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**STATUS OF HUMAN RIGHTS IN THE BOLIVARIAN REPUBLIC OF VENEZUELA
FOR THE 54TH SESSION OF THE
UNIVERSAL PERIODIC REVIEW**

The European Centre for Law and Justice (ECLJ) was founded in 1998 and is a non-governmental organization dedicated to promoting and protecting human rights around the world. The ECLJ also holds Special Consultative status before the United Nations Economic and Social Council. This report discusses the status of human rights in the Bolivarian Republic of Venezuela (Venezuela) for the 54th session of the Universal Periodic Review (UPR).

www.ECLJ.org
4, quai Koch
67000 Strasbourg, France
Phone: +33 (0)3.88.24.94.40

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Background

1. Venezuela is a country located in South America and has a population of approximately 34.8 million people.¹ The population is predominantly Christian, with approximately 84.5% of the population identifying as Catholic, 4% as Protestant Christian, and 11.5% as nonreligious.²

2. Venezuela's last review was held on January 25, 2022.³ As a result of the review, Venezuela received 328 recommendations, 221 of which it accepted.⁴ It was recommended by the United States of America, but only noted by Venezuela, that the government "[e]nd immediately all undue interference with freedoms of expression, religion, association, and peaceful assembly. Allow all independent media, religious institutions, civil society organizations, and humanitarian organizations to operate without undue restrictions or threats."⁵ Additionally, it was recommended by Liechtenstein, and supported by Venezuela, that the government "[e]stablish specialized institutions and policies to document cases of migrants, women, children and the most vulnerable becoming victims of human trafficking, forced prostitution and sexual slavery, and to protect them from such occurrences."⁶ In our last report, we also expressed concern over the persecution of Christians and the problem of human trafficking.

3. In its 2026 World Watch List, Open Doors ranked Venezuela as the 69th worst country for Christians.⁷ In Venezuela, the government cracks down on all views of dissent, including targeting Christians who speak out against human rights violations committed by the government.⁸

Legal Framework

Christian Persecution

4. Under Article 59 of the Constitution of Venezuela:

The State guarantees the freedom of cult and religion. All persons have the right to profess their religious faith and cults, and express their beliefs in private or in public, by teaching and other practices, provided such beliefs are not contrary to moral, good customs and public order. The autonomy and independence of religious confessions and churches is likewise guaranteed, subject only to such limitations as may derive from this Constitution and the law. Father and Mother are entitled to have their sons and daughters receive religious education in accordance with their convictions.⁹

5. Venezuela is a party to the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR).¹⁰ Under Article 18 of the ICCPR:

1. Everyone shall have the right to freedom of thought, conscience and religion. This right shall include freedom to have or to adopt a religion or belief of his

choice, and freedom, either individually or in community with others and in public or private, to manifest his religion or belief in worship, observance, practice and teaching.

2. No one shall be subject to coercion which would impair his freedom to have or to adopt a religion or belief of his choice.¹¹

Human Trafficking

6. Under Article 54 of the Constitution of Venezuela, “[n]o person shall be subjected to slavery or servitude. Traffic of persons, in particular women, children and adolescents, in any form, shall be subject to the penalties prescribes by law.”¹²

7. Under Article 174 of the Penal Code, “[a]nyone who reduces a person to slavery or subjects him to a similar condition shall be punished by imprisonment from six to twelve years. In equal penalty will incur those who intervene in the slave trade.”¹³

8. Additionally, Article 8 of the ICCPR states that “[n]o one shall be held in slavery; slavery and the slave-trade in all their forms shall be prohibited. No one shall be held in servitude.”¹⁴

9. Further, Venezuela is a party to the Protocol to Prevent, Suppress and Punish Trafficking in Persons, Especially Women and Children, supplementing the United Nations Convention against Transnational Organized Crime.¹⁵ Under Article 9, section 1 of this Protocol:

1. States Parties shall establish comprehensive policies, programmes and other measures:

(a) To prevent and combat trafficking in persons; and

(b) To protect victims of trafficking in persons, especially women and children, from revictimization.¹⁶

Christian Persecution

10. In our last report, we expressed concern over the targeting of Christians. Since its last review, the government has continued to crack down and go after Christians, particularly those who speak out against the human rights abuses being carried out by the regime.

