

Venezuela prisons 'beyond monstrous', UN warns, highlighting plight of Colombian detainees

Conditions in Venezuela's prisons are "beyond monstrous", the UN human rights office, [OHCHR](#), said on Tuesday, before calling for an independent and transparent investigation into the death of a leading political opponent of the Government.

Issuing the alert in Geneva, OHCHR spokesperson Ravina Shamdasani said that there were specific concerns for the well-being of 59 Colombian nationals, who've been held for more than two years without being charged.

They were picked up in a security operation in 2016 and are now sharing a single cell at a facility in the country's capital, Caracas, Ms Shamdasani said. Many of them are ill, she told journalists.

"The 59 were accused of being Colombian paramilitaries but to date, no evidence or charges have been brought against them," Ms Shamdasani explained. "In November 2017, a Venezuelan judge had ruled that they should be unconditionally released. However, they remain in detention."

Investigation vital into death of Fernando Alban

Asked about Fernando Alban, a critic of the government whose death was announced on Monday at the headquarters of the country's intelligence services, Ms Shamdasani confirmed the need for an independent, transparent investigation to clarify reports that he had jumped to his death from the 10th floor.

"There are so many different reports, and quite a lot of speculation on exactly what happened," Ms Shamdasani said. "On whether Mr Alban committed suicide, whether he was thrown, whether he was ill-treated, which is why we need an independent, transparent investigation to clarify the circumstances of his death."

Overcrowding is rife...infrastructure is infested with rats and insects. Not all detainees have access to natural light – *Ravina Shamdasani, OHCHR*

On the subject of the Colombian detainees, Ms Shamdasani explained that the men were rounded up during so-called Operations for the Liberation of the People (OLP), which the Venezuelan Government had said were designed to break up criminal gangs and bring criminals to justice.

Calling on the authorities to comply with the judge's ruling and free the

Colombians, Ms Shamdasani underlined the dire conditions in the country's prisons.

"Overcrowding is rife," she said. "The infrastructure is infested with rats and insects. Not all detainees have access to natural light. And in many detention centres across the country, detainees have limited access to food and water, including drinking water."

The deteriorating human rights situation in Venezuela was detailed in [a recent UN report](#). Published in June, it highlighted the accelerating erosion of the rule of law amid unprecedented mass demonstrations and the excessive use of force in security operations.

Allegations of extrajudicial killings linked to OLP raids first surfaced in July 2015, the report found, after an operation took place in one of the poorest and most violent neighbourhoods in Caracas, Cota 905, in which 14 people died and 134 were arrested.

Citing information from the Attorney General's Office, the OHCHR report noted that between July 2015 and March 2017, 505 people were killed in OLPs, including four women and 24 children.

Dozens of detention centre deaths

The UN report also detailed the deaths last year of 39 inmates at a detention centre in the state of Amazonas, where security forces had retaken control, after detainees had established a system of self-government within the facility several years earlier.

"There have also been violent situations as you know in Venezuelan prisons, where because of these terrible conditions, or because of other ill-treatment, riots have broken out," Ms Shamdasani said. "So, really, the conditions are beyond monstrous in these detention facilities."

Citing civil society records, the UN human rights office report noted that "at least 570 people, including 35 children, were arbitrarily detained" in Venezuela between August 2017 and April 2018.

Ms Shamdasani said that one of the Colombian prisoners, William Estremor, had been taken to a hospital emergency department on Monday.

He was then reported to have been transferred to a small infirmary at premises in Caracas of the country's intelligence services, but there has been no update on his condition, the OHCHR spokesperson explained.

"As far as international human rights law is concerned, their detention could very well amount to arbitrary detention," Ms Shamdasani said. "This case has been referred to the UN Working Group on Arbitrary Detention."

At its last session, the [UN Human Rights Council](#) mandated OHCHR to gather information on the situation in Venezuela and report back to Member States next year.