

Miguel Pizarro: “Repression is the core of the regime’s political action”

The Humanitarian Aid Commissioner asserts that the International Criminal Court has the capacity to act with greater urgency, not only in judging and punishing past events but also in playing a key role in preventing current and future occurrences.

On July 28, 2024, more than 7 million Venezuelans took to the polls, marking a significant moment in the nation’s democratic history. However, by disregarding the will of the people, the Nicolás Maduro regime chose to initiate a new chapter of terror, leaving behind a trail of bloodshed, death, and devastation across the Republic.

The history of violence is long and well-documented, with extensive reports and investigations from the Prosecutor of the International Criminal Court (ICC), the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights, the Fact-Finding Mission (FFM), and other international organizations.

The electoral fraud carried out by Maduro has resulted in lost lives, grieving families, and widespread suffering throughout society. “ It is a grotesque pattern of human rights violations and a new level of repression, but it

must be understood as part of a continuous trend. The regime has consistently intensified its violations of human rights,” warns Miguel Pizarro, a former member of the 2015 National Assembly and spokesperson for the Special Commission on Monitoring Humanitarian Aid in Venezuela.

–What are the key differences or distinguishing factors between the repression that began after June 28 and previous experiences in Venezuela?

Regarding the pattern of repression in Venezuela, rather than focusing on how it differs now, it is more pertinent to discuss the variation in intensity and the integration of various methods of repression.

Some elements that could be considered new in terms of scale or that suggest a heightened level of human rights violations are fundamental in nature. In the past, the regime utilized repression and human rights abuses as tools to direct opposition movements in a specific direction. This repression aimed to force negotiation, participation in political schemes, or to shift the public discourse.

The key difference now is that repression has become central to the regime’s political strategy. It is no longer a clandestine act but a mechanism openly used to maintain power. Repression is now publicly broadcasted through television, state-controlled media, social networks, and even advertisements produced by the General Directorate of Military Counterintelligence (DGCIM). It is now at the heart of the regime’s political operations, establishing a new system of social control through force.

There are patterns of repression that have intensified, such as forced disappearances and arbitrary detentions. The scale of arrests in the days leading up to and following the elections is unprecedented. Venezuela now has more political prisoners than Cuba and Nicaragua combined, surpassing even Russia in this regard. The repression in Venezuela operates on an extraordinary scale.

The mass arrests are also influenced by the use of anti-terrorist and anti-hate laws, as well as the discretionary application of punitive laws developed by the regime. This is significant, as it relates to recent legislation, such as the Simon Bolivar Law and the anti-NGO law, which serve as legal tools to legitimize actions previously carried out outside the law. These laws are part of the broader strategy to deepen the regime's control and instill fear.

Lastly, there has been, as evidenced by reports from detention centers, a significant increase in the transfer of political prisoners to common criminal facilities. The scale of physical and mental abuse suffered by detained women, including the denial of menstrual hygiene and medical care, is alarming. Additionally, children and adolescents have been arrested, charged with terrorism, and put on trial. As the Fact-Finding Mission (FFM) rightly pointed out, these minors are being detained without regard for gender or age separation.

–There has been considerable debate regarding the actions of the ICC Prosecutor, with some critics arguing that progress on the Venezuela case has been too slow. What is your

perspective on this, and what can be expected regarding Venezuela's case before the ICC moving forward?

I engage with the United Nations on a daily basis, and these organizations do not always operate at the pace we would desire, nor do they always respond in the manner we expect. However, I am convinced that, in the case of Venezuela, the ICC and the Prosecutor's Office have the potential to do more, and to do so more effectively, in order to achieve a positive impact.

Often, these organizations themselves underestimate their capacity, the level of influence they can wield, and the leverage they hold over state authorities. In the case of Venezuela, the evidence available to the Prosecutor's Office is substantial, as this is not merely a case of autopsy. It is crucial to note that the pattern of human rights violations in Venezuela is ongoing; it is a systematic campaign by the state against the population, as well as against all forms of dissent and social organization. This means that the actions of the ICC and the Prosecutor's Office are not only important for addressing past violations, but they serve a dual purpose: they are one of the few instances where the Court's intervention can help prevent further violations and curb the deepening closure of civic space in Venezuela.

Regardless of personal opinions on the matter, I firmly believe that the Court, along with many other organizations, could take more decisive, effective, and timely action. In the case of Venezuela, it is critical not to underestimate the impact of actions that can not only judge and punish past events, but also play a key role in preventing present and future violations.

