



Embassy of the Bolivarian Republic of Venezuela to the UK and Ireland

Fact Sheet:

THE HUMANISATION OF VENEZUELAN PRISONS

Prisons in Venezuela

When President Chavez was elected in 1998, one of the most serious issues the new government faced was tackling the notoriously violent, overcrowded and corrupt prison system. However, Venezuela was far from unique in Latin America where crime and incarceration rates rocketed throughout the 1980's and 90's in line with growing poverty as a result of harsh neoliberal policies. The Chavez government carried out a comprehensive study of the problems in the system in 2005, and activated its Prison Humanisation Program in 2006.

Prison Humanisation Programme

To address the concerns of prison conditions, the government launched the Prison Humanisation Programme in 2006. The programme aims to promote “ethical, moral and social values” and foment “social reintegration”¹.

The plan seeks to create (1) new **institutional structure**, with an efficient organisational framework, rules, and procedures; (2) appropriate prison **infrastructure**, in line with the size of the prison population, with all the basic services needed for a decent existence; and (3) **comprehensive attention**, providing inmates awaiting trial and convicts alike with the conditions and tools needed to develop their potential and capacity.

¹Press and Communications Office of the Embassy of the Bolivarian Republic of Venezuela in the United States / June 29, 2010 <http://venezuela-us.org/2010/06/29/venezuelan-government-works-to-transform-the-prison-system/>

The plan involves all the country's prisons and is intended to reduce violence within them, improve health conditions, and encourage the social reincorporation of inmates.

The plan has also introduced structural changes in prison staff training, and it will implement a high-technology solution to strengthen prison security and custody. The plan also provides for comprehensive programs for inmates, providing assistance in the areas of health, nutrition, education, recreation, and job training and skill acquisition; it has also provided vehicles for prisoner transfers and other services to foster the human dimension inside Venezuela's prisons.

The Ministry of People's Power for the Interior and Justice, through its General Directorate for Human Rights, has appointed human rights delegates at all prisons nationwide, together with the detention centres located in some police stations, to provide a swift response to outbreaks of violence and other complaints lodged by inmates.

Recent developments in the programme

Recent reforms and developments have led to a significant reduction in prison violence and improved conditions for inmates.

Improving safety – seizing weapons

In 2008, efficiency in confiscating weapons was enhanced, with the plan producing total seizures of 2,213 bladed weapons, 113 pistols, 107 revolvers, 445 improvised firearms, 43 shotguns, two



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submachine guns, 60 grenades, and 5,432 rounds of ammunition.² To prevent the entry of weapons, drugs, explosives, and other prohibited items into 27 of the country's prisons, the installation of X-ray machines, 40 weapons detectors, and 37 digital closed-circuit TV systems for the exclusive monitoring of prison entryways are planned.³

Ensuring swift justice

With regard to the procedural delays that affect the trials of detainees in Venezuela, the Prisons Commissions were set up at several detention centres in order to undertake case reviews. An itinerant judges program was established to ensure effective judicial oversight during the control and trial phases of cases against people who remain detained while facing trial.

Protecting human rights

The Human Rights Ombudsman has set up Human Rights Defence Councils within prisons to resolve community problems, such as issues related to the rights to health, education, nutrition, humane treatment, housing, etc. These Councils organise and represent all the inmates of different prison blocks, who can present to them their recommendations. The Councils offer a direct communications channel between representatives of the institutions and the prison community, providing a forum for dialogue, agreements, and commitments for resolving prison conflicts.⁴

² Inter-American Commission on Human Rights: http://www.cidh.org/countryrep/Venezuela2009eng/VE09CHAPVIENG.htm#_ftnref171

³ Inter-American Commission on Human Rights: http://www.cidh.org/countryrep/Venezuela2009eng/VE09CHAPVIENG.htm#_ftnref171

⁴ Inter-American Commission on Human Rights: http://www.cidh.org/countryrep/Venezuela2009eng/VE09CHAPVIENG.htm#_ftnref171

Visiting rights

The traditional practice of allowing prisoners visitors on weekends only is to be abolished to establish a system whereby relatives may visit inmates any day of the week.

Tackling overcrowding

To tackle the problem of overcrowding, the Prison Humanisation Plan aims to build 15 Prison Communities which will ensure inmates their rights and social services.

New education opportunities

In June 2010, the Venezuelan Ministry for Internal Affairs and Justice signed an inter-institutional cooperation accord with the National Experimental Polytechnical University of the Armed Forces (UNEFA) to provide vocational training, including cooperative business management, to the nation's prisoners as well as training in human rights for prison personnel.

Other courses included the philosophy and sociology of jails, laws governing public functionaries in jails, theory and practice of penitentiary management, conflict resolution, and human rights. Among the students were 18 lawyers, 12 psychologists, eight criminologists, nine social workers, and a doctor who work in the Venezuelan prison system.

System of Penitentiary Symphony Orchestras

Following the world-wide success of El Sistema's youth orchestras, the System of Penitentiary Symphony Orchestras was established in 2007 to reduce violence in jails and prepare inmates for their reintegration into society through the learning, practice, and enjoyment of music.



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This music education program is funded by the Inter-American Development Bank, and carried out by the State Foundation for the National System of Youth and Children's Orchestras of Venezuela, and the Ministry of People's Power for Interior Affairs and Justice.

The inmates were interviewed so as to know their temperament, nature, and morphology. Based on this information, they were assigned a musical instrument.⁵

Other cultural opportunities

Penitentiary Championship Sports Games

Annual championships took place in basketball, softball, indoor football. The best regional teams are to be selected for a national championship.⁶

Bicentenary Penitentiary Theatre

In August 2010, 132 inmates (92 men and 42 women) from seven different prisons took part in various performances at the National Library in Caracas.⁷

⁵ <http://www.fesnojiv.gob.ve/en/penitentiary-symphony-orchestras.html>

⁶ Venezuelan Ministry of Justice:
<http://www.dnsp.gob.ve/?q=node/53/¬icia=466&mes=Junio&anno=2010>

⁷ Venezuelan Ministry of Justice:
<http://www.dnsp.gob.ve/?q=node/53/¬icia=482&mes=Agosto&anno=2010>