

Martha Tineo Rodríguez: “Justice is the guarantee of peace, and peace can only be achieved together”

Democratization

The Venezuelan non-governmental organization (NGO) Justicia, Encuentro y Perdón (JEP) is “an organization of victims, founded and led by a victim,” recalls its general coordinator, Martha Tineo Rodríguez.

Tineo Rodríguez —a lawyer specializing in Human Rights and Forensics— was among the cofounders of JEP, along with Mrs. Rosa Orozco, mother of Geraldine Moreno Orozco, a 23-year-old woman who was killed by members of the National Guard during the anti-government protests that took place in 2014.

On its website, the NGO emphasizes that it was founded “in 2017 as a response to the most serious Human Rights crisis Venezuela has faced in recent decades.” However, in a country that is constantly in free fall, experts in the field warn that following the July 24, 2024, elections, abuses perpetrated by the authoritarian regime have worsened to unimaginable levels.

–For many years, various local and international organizations have denounced the human rights situation in the country. However, today it is stated that this situation has worsened considerably. Why?

Indeed, over the past decade, Venezuela has experienced a severe and sustained violation of human rights, in a context of a complex humanitarian emergency –more of a crisis by design, according to various actors– such that both ordinary and extraordinary mechanisms have been activated by international human rights protection systems for its assessment and monitoring. Such is the case of the Independent International Fact-Finding Mission on the Bolivarian Republic of Venezuela, an entity that, based on rigorous documentation, has repeatedly emphasized that this constitutes a state policy aimed at systematically targeting sectors of civil society.

In response to this reality, in February 2018 the Office of the Prosecutor of the International Criminal Court (ICC) initiated a preliminary examination, covering events from at least 2017, and later moved to the investigation phase –extending the period under review to at least 2014– after determining that there are reasonable grounds to believe that crimes against humanity have been committed in Venezuela. In other words, the threshold of human rights violations has already been surpassed, and now it may be a systematic and/or widespread attack against segments of society, specifically including arbitrary detentions, torture, sexual violence, and persecution. This underscores the gravity of the situation. Nevertheless, despite such scrutiny, the situation unfortunately continues to deteriorate.

One indicator of this is that before July 28, 2024, our organization had recorded just over 300 political prisoners –a figure

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that had remained largely stable for nearly the past decade, ranging between 300 and 400, except for specific periods when there was a notable increase, mostly in short-term detentions. In the electoral context, this number rose to over 2,500 people.

Although many of them were released in the following months (between November 2024 and January 2025), these individuals remain subject to judicial proceedings in cases that deny them the right to choose trusted lawyers and the right to defense, proceed without evidence or with manipulated evidence, and in any case continue to restrict personal freedom, as the released individuals are required to report periodically to the courts, are prohibited from leaving the country, and are barred from making statements about their cases, among other restrictions.

Parallel to this already very serious situation, as of November 2025 our organization has identified 1,080 people imprisoned for political reasons. In all cases, the arrests have involved arbitrary detention followed by enforced disappearance, denial of the right to choose trusted legal counsel, among other violations of due process. In many cases, isolation, lack of communication, and prohibition of family contact are added, along with deplorable detention conditions. Most of these individuals endure what we call a preemptive sentence, having spent months and even years deprived of liberty without a trial that actually determines their responsibility for any alleged crime.

–What new practices or elements confirm the worsening of human rights violations in the country?

While patterns such as Sippenhaft –the extension of political persecution to family members– and the detention of women and especially vulnerable individuals are not new and have been

documented by our organization and international mechanisms, the reality is that their implementation has shifted from selective to widespread. So much so, that we currently have records of more than 170 women imprisoned for political reasons, as well as at least four adolescents, neurodivergent individuals, older adults, human rights defenders, and journalists, to name a few groups requiring special protection. This fact alone attests to the worsening of the situation.

In the electoral context, we recorded more than 200 children and adolescents imprisoned for political reasons, and, worse, in some of these cases forced disappearance, torture, and sexual violence were also reported. This was thoroughly documented in the recent report by the United Nations Fact-Finding Mission, with the shocking addition of cases of sexual slavery involving adolescents.

Those detained in this context were presented in mass hearings, without individual assessment of their alleged participation in criminal acts. All were charged with the same offenses, pre-classified by the Attorney General. From the prisons, reports have emerged –and, unfortunately, they have occurred– of suicide attempts and physical and emotional illnesses as a result of the torture and cruel treatment to which they are subjected.

Our organization has conducted thorough documentation, applying standards of severity and urgency, and we have identified at least 90 individuals who require specialized and urgent medical attention for illnesses such as cancer, cardiovascular, renal, gastrointestinal, and respiratory conditions, among others. These are lives that are seriously at risk.

