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# Amnesty Reports Dozens of Venezuela Torture Accounts

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Amnesty International has received dozens of accounts of torture allegedly carried out by government security forces in Venezuela since protests that have left at least 37 dead broke out in February.

"We've received reports from detainees who were forced to spend hours on their knees or feet in detention centers," Amnesty wrote in a report, adding that other Venezuelans said they suffered sexual abuse and threats of murder. "Inhuman and degrading treatment inflicted on detainees appears to be intended to punish them for their involvement, or suspected involvement, in the protests," Amnesty said.

The unrest started Feb. 4 when students demonstrated against a lack of security at their universities, sparking nationwide marches organized by political opposition leaders eight days later over issues including rising crime, shortages of basic goods and accelerating inflation. The unrest has persisted almost nightly as protesters clash with the National Guard and armed groups that support President Nicolas Maduro.

The government and members of the opposition must make a commitment to human rights and the rule of law, according to the report, "Venezuela: Human Rights at Risk Amid Protests." Amnesty based its findings on interviews with government officials, human rights organizations and lawyers, alleged victims of abuse and witnesses of violence during protests.

Venezuela's Information Ministry didn't respond to a telephone call and e-mail message seeking comment on the report, which was made available in Spanish to reporters yesterday under embargo.

### **'Cruel Treatment'**

The government is investigating two cases of torture and 75 of "cruel treatment," the Public Prosecutor's office said yesterday in an e-mailed report, adding that 17 members of state security forces had been arrested.

"Human rights are respected in Venezuela," Public Prosecutor Luisa Ortega Diaz said on state television March 28. "We're going to investigate."

More than 550 people have been wounded during the unrest, including anti-government protesters, Maduro supporters and bystanders, according to the London-based human rights watchdog. Eight members of the National Guard are among the

dead, Amnesty said.

Amnesty since Feb. 12 has received reports of the use of pellet guns and tear gas shot directly at protesters at short range and without warning. Such practices violate international standards and have resulted in the death of at least one protester, it said. Demonstrators detained by government forces at times have been denied medical care and access to lawyers, Amnesty said.

### **'Chemical Toxins'**

"Amnesty views with worry the use of chemical toxins in high concentrations," the non-governmental organization said. It recommended that all government security forces receive training on the correct use of force in protests and that operational plans to control public order be changed to comply with United Nations norms.

Amnesty called on Venezuela's government to conduct an "exhaustive, independent and impartial" investigation into all reports of human rights violations and guarantee that detained protesters have access to lawyers, family members and medical care.

Amnesty expressed concern about Maduro's March 5 statement urging supporters to take to the streets and stop opposition protests as well as the use of barricades by protesters and pro-

government forces to shut down city avenues.

Elected last April to succeed Hugo Chavez, who died a month earlier from cancer, Maduro is struggling to slow the world's fastest inflation and stimulate gross domestic product that according to analysts polled by Bloomberg will contract in 2014. The economic woes put into question past gains that have benefited the poorest of society, according to Amnesty.

"The grave situation the country faces today could have been avoided if the government had prioritized the promotion and protection of human rights, strengthened institutions that support the rule of law and fought high indexes of criminality," it wrote.

### **'Electric Shocks'**

The Human Rights Center at the Andres Bello Catholic University in Caracas is aware of 30 cases of torture or bad treatment in Venezuela since protests started, Beatriz Borjas, a lawyer at the organization, said by telephone yesterday, adding that 27 of the cases involved students detained by state security forces.

"There are two cases that involved electric shocks, two cases that involved pepper gas and another two cases where they were doused with gasoline," she said. "We've found there to be

systematic conduct on the part of the state to inflict inhumane treatment on detainees because of similar reports from different days and detention centers.”

Marco Coello, an 18-year-old student in Caracas, was detained Feb. 12 and tortured by security forces after participating in a march for the first time, his mother, Doris Coello, said today by telephone. After being detained by plain clothes officials who did not identify themselves, he was taken to a basement and at gun point told to sign a confession stating that he had burned cars after the protest, she said.

The Public Prosecutor’s press office didn’t immediately respond to telephone messages left by [Bloomberg News](#) seeking comment on the allegations.

“They told him that they would kill him if he didn’t sign it,” she said, basing her account on conversations with her son. “He started to cry, but he wouldn’t sign it. They then wrapped him in foam sheets and started to hit him with rods and a fire extinguisher. Later, they doused him with gasoline, stating that they would then have evidence to charge him.”

Her son remains in jail, and authorities by law have until the end of the day today to file formal charges or release him, she said.

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