

HUMAN RIGHTS VIOLATIONS IN VENEZUELA

While the removal of Maduro from power marks the end of a 25-year-long authoritarian dictatorship which first began under Hugo Chavez, it presents an uneasy path ahead for Venezuela with global implications.

Did you know?...

- ➔ According to a 2020 report [authored](#) by the United Nations Independent International Fact-Finding Mission on Venezuela, the experts on this mission documented **53 extrajudicial executions** and reviewed **2,552 additional incidents** involving **5,094 killings** by security forces.
- ➔ In November 2020, Venezuelan prisons and intelligence headquarters held [nearly 400 political prisoners](#), according to the Penal Forum, a Venezuelan network of pro-bono criminal defense lawyers.
- ➔ According to the United Nations, after a review by experts involving interviews and case studies, **110 documented cases were identified** where the Bolivarian National Intelligence Service targeted political dissidents, human rights activists, and others perceived to be opponents.

The security services operating in Venezuela have **tortured detainees**, including political dissidents and human rights activists, using beatings, asphyxiation and sexual violence.



Venezuela's Human Rights Crisis and the Refugee Exodus

Beyond extrajudicial killings, detentions due to political persecution, use of torture, and limits on freedom of expression have been documented by the United Nations and Human Rights Watch. These human rights violations have led to an explosion of refugees fleeing Venezuela, with over **4.5 million refugees** identified during a six-year period.

Human Rights Violations in Venezuela

Executive Summary

Venezuela has a well-documented history of utilizing security forces to attempt to control the population, with numerous reported instances of extrajudicial executions and lethal repression by government security forces.

In September 2020, the Human Rights Watch [noted](#) that independent experts investigating human rights abuses in Venezuela had reasonable grounds to find that “most of the violations and crimes ... were part of a widespread and systematic attack against a civilian population ... in furtherance of a state policy.”

Beyond extrajudicial killings, detentions due to political persecution, use of torture, and limits on freedom of expression have been documented by the United Nations and Human Rights Watch. These human rights violations have led to an explosion of refugees fleeing Venezuela, with over 4.5 million refugees identified during a six-year period.

Extrajudicial Killings and Lethal Repression

Investigations by international organizations, including the UN Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights, have found that the Venezuelan government has allowed its security forces to use lethal force against Venezuelans, including extrajudicial executions.

- According to a 2020 report [authored](#) by the United Nations Independent International Fact-Finding Mission on Venezuela, the experts on this mission documented **53 extrajudicial executions** and reviewed **2,552 additional incidents involving 5,094 killings** by security forces.
 - Of these extrajudicial killings, the investigative police of Venezuela and the Special Action Forces of the National Bolivarian Police were [responsible](#) for **59 percent** of all killings by security forces.
- According to the UN Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights, in 2018 and the first five months of 2019, Venezuelan security forces **killed nearly 7,000 people** in incidents they claimed were cases of “resistance to authority.”
- After the 2024 Presidential Election, in which the Maduro government [claimed](#) he won re-election amid international skepticism, the Human Rights Watch identified at least **24 credible reports of killings** by the security forces during protests over the election results.

Arbitrary Detention and Political Persecution

Venezuela has a record of imprisoning citizens, including those associated with political opposition activities and human rights work, with the judicial branch of the government being criticized for allowing abusive policies and government overreach.

- In November 2020, Venezuelan prisons and intelligence headquarters held [nearly 400 political prisoners](#), according to the Penal Forum, a Venezuelan network of pro-bono criminal defense lawyers.

- According to the Human Rights Watch, the judicial branch of the Venezuelan government has [consistently](#) supported abusive policies and government overreach.
- Between 2024 and 2025, [approximately 2,000 people were detained](#) in connection with protests, political opposition activities, and human rights work, including many who have been arrested for participating in demonstrations, expressing criticism of the government, or supporting the opposition.

Torture and Ill-Treatment

The security services operating in Venezuela have tortured detainees, including political dissidents and human rights activists, using beatings, asphyxiation and sexual violence.

- According to the United Nations, after a review by experts involving interviews and case studies, **110 documented cases** were [identified](#) where the Bolivarian National Intelligence Service targeted political dissidents, human rights activists, and others perceived to be opponents.
- In this same report, the General Directorate of Military Counter-Intelligence was [identified](#) as targeting military personnel and associated civilians allegedly involved in rebellions or coup attempts, holding them in unofficial or clandestine facilities.
 - [Human Rights Watch](#): “In the case of the Bolivarian National Intelligence Service, the experts found that orders establishing who would be investigated often came from President Nicolás Maduro or the powerful pro-government politician Diosdado Cabello to the agency’s director.”
 - [Human Rights Watch](#): “Detainees were tortured – including with stress positions, asphyxiation, beatings, electric shocks, cuts and mutilations, death threats, and sexual violence – to extract confessions or as punishment.”

Crackdown on Freedom of Expression

Since 2014, there have been specific instances of the Government of Venezuela arresting nonviolent protesters and journalists by leveraging legislation that has limited free speech in Venezuela.

- The United Nations has also [identified](#) cases of human rights violations against protesters, particularly during the crackdowns in 2014, 2017, and 2019, including **killings of 36 protesters** and torture and other ill-treatment in detention such as beatings and humiliation, sexual and gender-based violence, and mock executions.
 - [According](#) to the Human Rights Watch “The Penal Forum counts more than 15,000 people arrested since 2014 in connection with protests, including demonstrators, bystanders, and people taken from their homes without warrants. Around 8,900 had been conditionally released as of November 2020, but they remained subject to criminal prosecution. More than 840 civilians have been prosecuted by military courts, in violation of international law. “
- Between 2015 and 2017, Venezuelan security forces [including](#) the Bolivarian National Guard, the Bolivarian National Police (PNB), the Bolivarian National Intelligence Service (SEBIN), the Scientific, Penal, and Criminal Investigative Police (CICPC), and state police conducted a series of raids called the “Operation to Liberate and Protect the People.”

- These raids led to widespread allegations of violations such as extrajudicial killings, mass arbitrary detentions, mistreatment of detainees, forced evictions, destruction of homes, and arbitrary deportations.
- The government of Venezuela has passed legislation [limiting](#) free speech and has prosecuted individuals for spreading “messages of intolerance and hatred.” Including a journalist who have reported on the current state of a Caracas hospital.

Refugee Crisis

The current conditions in Venezuela have led to 4.5 million refugees fleeing the country between 2014 and 2020. Additionally, for those who have remained, health crises have risen, with infant mortality reaching 30 percent and maternal mortality reaching 65 percent in 2016.

- According to the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, [approximately 4.5 million of an estimated 32 million](#) Venezuelans had fled their country between 2014 and 2020.
 - [Human Rights Watch](#): “In 2017, the Venezuelan health minister released official data indicating that during 2016 maternal mortality had increased 65 percent, and infant mortality 30 percent. Days later, the health minister was fired.”