

VENEZUELA

Amid an ongoing economic, political, and humanitarian crisis, reported attacks on higher education decreased during this reporting period. However, the government continued to repress protests and detain students. Reports of military use of schools increased slightly from the previous reporting period.

Context

Political violence and insecurity increased during this reporting period. In May 2018, Nicolás Maduro won a second presidential term in elections marred by irregularities and without international independent oversight.²²²⁰ On January 23, 2019, Venezuela's opposition-led National Assembly declared Juan Guaidó, the leader of the legislative body, interim president. More than 50 governments, including the United States, Canada and most South American governments, recognized the change in leadership.²²²¹ However, by the end of the reporting period, the country remained at a political impasse.²²²²

Many Venezuelans faced dire living conditions during this reporting period. According to a survey conducted by a consortium of Venezuelan universities, poverty rose from 48 percent in 2014 to 87 percent in 2017.²²²³ Extreme rates of inflation, over two million percent per year at the time of writing, impacted residents' ability to afford food and access healthcare.²²²⁴ The government repeatedly limited deliveries of humanitarian aid from international organizations; a first shipment arrived in April 2019, but a comprehensive large-scale humanitarian response led by the UN had yet to be implemented.²²²⁵ Human Rights Watch reported that the crisis had contributed to high levels of violence, with security forces having killed nearly 7,000 people for "resisting authority" in 2018 and the first five months of 2019.²²²⁶ According to the Venezuelan Violence Observatory, 5,364 children and young people died in 2018 as a result of police violence.²²²⁷

Approximately 4.8 million Venezuelan refugees and migrants were living outside the country as of December 2019.²²²⁸

The UN estimated that, as of April 2019, more than one million children had stopped attending school due to rising transportation costs and cuts to school feeding programs.²²²⁹ In addition, rising rates of inflation decreased the value of teachers' salaries, leading some to stop going to work and forcing some schools to close.²²³⁰ In border areas, many Venezuelan children attended Colombian schools, often using dangerous, informal crossings controlled by non-state armed groups to enter into the neighboring country.²²³¹ According to Human Rights Watch and other sources, children were at an increased risk of forced recruitment in these border regions, not only in Colombia by non-state armed groups, including the Ejército de Liberación Nacional (National Liberation Army) (ELN) and the Fuerzas Armadas Revolucionarias de Colombia—Ejército del Pueblo (Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia-People's Army) (FARC-EP) dissident groups, but also in Venezuela.²²³² The ELN and FARC-EP dissident groups, traditionally found in Colombia, maintained their presence across the border in Venezuela during this period.²²³³ According to local NGO Fundación Redes, the non-state armed group Fuerzas Bolivarianas de Liberación (Bolivarian Liberation Forces) also forcibly recruited out-of-school children in Venezuela's border states.²²³⁴

In April 2018, *AFP* reported that the University of Zulia in Maracaibo reduced courses to three days a week in order to minimize the economic burden of travel to the university.²²³⁵ In April 2018, the director of the University of Oriente in Cumaná stated that 25 percent of teaching staff and 40 percent of students had emigrated since 2016.²²³⁶ Professors and students at the Central University of Venezuela in Caracas also told *AFP* that insecurity had increased on campus.²²³⁷ More broadly, police, military, and intelligence officers continued to arrest university students and professors and violently repress their protests, sometimes aided by pro-government armed groups (known as "colectivos"), according to the Inter-American Commission on Human Rights and the UN.²²³⁸

Attacks on school students, teachers, and other education personnel

During the 2017-2019 reporting period, GCPEA collected one report of an attack on school students, teachers, or other education personnel. On September 16, 2019, teachers reportedly marched in Caracas towards the Ministry of Education to protest against high student absentee rates and demand higher salaries and improved school infrastructure. Local and regional media reported allegations that, as teachers passed the line of National Guard and National Bolivarian Police, pro-government armed civilians fired seven shots in the air above the teachers to disperse the protest.²²³⁹

In addition, the Venezuelan Observatory of Social Conflict documented at least 388 protests related to education in 2018,²²⁴⁰ and 925 education-related protests in 2019.²²⁴¹ The same organization also reported that, in 2018, 14 people were killed in the context of protests;²²⁴² in 2019, the number reported was 67.²²⁴³ However, it is unknown whether any of the reported killings occurred during protests related to education, or whether those protests covered primary and secondary schooling or higher education.

