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## Venezuela: Smear campaign and threats from government officials against **Transparencia Venezuela**

Since 10 September 2018, the anti-corruption organisation **Transparencia Venezuela** has received several threats from government officials and has become the victim of a government-led smear campaign. These actions can be understood within a wider effort of the Venezuelan government to intimidate and silence individuals and organisation who denounce human rights violations and corruption of the Venezuelan government.

As the national chapter of the global human rights organisation Transparency International, [Transparencia Venezuela](#) promotes the elimination of corruption in the country by researching and analysing the national budget, public policies, development, private contracts and assessing the overall action of state officials in the fight against corruption. Recently, **Transparencia Venezuela** published a comprehensive report implicating the Venezuelan government in the international Odebrecht corruption scandal and denouncing the negligence of government officials in response to the current economic and political crisis.

On 10 September 2018, the Executive Director of **Transparencia Venezuela**, Mercedes De Freitas, participated in a meeting with the UN Security Council to discuss corruption practices in the Venezuelan government, and more generally the current crisis. Several UN delegations, including Nikki Haley, United States' representative, accused Venezuelan high officials of corruption and drug-trafficking crimes. After the meeting, government officials released threatening and stigmatising statements against participants of the meeting.

Later that day, President Nicolas Maduro announced during a national broadcast that his government would be taking actions against an “international smear campaign against Venezuela”. The President furthermore claimed that the international campaign talking about a humanitarian crisis in the country is led by human rights defenders and foreign governments to justify a military intervention or a terrorist attack in the country.

Pedro Carreño, representative in the National Constituent Assembly, dismissed the corruption allegations against Venezuelan officials during a speech on 12 September 2018. He also threatened government critics: “we can not let them prosecute our comrades in any arena (...) we have to end ... [them], we have to hurt them”<sup>1</sup>. The Minister of Penitentiary Affairs, Iris Varela, supported Pedro Carreño’s statement on Twitter and added “when are we, the revolutionaries, going to stop turning other cheek? [...] who keeps bothering us is going to pay and that is it”.<sup>2</sup>

On 13 September 2018, the state-controlled digital blog *Misión Verdad* (Truth Mission) ( posted an article referring to **Transparencia Venezuela** as an organisation funded and directed by the United States Government, the European Union and the finance fund KKR. The article claimed that the Executive Director of **Transparencia Venezuela** was participating in the UN Security Council meeting to reinforce an international attack against the Venezuelan government led by the U.S. government.

- 1 Original quote in Spanish: “No podemos dejar que persigan a ningún camarada en el terreno que sea... a los escuálidos hay que joderlos, hay que escoñetarlos”. Escoñetar: Venezuelan slang referring to harm someone in a physical and violent way.
- 2 Original quote in Spanish: “Totalmente de acuerdo con mi hermano Pedro Carreño. ¿Hasta cuándo vamos a poner los revolucionarios la otra mejilla. Escuálido que siga jodiendo la debe pagar y punto.”

This not the first time that the organisation Transparencia Venezuela or its Executive Director have been targeted directly or indirectly by high officials of the Venezuelan government. The organisation has documented at least 12 attacks between 2017 and 2018, especially because of their cooperation with international organisations and human rights protection mechanisms. Front Line Defenders has already reported on several [cyber attacks](#) against Transparencia Venezuela. The latest government attacks confirm a pattern of harassment against the organisation.

Venezuelan government officials regularly refer to human rights defenders as criminals or U.S. government allies against Venezuela's interest. Public officials, state controlled media channels and print media have stigmatised human rights defenders through persistent campaigns to discredit their work and accuse them of attempting to destabilise the country. The Inter-American Commission on Human Rights has established that the smear campaigns and attacks against human rights defenders in Venezuela not only affect their rights to personal integrity, honour and presumption of innocence, but can potentially increase the climate of intolerance against the work of human rights defenders.

Front Line Defenders expresses its concern about the attacks on Transparencia Venezuela's team and on the overall reputation of the organisation, which it believes to be an attempt to delegitimise its work in uncovering corruption in the country. Front Line Defenders condemns the strong language and threats formulated by high government officials against human rights defenders and opposition supporters, such attacks and smear campaigns not only impair the work of human rights defenders, but may further lead to an increase in violence against them.

#### **Front Line Defenders urges the authorities in Venezuela to:**

1. Immediately take measures to ensure that government officials state-controlled media and other public figures refrain from stigmatising the legitimate work of the human rights organisation Transparencia Venezuela and its members;
2. Carry out an immediate, thorough and impartial investigation into the defamatory statements and threats made by public officials with a view to publishing the results and bringing those responsible to justice in accordance with international standards;
3. Guarantee in all circumstances that all human rights defenders in Venezuela are able to carry out their legitimate human rights activities without fear of reprisals and free of all restrictions, including judicial harassment.