11. For more than a quarter century, Venezuela has been under the control of authoritarian regimes. The government’s efforts to maintain control have resulted in massive corruption and a crackdown on human rights defenders, including clergy, who speak out against the human rights violations being committed by the government. The government has responded to dissidents by intimidating, harassing, kidnapping, and arresting those who criticize the government. For example, in May 2026, a Christian pastor received summons from the country’s security agency. He was led to believe that he was being asked questions as a witness to a potential crime, but was instead detained for eight days. During those eight days, he was held in poor conditions and suffered psychological abuse. He was also taunted by the guards about his faith. He shared that:

They constantly claimed that Christians are naïve for believing in God in the twenty-first century. There was one person who, approximately every thirty minutes, repeated exactly the same speech: that faith would not save me, that Christians are foolish and that God would not intervene.¹⁷

12. The government has targeted religious clergy, particularly priests from the Catholic Church, by not renewing the residence permits of religious personnel. Additionally, officers from the Bolivarian National Intelligence Service (SEBIN) have targeted and harassed religious leaders who spoke out against President Maduro and his regime. For example, in August 2024, Father Elvis Cabaracas was arbitrarily arrested by members of the Bolivarian National Guard while praying in a chapel during a protest against the regime. He was later released.¹⁸

13. The government has even gone after churches for distributing humanitarian aid to those in need. In July 2024, officials from the Bolivarian National Guard entered the church of San Baltasar de Cumaná during mass. The authorities informed Monsignor Jesús González Zárate that only the government is permitted to distribute aid to those in need. Authorities then closed the church for this violation.¹⁹

14. President Maduro has also used his power to create division among Protestant churches. Protestant Churches that support the regime, like the Evangelical Christian Movement for Venezuela and the National Religious Council, receive preferential treatment from the government. President Maduro even instituted financial incentives to pastors who spoke favorably of the regime and were provided with equipment and funds. However, Protestant churches who speak out against the regime and its human rights violations are discriminated against, harassed, and intimidated.²⁰ One religious leader in Venezuela shared that:

Over the past year, I have received anonymous threats over the phone and at my front door. I have faced extensive surveillance, but up until now everything has just been intimidation. There have been a few exceptions, the church's pick-up truck was stolen, one of the church leader's homes was burgled, and my assistant was physically abused. In each of these cases, every time something happened to a member of my team, they sent messages to me claiming responsibility. They have never done anything to me, no one has put me in prison, but they always send messages telling me where I am, where my wife is, and what I am doing . . . it is clear that there are state security entities, at least at the regional level, involved in this.²¹

15. On January 3, 2026, President Nicolas Maduros was removed from office by the United States. While many hoped that his removal would end the authoritarian regime, the fact is that the Socialist Union of Venezuela Party remains entrenched in power and continues to carry out Maduro's objectives. In fact, many leaders who have helped Maduro still remain in power. Further, twenty-three of the twenty-five states in Venezuela are led by governors belonging to the United Socialist Party of Venezuela.²² This means that there is great uncertainty among Christians in Venezuela, since Maduro has been ousted, that authorities that have supported Maduro are more likely to be sensitive to anything that could question their legitimacy, including Christians calling out the regime's human rights violations.

Human Trafficking

16. In our previous report, we also recommended that Venezuela adopt comprehensive anti-human trafficking legislation. Unfortunately, Venezuela has failed to do that. Comprehensive anti-trafficking legislation would address all aspects of human trafficking, not just criminalize it. Again, Venezuela has an obligation under the Protocol to Prevent, Suppress and Punish Trafficking in Persons Especially Women and Children, supplementing the United Nations Convention against Transnational Organized Crime to both combat human trafficking and protect victims of human trafficking.²³ We also reported that an estimated 5.4 million Venezuelans have left the country in search of a better life due to the collapsing economy in Venezuela. Those fleeing Venezuela are vulnerable to exploitation by human traffickers who falsely promise good-paying jobs and a better life. As we will demonstrate below, Venezuela has failed to combat human trafficking in any meaningful way, despite accepting a recommendation by Liechtenstein to “[e]stablish specialized institutions and policies to document cases of migrants, women, children and the most vulnerable becoming victims of human trafficking, forced prostitution and sexual slavery, and to protect them from such occurrences.”²⁴

17. Since its last review, Venezuela remains a hub for human trafficking in the region. Victims are trafficked internationally and domestically for forced labor in agriculture, construction, and domestic sectors. Additionally, women and girls are exploited and trafficked for sex. Often, this is done by gangs, like Tren de Aragua, who traffic women into prostitution rings. The human trafficking industry in Venezuela is massive, and in 2024 alone, human trafficking generated \$2.6 billion in revenue.²⁵ That same year, it was reported that an estimated 364,500 Venezuelans are living in conditions of modern slavery, with 188,000 of them being exploited for forced labor, 70,000 sexually exploited, and 105,000 forced into marriage.²⁶ Unfortunately, that same year, the government reported zero investigations and zero human trafficking convictions.²⁷

