

Venezuela must guarantee judicial impartiality – UN human rights expert

As political tensions continue to escalate in Venezuela, a United Nations independent human rights expert has called on the Government to “take all necessary measures to guarantee judicial independence,” following concerns that some pressure may have been placed on the country’s justice system “to act against the political opposition”.

“All Venezuelan State institutions must respect, promote and guarantee the independence and impartiality of the judiciary, including judges and prosecutors, so that they can maintain their independence in the face of undue pressure,” said the expert, Diego García-Sayán, who specializes in safeguarding the independence of judges and lawyers around the world. “It is essential that the Constitution and human rights treaties are respected,” he added.

“I am concerned that pressure is being put on the judicial system to act against the political opposition.”

Tensions started escalating at the end of January, when Mr. Guaidó, head of the country’s National Assembly, challenged the legitimacy of the sitting President, Nicolás Maduro, and was declared interim president by the National Assembly. President Maduro has been in power since 2013 and was sworn in again for a second term on 10 January.

“The measures taken against Guaidó and the pressure being exerted on him are unacceptable,” stated the UN human rights expert, deploring the criminal investigation that is being conducted, “as this could be politically motivated,” he explained.

Mr. García-Sayán further noted that “statements already made by Tarek William Saab, a leading supporter of the incumbent President Maduro, about the Guaidó investigation may already be affecting the legal presumption of innocence” and that “the equitable, independent and impartial administration of justice, requires prosecutors to work in a way that is fair and which avoids any discrimination.”

Mr. García-Sayán called on Venezuela to “organise its State apparatus in a way that is compatible with its international obligations to guarantee the rule of law, the independence and impartiality of the judiciary and international human rights standards”.

He added that “in accordance with the human rights treaties to which it is a party, Venezuela must adopt all legislative, administrative, judicial and other measures necessary for the establishment of an independent and impartial judiciary and the proper administration of justice.”

On Sunday, the UN human rights chief, Michelle Bachelet, expressed grave

concern over other human rights violations taking place in the country, highlighting the killing and injuring of civilians due to [excessive use of force](#) by the Venezuelan security forces.

The UN humanitarian coordination office ([OCHA](#)) has been documenting the [humanitarian crisis](#) in the country: infant mortality has increased by more than 50 per cent since 2017; four in five hospitals lack the necessary medicines and staff to be operational. To date, the UN refugee and migration agencies ([UNHCR](#) and [IOM](#), respectively), estimate that the number of Venezuelans to have fled their country [stands at 3.4 million](#).

[**DR Congo: Insecurity and attacks mean Ebola will keep spreading, warns world health agency**](#)

Worsening security in eastern Democratic Republic of the Congo marked by attacks on Ebola clinics have made it a “given” that the deadly virus will spread further, the World Health Organization ([WHO](#)) said on Friday.

In Geneva, spokesperson Christian Lindmeier condemned the “deplorable” targeting of two Médecins Sans Frontières (MSF) facilities earlier this week in Katwa and Butembo.

WHO was “doing everything and talking with everyone” to ensure that the operation to overcome the current Ebola outbreak continues, he insisted.

To date, the agency and its partners have relied on armed protection from UN peacekeepers from the United Nations Stabilization Mission in the DRC ([MONUSCO](#)), to operate in a region that’s home to more than 100 non-State armed groups.

“In the light of the recent attacks and enhanced discussion with MONUSCO forces, with local authorities”, said Mr. Lindmeier, he said they were working on improving security to ensure that patients and staff were better protected, “and that everything can be done to get this outbreak under control.”

He added that considering the “deteriorating” situation, there was nonetheless “a likelihood of an increase of Ebola cases. That is definitely a given.”

555 lives lost so far to Ebola outbreak

According to the DRC health authorities, the latest outbreak of Ebola which

began on 1 August 2018, has claimed 555 lives.

There have been 885 cases of the virus – which is endemic in the vast country, causing high fever, bleeding and death in around 60 per cent of cases – with 820 confirmed infections and 65 probable.

Mr. Lindmeier confirmed that following Wednesday's arson attack on the Butembo facility, four patients had fled and run away while the attack was ongoing. But they "have not run away" from treatment.

WHO and MSF staff were unhurt but security personnel "did experience casualties", he added.

"It's a very understandable reaction that under fire you try to save your own life more than anything," the WHO spokesperson said, in relation to the missing patients: "Three have already voluntarily returned, that's also important to note – they understand how important it is – and the fourth for whatever reason hasn't come back yet or hasn't been traced yet," he added, saying that finding the patient had to be a priority now, along with tracing those they had all come into contact with.