–The partial reactivation of the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights' office in Venezuela was recently announced. What is the significance of this decision, and what potential impact could it have in light of the wave of repression unleashed by the Maduro regime?

I believe it is highly significant that they have regained access. However, this occurs within a framework where the regime attempts to force international organizations into a dilemma between access and reporting –between being present on the ground and maintaining the ability to report. Fortunately, in the case of the UN Office, this dilemma does not exist. They have adhered well to their mandate and have conducted their work effectively, and I hope they can return to normal operations.

So far, they have managed to keep one person on the ground, with a commitment to increasing their presence to three staff members. I sincerely hope they can resume operations with the same number of personnel as before, gain access to penitentiary centers, engage freely with victims and organizations, and document the situation in the country without restrictions.

It is crucial for them to develop a strategy for the protection and prevention of ongoing human rights violations. One of their primary roles is to document, intervene, mediate, and help protect those at risk. I remain hopeful that these efforts will continue, even in a country where such actions are severely restricted.

–The Maduro regime appears to engage in a pattern of initially displaying a willingness to collaborate with organizations such as the ICC and the UN Office, only to later accuse them of serving "imperialism." This creates a

dynamic of constant back-and-forth, seemingly aimed at buying time and securing impunity. Given this context, can we realistically expect any meaningful collaboration or complementarity from the Maduro regime? What steps can be taken to break this cycle and ensure more favorable outcomes for the citizens?

It is utterly naive to expect any form of genuine goodwill or real cooperation from the regime at this point. The regime views technical cooperation merely as a tactic to buy time, attempting to create the illusion that such access can radically alter the situation. However, when the time comes to fulfill its most significant commitments, the regime consistently finds excuses to avoid responsibility.

That said, I firmly believe in the importance of their presence in the country. While there are countless crises around the world, Venezuela's crisis attracts attention because it is well-documented, supported by mandates, a robust and organized civil society, and victims who have a voice. Additionally, there are monitoring and protection mechanisms in place, such as the Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights, the Fact-Finding Mission (FFM), and investigations by the International Criminal Court (ICC).

The game the regime is attempting to play has the objective of ensuring that none of this materializes –that reports are never as damning as they should be, that the ICC never issues arrest warrants or takes decisive action, and that the FFM ultimately wears out over time. However, it is important to recognize the changes these mechanisms have already forced. While the regime's repression remains vast, it has been compelled to alter its methods, change commands, and eliminate some of its previous

repressive arms, which is a direct result of pressure from these organizations.

The real challenge is how to avoid naivety disguised as cooperation or complementarity, and how to prevent the genuine goodwill of these organizations from inadvertently causing harm in practice. I believe the only safeguard is the strategy that has been employed thus far: consistent documentation, persistence, and the continuous effort to keep these organizations informed and engaged, ensuring they remain at the center of the conversation.

Furthermore, it is crucial for organizations to understand that Venezuela does not have partial solutions. The solution to Venezuela's crisis is political, and that political solution lies in a transition, which is what Venezuelans expressed on July 28. Without addressing the underlying causes, it is impossible to resolve any of the consequences, from migration to human rights issues.

–While there is ongoing advocacy for human rights at international forums, the mobilization within Venezuela, particularly among mothers, wives, and relatives of political prisoners, has also been significant. How do you assess the impact of this initiative, not only in terms of advancing the release of political prisoners but also as a contributing factor to the broader democratization of the country?

In a country where everything has come to a standstill and fear has effectively stifled most political action, the mothers and relatives of prisoners have displayed an extraordinary level of courage. They have highlighted the crucial importance of ensuring that no one is left behind in Venezuela.

This movement of mothers, which has been instrumental in locating missing persons, compiling lists of prisoners, and mitigating the impact of mass rape, represents a significant driving force. It is part of the most profound and radical changes we have seen since July 28.

By making repression all-encompassing, the regime has inadvertently made the response and solidarity equally pervasive. Ultimately, this has led to a unification and mutual support movement. It has become a powerful means of expression in a country where much has been paralyzed by repression and fear. It demonstrates that fear does not completely paralyze society; although it forces people to become more cautious and limits what they say and how they say it, it has also fueled these movements. These sectors are gaining space and relevance in a context defined by prisoners and repression.

They have become a crucial factor in ensuring that no one is forgotten and that the struggle for the liberation of political prisoners receives the attention and support it so urgently requires.