Military use of schools and universities

During the 2017-2019 reporting period, GCPEA collected approximately five reports of military use of schools and universities. No reports of such incidents were collected during the prior reporting period, which covered 2013-2017. In 2018 and 2019, non-state armed groups, pro-government armed groups, and Venezuelan National Guard forces used, or threatened to use, schools and universities for military purposes in several states across the country, including two reported incidents in Mérida state.

In 2018, Fundación Redes, a local NGO, received allegations that members of an armed group entered schools in Apure, Amazonas, Barinas, Bolívar, Táchira, and Zulia states. While occupying these schools, the armed group reportedly forced students to participate in recreational activities and perform plays that portrayed the armed group in a heroic light, and distributed materials to students about the group's history, philosophy, and political aims.²²⁴⁴ The same organization alleges that members of armed groups entered at least 325 schools in 2019, in Amazonas, Apure, and Táchira, all states along the Colombian border.²²⁴⁵

On April 13, 2018, a group of at least 100 people calling themselves the “Socialist Commune Battle and Victory Unit” reportedly occupied the University of Los Andes’ land, away from the main campus. The University used the farmland, located in El Vigía, Mérida state, for research and academic practicums, according to Aula Abierta, a Venezuelan NGO and academic freedom monitor.²²⁴⁶

In 2019, GCPEA compiled four reported cases of military use of schools:

- Local media reported that on an unspecified date between February 14 and 24, 2019, at least 17 unidentified armed individuals allegedly engaged in military training with rifles in Vuelvan Caras primary school in San Fernando de Apure, Apure state.²²⁴⁷ A journalist claimed to identify at least one well-known member of an armed group through photos posted on social media.²²⁴⁸
- Local media *RetoPaís* reported that the national director of Fe y Alegría, a worldwide network of Catholic schools that runs 180 primary and middle schools in Venezuela, made a public complaint after a member of the National Guard and approximately 80 members of the military force requested to use San Javier del Valle school in the city of Mérida for military exercises from February 22 to February 24, 2019. The school director rejected the request and, in his public statement, referred to other requests made by officers to use Fe y Alegría schools for armed military exercises.²²⁴⁹
- On February 23, 2019, 100 pro-government militia members reportedly occupied a school in Ureña, Táchira state. International media outlet *Alianza News* reported the armed actors were in place to reinforce the border closure with Colombia instated around that time.²²⁵⁰
- On May 24, 2019, *CNN* reported that members of a colectivo were running a radio station from a small room in a primary school in Caracas.²²⁵¹

Child recruitment at, or on the way to or from, school

Fundación Redes, a local NGO, alleged that in 2018 and 2019 non-state armed groups entered schools, as well as visited students’ homes, in rural areas of states along Venezuela’s border with Colombia, such as in Delicias and San Antonio towns, Táchira state. Based on fieldwork and interviews with teachers, the organization reports that the armed groups collected students’ information and gave them gifts and school supplies in an attempt to persuade the students to join their ranks.²²⁵²

Sexual violence at, or on the way to or from, school or university

In 2017, Human Rights Watch reported the sexual assault of a female student detained by police in Aragua state.²²⁵³ No other reports were collected during the reporting period. Although the UN documented cases of sexual violence while political opponents and their relatives were detained²²⁵⁴ and Human Rights Watch reported cases of non-state armed groups abducting and sexually abusing girls,²²⁵⁵ the status of survivors as students, teachers, or academics was unknown.