In addition to attacks on Ebola treatment centres, healthworkers have faced varying levels of resistance from some local communities in trying to trace anyone who might have come into contact with infected carriers.

"Apart from the obstacles we are facing there are ongoing rumours in the communities that the Ebola virus doesn't even exist," Mr Lindmeier said. "And if such a rumour (takes) hold, that makes it easy for groups to not believe in what you see, and what the patients are going through, and that hampers the operations."

Following the most recent Butembo attack, WHO and partners are working to ensure the safety of the patients and staff. Patients have been transferred to a centre in Katwa.

"It is a priority of the response to ensure quality clinical care for the patients," the agency said in a statement.

[Venezuela: Competing US, Russia resolutions fail to pass in Security Council](#)

The second meeting of the week [on the situation in Venezuela](#), took place in the UN Security Council on Thursday, during which competing resolutions produced by the United States and by Russia were presented. Neither text was adopted as the US draft was vetoed and the Russian draft failing to secure

enough votes in favor.

It was the third Council meeting seeking solutions to Venezuela's "[protracted crisis](#)" since tensions started escalating in January, when Juan Guaidó, head of the country's National Assembly, challenged the legitimacy of the sitting President, Nicolás Maduro, who has been in power since 2013 and who was sworn in again for a second term, on 10 January.

The 15 members of the Council have been divided between those who are firmly supporting Mr. Maduro arguing that he is the legitimate elected president and those who support Mr. Guaidó's claim, backed by calls for a fresh round of voting.

The US draft resolution called for the holding of new elections and a recognition of self-proclaimed interim President Guaidó. Nine voted in favour (Germany, Poland, Peru, US, United Kingdom, France, Belgium, Dominican Republic, Kuwait), three against (Russia, China, South Africa) and there were three abstentions (Equatorial Guinea, Indonesia, Côte d'Ivoire).

"The Situation in Venezuela demands our action now," the United States Special Representative for Venezuela, Elliot Abrams, told the Council. "The time for a peaceful transition to democracy is now..We look forward to genuine free and fair elections and to a Government that reflects the will and aspirations of the Venezuelan people".

Russia's draft called for a dialogue between the Government and the opposition, in line with the Montevideo mechanism – a forum for talks, launched by Mexico and Uruguay earlier this February. The text produced four votes in favour (Russia, China, South Africa, Equatorial Guinea), seven against (Germany, Poland, Peru, US, United Kingdom, France, Belgium) and four abstentions (Côte d'Ivoire, Dominican Republic, Indonesia, Kuwait).

"We drafted an alternative draft resolution, the aim of which is not to incite political intrigues and regime change but rather to genuinely help the Venezuelan people in efforts to normalize the situation in the country," said Russian Ambassador, Vassily Nebenzia.

On Tuesday, the UN's political and peacebuilding chief, Rosemary DiCarlo, [briefed](#) the Security Council, describing the "grim reality" facing the country.

As tensions continue to escalate, the UN humanitarian coordination office ([OCHA](#)) has been documenting the [humanitarian crisis](#) in the country: infant mortality has increased by more than 50 per cent since 2017; four in five hospitals lack the necessary medicines and staff to be operational. To date, the UN refugee and migration agencies ([UNHCR](#) and [IOM](#), respectively), estimate that the number of Venezuelans to have fled their country [stands at 3.4 million](#).

Following recent violence by Government forces during demonstrations at border crossings with Brazil and Colombia and other parts of the country, the UN human rights office ([OHCHR](#)) denounced [excessive use of force](#) which led to

the death of several civilians.

Easing fears and promoting gender equality in Chad's girls-only classrooms

A teacher holds up a drawing of an adolescent girl who has just been caught unawares by her first menstruation cycle, while at school. She's addressing neat rows of young women sitting in class, in the town of Bol, in Chad.

"We spoke about puberty and periods and looked at a story of a young girl who experienced her period for the first time," Fatime Ali Abakar told UN News in her classroom at the single-sex Lycée de Bol school.

Some 50 girls are present. Many like Fatime Ali Abakar, have already started menstruating, but the lesson is still relevant, according to 20-year old Houa Adoum Abdoulaye. "This class can help us to support younger girls who may be confused or worried about what is happening to them."

