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## Venezuela: Human rights defender Marco Antonio Ponce target of ongoing smear campaign and incitement to violence

During the month of January, the Venezuelan Observatory of Social Conflict (OVCS) and in particular its president, **Marco Antonio Ponce**, experienced an intensification of threats against them. Since March 2014, when the incidents began, until 31 January 2019, the defender has documented at least 68 security incidents against him and his organisation.

Marco Antonio Ponce is the Coordinator of the Venezuelan Observatory of Social Conflict (Observatorio Venezolano de Conflictividad Social, OVCS), an organisation dedicated to the promotion of human rights and human dignity in Venezuela. The OVCS regularly monitors protests and demonstrations in Venezuela, as well as the State's response. Marco Antonio Ponce is a national and international expert on the right of peaceful assembly. As a result of the permanent smear campaign against him by high-level public officials, the Inter-American Commission of Human Rights (IACHR) granted him Precautionary Measures in March 2015.

Marco Antonio Ponce was recently informed that his organisation was included in an internal governmental report on National and International Information Agendas, prepared by the Ministry of Communication and Information. OVCS appeared in a section entitled 'Opposition Agenda: International Interference'. The human rights defender fears he and the organisation are classified by the government as "interventionist".

On 25 January 2019, as the most recent wave of social protests were ongoing, the government's online portal Misión Verdad published the article 'First Policy of the "Parallel Government": Building an Apartheid in Venezuela'. The article included an image of digital media outlet Vivoplay's interview with Marco Antonio Ponce, in which he spoke about the protests that took place between 21 and 22 January, which were strongly repressed by government forces. The article makes accusations against opposition parties and portrays the protests as destabilizing incidents financed by NGOs. It suggests that NGOs are "promoting and seeking to extend the logic of hatred and confrontation to the popular sectors of Caracas" and includes a hyperlink to OVCS' Twitter account.

Front Line Defenders has previously reported on similar attacks against Marco Antonio Ponce and the OVCS. In June 2016, Congressman Diosdado Cabello called Marco Antonio Ponce a traitor to Venezuela ("vendepatria") in his weekly programme "Con el Mazo Dando". This was motivated by the human rights defender's participation in the 47th General Assembly of the Organisation of American States (OAS). Congressman Diosdado Cabello also provided information about a flight the human rights defender was due to take the following month, including details about where he would be seated on the plane.

In May 2016, the State owned daily newspaper, "Ciudad Caracas, Revolución a Diario", printed an article entitled "International Mercenaries from NGOs Revealed", which featured Marco Antonio Ponce's picture and suggested he was acting against the interest of the nation and inciting violence.

Front Line Defenders denounces the publication of Marco Antonio Ponce's photograph and name in this context, as well as the serious allegations that have been made against OVCS' work. Given current tense climate in Venezuela, these acts may put the defender at a heightened risk by exposing him to retaliations from public and private actors, including judicial measures.

Venezuela has seen a escalation of violence since 21 January 2019, when a new wave of mass protests began. According to the IACR, Venezuelan authorities detained a total of 943 people in at least 22 states between 21 and 31 January, especially in the Capital District, Aragua, Zulia and Bolívar. At least 35 people have reportedly been killed.

Since 2014, Marco Antonio Ponce has been the victim of different types of attacks as a result of his work in defense of human rights. These have included acts of intimidation, harassment, stalking, surveillance in airports, smear campaigns against him and OVCS, and criminalization of OVCS' work. The human rights defender has been accused of being an 'enemy of the State' and a 'destabilizing agent', particularly in the context of his activities with international protection systems, such as with the IACR or when reporting to the United Nations.

Front Line Defenders is extremely concerned about this continuous smear campaign against Marco Antonio Ponce and the work he performs through OVCS. The fact that Marco Antonio Ponce's name and picture are routinely displayed on State-owned media channels along with content suggesting he is a threat to the nation constitutes an incitement to violence and hostility against the human rights defender.

Front Line Defenders is equally concerned at the government of Venezuela's use of the State's punitive powers to discourage, punish or prevent the exercise of the rights to freedom of expression, peaceful assembly, and social and political participation in the broadest sense and the generalised efforts to discredit and criminalise any organisation receiving foreign funding and interacting with international mechanisms without regard to the actual work they perform, in particular organisations looking to uphold human rights for all Venezuelans.

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

1. Cease the ongoing smear campaign conducted through State-owned media against human rights defender Marco Antonio Ponce and the OVCS;
2. Make all necessary efforts to protect the physical and psychological integrity of human rights defender Marco Antonio Ponce and personnel working for OVCS, in consultation and agreement with the human rights defenders, including by fully implementing the Precautionary Measures granted by the Inter-American Commission of Human Rights;
3. Guarantee access to information from archives and investigation in relation to the defender and any member of OVCS, as well as to report if there is any administrative, criminal or other investigation initiated against him;
4. Ensure that all human rights defenders in Venezuela are able to conduct their peaceful and legitimate activities without undue restrictions and without fear of harassment, threats or retaliation.