and leads to its international responsibility.

We urge progress in compliance with the recommendations of the international community and adopt all necessary measures to advance the construction of favorable and safe environments, which allow the right to defend human rights to be exercised without fear of being a victim of aggression or reprisals.

From the Center for Defenders and Justice (CDJ), we insist on the need to use the necessary measures to reverse the fact that the environment for the defense and demand of rights continues to be adverse and hostile; and follow international recommendations and standards to reduce the risks for those who carry out these actions. We call on the different actors of the international community to ensure that every person and organization that promotes, defends, and demands these rights does so without fear of being criminalized or persecuted.

CENTRO PARA LOS DEFENSORES Y LA JUSTICIA

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