

August 4, 2019

Letter to the Venezuelan Government Regarding Crimes against Pemón Indigenous Peoples

The Society for the Anthropology of Lowland South America (SALSA), an international organization of academic experts on the peoples and environments of the region, strongly condemns the murders, expulsion and persecution of indigenous Pemón people by security forces of the Venezuelan government under the command of Nicolas Maduro. In this determination, SALSA relies on the expertise of its members and the evidence gathered by the United Nations Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR) in a damning report entitled “Human rights in the Bolivarian Republic of Venezuela” (from 12 July 2019).

Section V, Part A of the OHCHR report is worth highlighting in full, as it concords with the experiences and perspectives of anthropologists who have long worked with Pemón peoples in the Gran Sabana Region of Bolívar State. High Commissioner Michelle Bachelet finds the following facts with regards to violations of indigenous peoples’ human rights in Venezuela:

62. There are violations of indigenous peoples’ collective rights to their traditional lands, territories, and resources. They have lost control of their land, including from militarization by State actors. Their presence has led to violence and insecurity in their territories in recent years, in addition to the presence of organized criminal gangs, and armed groups.

63. Mining, particularly in Amazonas and Bolivar, including in the “Arco Minero del Orinoco” region, has resulted in violations of various collective rights, including rights to maintain customs, traditional ways of life, and a spiritual relationship with their land. Mining also has grave environmental and health impacts, such as increased malaria, and contamination of waterways. The presence of mining operations has had a differentiated impact on indigenous women and girls, who face an increased risk of human trafficking. The failure to consult indigenous peoples regarding these activities amounts to a violation of their right to consultation.

64. OHCHR documented seven deaths of indigenous peoples in violent circumstances in 2019. Indigenous authorities and leaders, including women, are often subjected to threats and attacks by State actors, which has an impact on their right to self-determination. In Bolivar State, Pemón communities who oppose the Government, particularly indigenous authorities and leaders, face targeted repression by State actors.

65. In February 2019, violent incidents occurred in Pemón territory in the context of the possible entry of aid from nearby Brazil. However, they did not happen in isolation, but amidst tension between the Government and the Pemóns, who have reported increased insecurity, including killings during the past year.

66. On 22 February soldiers open-fired on members of the Pemón community of Kumaracapay, killing three and wounding 12 others. During these events, four soldiers were held by Pemóns, and reported suffering ill-treatment. On 23 February, the Bolivarian National Guard (GNB) used excessive force against individuals, both indigenous and non-indigenous, in and around the town of Santa Elena,

including against people heading to the border to receive aid. Witnesses described attacks and chaos lasting throughout the day and evening, GNB shooting indiscriminately from armoured vehicles at close range, as well as attacks against the hospital. Due to lack of medicine and supplies, the injured were transferred to a Brazilian hospital 200 kilometres away where many received surgery and face months of rehabilitation. OHCHR confirmed seven people were killed (four indigenous, three non-indigenous) and 26 injured by gunshot, by military forces. At least 63 individuals (indigenous and nonindigenous) were detained. Detainees were ill-treated. OHCHR is concerned about witness statements suggesting many more people may have been killed. It is also concerned with reports of a possible mass grave, which warrants further investigation. The State has yet to undertake an independent, impartial investigation into the incidents.

67. During these events, military forces took control of the previously indigenous controlled airport in the Maurak Pemón community. Maurak and two other communities remain militarized at the time of writing.

68. These events forced at least 966 Pemóns to flee to Brazil, and most interviewees said they would not return for fear of persecution. The events, and the subsequent displacement, have caused irreparable harm to the Pemón, who have suffered violations of individual and collective rights, related to their customs, territory, and self-determination.

The Society for the Anthropology of Lowland South America (SALSA) urges the Venezuelan government to respect and protect the lives and territory of indigenous people, as provided for in the Venezuelan Bolivian Constitution. We also call on the government to conduct prompt, effective, thorough, independent, impartial, and transparent investigations into human rights violations, including killings of indigenous peoples, and bring perpetrators to justice. The executive and the security forces should immediately cease any intimidation and attacks against indigenous peoples and local leaders. Constitutional prerogatives demand that the Venezuelan government ensure the protection of all citizens and take all necessary measures to protect their individual and collective rights, including indigenous peoples' right to land.



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