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Another pattern documented since last year, for which we had no previous precedent, is the detention of foreigners and individuals with dual nationality. This may be an attempt to exert pressure on other states regarding their positions on the situation in Venezuela.

–In the specific case of NGOs, how is their work being affected in the country?

Under the premise of the "internal enemy" and due to the exercise of our work –which is a human right in itself– human rights defenders and civil society organizations are also victims of political persecution. The pattern progresses from stigmatization and criminalization to detentions and disappearances, as previously described, and according to our records, at least 11 human rights defenders are currently detained in Venezuela. This policy of persecution is compounded by laws that obstruct or limit the exercise of our work. In other words, this is clearly a state policy.

–What changes or adjustments have you had to make to continue operating on the ground, and what implications does this have for your work?

In our case, as an organization of victims founded and led by a victim, this reinforces our commitment to support victims in filing complaints and making their experiences visible. It is, therefore, a daily practice of overcoming fear and reinterpreting the suffering of thousands, transforming it into the strength to continue activating mechanisms that restore freedom to victims –in the case of political prisoners– and, in all cases (including killings and detentions), seek truth, justice, and comprehensive reparations. Documentation is fundamental to this work, and

much of our effort is focused on it, as well as on building collective memory.

–The UN High Commissioner issues harsh reports on Venezuela, as do other international bodies. Yet the government continues its scorched-earth policy. So, what is the purpose of these organizations and the complaints brought before them?

Unfortunately, these mechanisms have not had a deterrent effect in stopping the persecution; however, they are the necessary avenues to document and accumulate the evidence required for future accountability processes. Without this, we would be abandoning justice and resigning ourselves to impunity, and with it, to the repetition of these crimes. While the timelines of international justice are not the timelines of the victims and their urgent needs, the hope for justice is, to a large extent, what sustains them in the face of such horror.

–I would like you to analyze, in this context, the attacks being suffered specifically by women. While there are precedents as serious as the case of Judge Afiuni, it seems that the assault against women in politics and social activism has increased. Do you share this assessment? Why is this happening?

I could not affirm that there is a gender-based persecution policy. On the contrary, the number of women imprisoned for political reasons is significantly lower than the number of men. Currently, out of 1,080 political prisoners, 903 are men and 177 are women –according to our records– so I believe that, given the exponential increase in the total number of prisoners, the rise in female prisoners corresponds proportionally.

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However, I must emphatically affirm that there is indeed a differentiated harm experienced by women, ranging from detention conditions and separation from their families –many of whom are mothers– to other forms of damage. It is important to note that while women may be tortured with the same brutality as men (beatings, among other abuses), they also endure additional cruel treatment and humiliation specifically on the basis of their gender.

–There are women who become victims because their husbands, fathers, or children are detained, but there are also those who directly suffer attacks from the repressive forces. How do you assess this new reality and its implications for Venezuelan society?

In the case of women, as well as adolescents, I emphasize that the harm is differentiated: the impacts of their imprisonment directly affect the entire family and community, striking at the most sensitive fibers of the social fabric and generating increasing fear throughout the population. It is a clear message of cruelty.

–Raising one's voice to denounce abuses does not stop the repressive forces. Perhaps for this reason, some victims prefer to remain silent, hoping that staying quiet might help negotiate or secure better conditions. What can be done in these cases? Is it better to remain silent to avoid further reprisals?

Silence must never be an option, because it only generates greater vulnerability for detainees and deeper abandonment. We understand the immense fear some families feel about speaking out. As we have already noted, entire families are being persecuted –there are, in fact, imprisoned families. In the face of this very

understandable reaction, activists, defenders, journalists, and other members of civil society have a profound responsibility to denounce and make this reality visible. In fact, I can responsibly assert that we have sufficient evidence to believe that the numbers we report for political prisoners are only indicative of a reality that may be far worse— very likely, the true figures are much higher. Insisting on this is precisely a way to help the public grasp the gravity of the situation we are facing.

–Your NGO is called “Justicia, Encuentro y Perdón” (Justice, Encounter, and Forgiveness). How can these three principles be made a reality in the country?

I appreciate this question. As a victims’ organization, one of our primary objectives is to ensure that they can obtain justice, which is essential for closing cycles of violence and preventing their repetition. And precisely to make that sustainable, we believe in the need to rebuild social fabric, which is where the idea of “encounter” becomes meaningful. Forgiveness does not mean renouncing justice; rather, it is an invitation to free ourselves from hatred, to heal, and to strengthen ourselves both personally and collectively. Ultimately, this is what ensures that new cycles of violence do not arise, cycles that could emerge precisely from impunity and the consequent risk of victims turning into perpetrators.

Justice is the guarantee of peace, and peace can only be achieved together. Forgiveness without impunity brings us closer to that goal, while hatred drives us away and subjugates us.