Attacks on higher education

During the 2017-2019 reporting period, GCPEA collected at least 35 reports of attacks on higher education. Attacks on higher education decreased during this reporting period as compared to the 2013-2017 period, when hundreds of students were killed, injured, or detained and violent repression of protests occurred multiple times per year. Attacks peaked in 2014 and 2017 when police and National Guard forces, often accompanied by colectivos, repressed massive student-led protests.²²⁵⁶

In 2017, GCPEA collected 22 reports of attacks on higher education, primarily consisting of arrests and detention of university students and staff, and violent repression of protests.²²⁵⁷ The NGO Aula Abierta documented at least 17 cases of arbitrary detention of academics in 2017 for a range of reasons, from publishing articles critical of the government, to participating in protests.²²⁵⁸ The same organization recorded the deaths of 19 university students, the arrest of 339 university students, and the repression of at least 92 protests, organized by the academic community or attended by a large component of this community, all in 2017.²²⁵⁹ However, GCPEA could not confirm if other sources also reported these same cases or whether these incidents met GCPEA criteria for attacks on education.

In 2018-2019, GCPEA collected reports of 14 attacks on higher education students and personnel, related to violent repression of protests, detention, and threats. This was a marked decrease from 2017, probably related to an overall reduction in the number of higher education protests which peaked in previous years, as well as a general shift from one- or few-issue protests against specific government policies, including those curbing academic freedom, to all-encompassing protests against government abuses and the humanitarian crisis.²²⁶⁰

GCPEA gathered five reports of attacks on higher education in 2018, all related to protest repression.²²⁶¹ Aula Abierta also recorded at least 51 incidents of insecurity on university campuses across the country between January and September 2018.²²⁶² Examples included:

- Bolivarian National Intelligence Services arrested two University of Los Andes law students in Mérida, on March 5, 2018, according to Scholars at Risk and local media outlet *El Nacional*. The arrests were carried out shortly after the student leaders gave a television interview demanding authorities end transit strikes that prevented students from attending classes.²²⁶³
- On November 14, 2018, state security forces reportedly raided the University of Carabobo, in Valencia, and threw teargas at students during student elections, according to Scholars at Risk. Prior to the elections, the Carabobo state governor reportedly imposed a state-appointed commission, which overturned the existing student electoral commission. The president of the student commission claimed to have received threats from the Carabobo governor before the raid.²²⁶⁴
- Scholars at Risk reported that on November 21, 2018, an estimated 400 students gathered at the Central University of Venezuela to protest poor learning conditions and the country's economic crisis. Hundreds of police and National Guard officers in riot gear reportedly barred students from leaving campus. Police eventually launched teargas at student protesters and students reportedly threw bottles and stones at police. At least a dozen students were injured by teargas.²²⁶⁵

In 2019, the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights reported the arbitrary detention of university personnel who criticized the government, as well as travel restrictions and the withholding of salaries.²²⁶⁶

GCPEA identified nine attacks on higher education in 2019, including threats and arrests.²²⁶⁷ During this period, university students and staff working at medical schools and university teaching hospitals were also targeted; GCPEA classified several of these incidents as attacks on education. Instances of higher education attacks include:

- The National Guard allegedly arrested a National Experimental University of Yaracuy professor on February 23, 2019, while he was organizing a protest to denounce violations of professors' labor rights in San Felipe, Yaracuy state, as reported by Aula Abierta.²²⁶⁸
- On February 23, 2019, the President of the Federation of University Centers at University of Carabobo in Valencia, Carabobo state, reported through his Twitter account that he, along with the dean and other student leaders, was detained at a police station after being stopped while traveling towards the Colombian border in a University of Carabobo bus.²²⁶⁹ Local media reported that the student leader had been detained in June that same year, allegedly as retaliation for the Federation of University Centers having taken its headquarters back from official groups several days earlier.²²⁷⁰
- On May 10, 2019, after breaking into the home of the president of the Association of Professors of the University of Los Andes, in Mérida, hooded and armed men reportedly painted a death threat on the wall. The Association had been advocating against violations of academics' labor rights, according to Aula Abierta.²²⁷¹
- According to local and regional media, on November 14, 2019, National Bolivarian Police and National Bolivarian Guard officers allegedly used teargas and pepper spray on students, immediately outside the Central University of Venezuela, to impede their protest from continuing towards the Plaza Venezuela, in Caracas. The student protesters reportedly responded by throwing stones and other objects at the officers. Reforms to university elections and greater university autonomy were reported as the reasons for the march.²²⁷²

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