Awareness-raising

The class which takes place after regular school hours is organized by the League of Women Preachers, a group of female Muslim teachers who are closely associated with Chad's Higher Council of Islamic Affairs.

The aim of the League is to contribute to awareness about issues which affect women and girls especially gender-based violence, the promotion of sexual and reproductive health and the dangers of radicalization by terrorist groups which operate in the region.

Mariam Abakar is the president of the League for the Lac region where Bol is located and is proactively engaged in the classes. The sharing of information takes place in what is called a madrassa, an Islamic religious school.

"In the Muslim world women are separated from men, especially in the mosque, so it is important that women get together to discuss the wide range of issues which particularly affect us," she said.

When the class focusing on puberty is over, some of these young women will return to family homes where female genital mutilation, early marriage and young pregnancies are accepted as traditional practices and considered part of normal life in Chad.

Early Marriage

Figures quoted by the United Nations show that 30% of Chadian women between the ages of 20-24 are married before they reach the age of 15. In that same group around 14% give birth also before the age of 15. Female genital mutilation, which is practiced in most parts of Chad, affects 44 per cent of all women.

The [UN Population Fund, UNFPA](#), is working in the country to reduce the incidence and damage caused by practices like female genital mutilation and child marriage. "The persistence of these harmful practices is tied to traditional sociocultural beliefs," said Edwige Adekambi Domingo, the Resident Representative of UNFPA in Chad. "They limit the empowerment of women and adolescent girls and increase their vulnerability and risk to poverty and more discrimination."

Change is happening. An intense advocacy campaign organized by UNFPA with traditional and religious leaders, including some Muslim leaders and the League of Women Preachers, successfully pressed members of parliament to vote in favour of a law which ratified a presidential decree forbidding child marriage and setting the minimum age of marriage at 18 years.

But early marriage and early non-consensual sexual intercourse is still taking place. "Poverty combined with the low status of women, high fertility rates and low rates of education of girls are the underlying causes," explained UNFPA's Edwige Adekambi Domingo. "UNFPA is committed to increasing access to quality and youth-friendly reproductive health services for marginalized adolescent girls, including those that are subject to risk of child marriage," she added.

[Prolonged economic crisis and drought demands urgent response for Zimbabwe's 'hardest hit': UN relief chief](#)

An urgent scale-up in humanitarian relief is required to provide "critical food and livelihood support" for hard-hit people across Zimbabwe, the UN's Emergency Relief Coordinator said on Thursday, speaking during the middle of a fact-finding mission to the southern African country.

Announcing the allocation of US\$10 million from the UN's Central Emergency Response Fund (CERF), Mark Lowcock said that this amount would "represent only a fraction of what is needed to meet the level of need across the country".

Farmers in Zimbabwe have been struggling with erratic rainfall and a fragile economy, and according to the [Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs \(OCHA\)](#), 5.3 million people are in need of assistance.

“The CERF allocation will help us to rapidly provide critical food and livelihood support, education, health, and protection services for the most vulnerable people who are hardest-hit during crises, including children, women, the elderly, and people who are chronically ill or living with disabilities”, Mr. Lowcock explained.

The announcement was made during the launch of the [Zimbabwe Flash Appeal](#) on Thursday, which requires \$234 million to provide urgent food, health, water, sanitation, hygiene and protection support for 2.2 million people who are the most at risk, out of the 5.3 million people in need over the next six months.

An estimated 2.9 million people in rural areas and 1.5 million in urban areas are already severely food insecure, including a million who are facing emergency levels of food insecurity. A further 900,000 people risk reaching crisis food insecurity levels if the humanitarian assistance they are receiving does not continue, said according to a [press statement](#).

During his three-day mission to Zimbabwe, Mr. Lowcock met with senior government officials, NGOs and humanitarian organizations. He also visited the densely populated Harare suburb of Epworth, where he met families who are struggling to cope.

Mr. Lowcock, describing some of the scenes that faced him during his visit, said: “I heard from people living with HIV who are unable to take the critical drugs they need. They can’t take it on an empty stomach and many of them can only afford one meal a day.”

The UN humanitarian relief chief also highlighted acute shortages of essential medicines, and the high-risk of gender-based violence, particularly for women and girls.

On Friday, Mr. Lowcock is expected to visit Bundura to talk to people affected by increasing food insecurity, and from Zimbabwe Mr. Lowcock will move on to nearby Malawi, to see first-hand the humanitarian situation there and the efforts undertaken by aid organizations to respond.