

Venezuela Expels Human Rights Watch Director for “Meddling Illegally”

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Mérida, September 19, 2008 (venezuelanalysis.com)- The Venezuelan government expelled two employees of the U.S.-based NGO Human Rights Watch (HRW), Americas Director José Miguel Vivanco and Americas Deputy Director Daniel Wilkinson, after the two presented a report that praised Venezuela’s 1999 Constitution but harshly criticized the “government’s willful disregard for the institutional guarantees and fundamental rights that make democratic participation possible.” In a press release, the Venezuelan Foreign Relations Ministry said Vivanco and Wilkinson “have done violence to the constitution” and “assaulted the institutions” of Venezuela by “meddling illegally in the internal affairs of our country.”

The ministry also said the HRW report is linked to the “unacceptable strategy of aggression” of the United States government. The ministry said the expulsion of Vivanco and Wilkinson was in the interest of “national sovereignty” and “the defense of the people against aggressions by international factors.”...

HRW’s report, [see excerpts below] titled “A Decade Under Chávez: Political Intolerance and Lost Opportunities for Advancing Human Rights in Venezuela,” says the two-day coup against President Hugo Chávez in April 2002 was the “most dramatic setback” to the human rights guarantees of the 1999 Constitution, but that the Chávez administration has since used the coup as a pretext to undercut those rights. Specifically, the government has engaged in “discrimination on political grounds,” “open disregard for the principle of separation of powers,” and has “undercut journalists’ freedom of expression, workers’ freedom of association, and civil society’s ability to promote human rights in Venezuela,” according to the report, which bases its conclusions on interviews conducted over the past two years. According to a press release from the U.S.-based Venezuelan Information Office (VIO), the HRW report portrays isolated incidents in Venezuela as though they were common occurrences, and “reads like the talking points of Venezuela’s discredited opposition. The VIO further pointed out that the “most fundamental” human rights to food, education, and health care have been expanded in Venezuela, and that this has been recognized by the United Nations Development Program.

The Venezuelan representative in the Inter-American Human Rights Court, Germán Saltrón, said the accusations of political discrimination in the report are contradicted by the fact that the people who participated in the coup against Chávez in April 2002 were granted amnesty.

The president of the Venezuelan National Assembly, Cilia Flores, declared Thursday that

“those who denounce that in Venezuela there is no freedom of expression do so exercising their freedom of expression.” Flores further denounced the cases in which “foreigners in Venezuela abuse the freedom of expression by lying unabashedly.”

National Assembly deputy Tulio Jiménez said the HRW report was carefully timed to influence Venezuela’s upcoming regional and local elections, and to cover up the coup plot that was recently discovered. “[The report] seeks to make banal the plans to assassinate the president,” said Jiménez.

The HRW report comes two months before Venezuela’s regional and local elections, which both the Chávez administration and the opposition have said are crucial for defining the course of the country in the remaining five years of Chávez’s presidency.

HRW has issued reports that are critical of the Chávez administration in the months leading up to crucial Venezuelan elections in the past, raising suspicion that the reports seek to sway Venezuelan voters against the president.

In June, July, and August 2004, two months prior to the referendum on Chávez’s mandate in office, HRW published several reports that claimed that there is no independence of the branches of power in the Venezuelan government. In October 2007, two months prior to Venezuela’s Constitutional Reform Referendum, HRW warned that if the reform is approved, the right to due process could be suspended in some situations by the president.

The most recent report and the expulsion of Vivanco and Wilkinson come during a time of relatively high tension between the U.S. and Venezuelan governments.

Last week, the Venezuelan government discovered a coup plot by retired Venezuelan military officers, and U.S. Ambassador Patrick Duddy was expelled. The U.S. responded by dismissing Venezuelan Ambassador Bernardo Alvarez and reiterating its accusations that the Venezuelan government facilitates drug trafficking and has links to terrorist groups.

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