18. Venezuela’s human trafficking problem is fueled by the deteriorating economic situation in Venezuela. As stated above, millions of people have fled the country out of desperation in search of a better life. Since then, an estimated 2.9 million more people have fled.²⁸ Traffickers exploit these individuals who are desperate to flee because they are vulnerable to deception, extortion, and coercion. Illicit gangs will offer individuals seeking to leave the country “travel packages” to be taken from Venezuela to other countries like Peru, Colombia, and the United States of America. However, these migrants are often exploited by gangs. It has been estimated that approximately 33% of Venezuelans who are traveling to the United States have been sexually abused, and gangs have made an estimated \$1.45 billion from the sexual exploitation of Venezuelan migrants in Colombia, Peru, and the United States of America.²⁹

19. Additionally, human trafficking for forced marriage is another way human traffickers are able to exploit women and girls in Venezuela. Ongoing economic hardship, displacement, and instability have an increased risk of trafficking. Human traffickers use deception to deceive their victims with false promises of employment and education before being forced into marriage. These marriages often involve physical and sexual abuse.

20. In Venezuela, human trafficking victims rely on NGOs for aid and shelter, as the government currently operates zero shelters for human trafficking victims. Organizations like CSEVI, COOPI, PUI, and Solidarités International, have stepped up to help victims as the

government has failed to provide aid and shelter. These organizations work to meet the needs of individuals and provide victims with psychological help, case management, legal guidance, and shelter homes. Since June 2022, CESVI has provided service for more than 13,000 women and children.³⁰

21. As demonstrated above, Venezuela has been unable to combat human trafficking in any meaningful way and has failed to adequately investigate cases and prosecute human traffickers. In addition to failing to combat human trafficking, Venezuela has also been ineffective in providing aid to victims of human trafficking. Currently, the government operates no shelters for human trafficking victims, and the government lacks the procedures to identify victims of human trafficking. The little aid that is available to victims of human trafficking is provided by various NGOs. However, as we noted in the previous section regarding churches distributing aid, the government heavily restricts the actions of NGOs to provide humanitarian aid.³¹

Recommendations

22. We urge Venezuela to guarantee and strengthen protections for religious freedom by ending the harassment, surveillance, and intimidation of Christian leaders and congregants, especially those who speak against the human rights violations being carried out by the government. Venezuela must uphold its obligations under its own Constitution and the ICCPR to ensure that everyone has the right to practice their religion without fear of harassment and intimidation.

23. We urge Venezuela to enforce its human trafficking law by investigating cases of human trafficking and ensure the successful conviction of human traffickers. Additionally, the government must implement standard operating procedures for identifying victims of human trafficking. Further, because NGOs are already providing aid for victims, we ask that the government not only allow these organizations to expand their work, but work with them as well to ensure that victims get the help and assistance they need.

¹ Heather D. Heckel, *Venezuela*, BRITANNICA, <https://www.britannica.com/place/Venezuela> (last updated July 14, 2026).

² *Id.*

³ *Universal Periodic Review – Venezuela (Bolivarian Republic of)*, OHCHR (Jan. 26, 2022), <https://www.ohchr.org/en/hr-bodies/upr/ve-index>.

⁴ *Venezuela – Infographic*, OHCHR, (Dec. 23, 2022), <https://www.ohchr.org/sites/default/files/documents/hrbodies/upr/sessions/session40/ve/2022-12-23/Venezuela.pdf>.

⁵ UPR of Venezuela (Bolivarian Republic of)(3rd Cycle-40th Session) Thematic List of Recommendations, OHCHR, https://www.ohchr.org/sites/default/files/documents/hrbodies/upr/sessions/session40/ve/2022-09-19/UPR40_Venezuela_Thematic_List_of_Recommendations.doc (last visited July 14, 2026), [hereinafter OCHR UPR of Venezuela].

⁶ *Id.* at 13.

⁷ OPEN DOORS, *WWL 2026 Compilation of all Main Documents* (Jan. 2026), <https://www.opendoors.org/research-reports/wwl-documentation/WWL2026-Compilation-of-main-documents.pdf>.

⁸ OPEN DOORS, *Venezuela: Persecution Dynamics* (Feb. 2025), <https://www.opendoors.org/research-reports/country-dossiers/WWL-2025-Venezuela-Persecution-Dynamics>.

⁹ CONSTITUTION OF THE BOLIVARIAN REPUBLIC OF VENEZUELA rev. 2009, art. 59, https://www.constituteproject.org/constitution/Venezuela_2009.

¹⁰ *Ratification Status for Venezuela (Bolivarian Republic of)*, OHCHR, https://tbinternet.ohchr.org/_layouts/15/TreatyBodyExternal/Treaty.aspx?CountryID=191&Lang=EN (last visited July 14, 2026).

¹¹ *International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights* art. 18, OHCHR (Dec. 16, 1966), 999 U.N.T.S. 171, <https://www.ohchr.org/en/instruments-mechanisms/instruments/international-covenant-civil-and-political-rights> [hereinafter ICCPR].

¹² CONSTITUTION OF THE BOLIVARIAN REPUBLIC OF VENEZUELA rev. 2009, art. 54, https://www.constituteproject.org/constitution/Venezuela_2009.

¹³ PENAL CODE OF VENEZUELA art. 174, <https://antislaverylaw.ac.uk/country/venezuela/?dataset=adld> (last visited July 14, 2026).

¹⁴ ICCPR art. 8, *supra* note 11.

¹⁵ *Chapter XVIII Penal Matters 12. A Protocol to Prevent, Suppress and Punish Trafficking in Persons, Especially Women and Children, Supplementing the United Nations Convention Against Transnational Organized Crime*, U.N. TREATY COLLECTION (NOV. 15, 2000), https://treaties.un.org/pages/ViewDetails.aspx?src=TREATY&mtsg_no=XVIII-12-a&chapter=18.

¹⁶ *Protocol to Prevent, Suppress and Punish Trafficking in Persons Especially Women and Children, Supplementing the United Nations Convention Against Transnational Organized Crime* art. 9 § 1, OHCHR (adopted Nov. 15, 2000), G.A. Res. 55/25, <https://www.ohchr.org/en/instruments-mechanisms/instruments/protocol-prevent-suppress-and-punish-trafficking-persons> [hereinafter Protocol].

¹⁷ “God Will Not Get You Out of Here”: A Pastor’s Experience of Detention in Venezuela, FORB IN FULL (June 7, 2026), <https://forbinfull.org/2026/07/06/god-will-not-get-you-out-of-here-a-pastors-experience-of-detention-in-venezuela>.

¹⁸ *General Briefing: Venezuela*, CHRISTIAN SOLIDARITY WORLDWIDE (May 29, 2025), <https://www.csw.org.uk/2025/05/29/report/6520/article.htm> [hereinafter CSW].

¹⁹ *GNB Assault on Monsignor Zárate Condemned for Bringing Humanitarian Aid to Victims of Cumanacoa*, NTN24 (July 16, 2024), <https://www.ntn24.com/noticias-actualidad/condenan-agresion-de-la-gnb-a-monsenor-zarate-por-llevar-ayuda-humanitaria-a-damnificados-de-cumanacoa-502285>.

²⁰ CSW, *supra* note 18.

²¹ *Self-Censorship and Social Control: The Situation of Freedom of Religion or Belief in Venezuela*, CHRISTIAN SOLIDARITY WORLDWIDE (Mar. 2026), <https://docs-eu.livesiteadmin.com/dc3e323f-351c-4172-800e-4e02848abf80/venezuela-report-march-2026---fixed.pdf>.

²² Anna Lee Stangl, *Maduro is out. What Next for Venezuela’s Christians?*, PREMIERE CHRISTIANITY (Jan. 8, 2026), <https://www.premierchristianity.com/opinion/maduro-is-out-what-next-for-venezuelas-christians/20763.article>.

²³ Protocol art. 9 § 1, *supra* note 16.

²⁴ OHCHR UPR of Venezuela, *supra* note 5.

²⁵ Antonio Mariá Delgado, *Human Trafficking of Venezuelans Explodes into \$2.6 Billion Industry, Report Says*, MIAMI HERALD (Sep. 11, 2025), <https://www.miamiherald.com/news/nation-world/world/americas/venezuela/article312055509.html>.

²⁶ *Id.*

²⁷ *Venezuela Trafficking Report*, ECOI (2024), <https://www.ecoi.net/en/document/2111790.html>.

²⁸ *Venezuela Situation*, UNHCR, <https://www.unhcr.org/us/emergencies/venezuela-situation> (last visited July 14, 2026).

²⁹ Delgado, *supra* note 25.

³⁰ *In Venezuela to Protect Women and Children Victims of Violence*, CESVI (Jan. 15, 2024), <https://cesvi.eu/news/in-venezuela-to-protect-women-and-children-victims-of-violence/>.

³¹ *Venezuela*, GLOBAL ORGANIZED CRIME INDEX, <https://ocindex.net/country/venezuela> (last visited July 14, 2026).