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Venezuela: Respect for human rights must be guaranteed

The authorities must ensure protection of human rights of all citizens in the increasingly violent political climate surrounding the decision of the National Electoral Commission expected today, Amnesty International said today.

At least three people were killed and up to 50 injured, including two journalists, over the weekend in the context of clashes between National Guard and Anti and Pro government demonstrators. There have been allegations of excessive use of force, in particular by the National Guard, while policing these demonstrations, some of which were reportedly violent. Heavily armed military and civilian intelligence units also reportedly participated in policing operations. There have also reportedly been a number of detentions of opposition supporters during opposition demonstrations in different parts of the country.

Amnesty International is calling for all law enforcement officials to abide by international standards on the use of force and firearms when policing demonstrations and maintaining public order and for all allegations of human rights abuses to be effectively investigated. The organization is also urging the authorities to ensure full respect of the rights of any persons detained in connection with the disturbances.

Venezuela's smouldering political crisis may result in further mass street demonstrations by both pro and anti government supporters in the coming days. While it is primarily the Government's responsibility to ensure the protection of human rights of all citizens, all social and political actors, whether opposition or government supporters, should avoid contributing to the spiralling political violence and the deterioration in the human rights situation.

Background information

Over the weekend the National Electoral Commission postponed until Monday 1 March the publication of its decision on the validation of signatures gathered to petition a recall referendum on President Hugo Chavez. The decision is expected to require further validation of signatures gathered. The potential for conflict around the decision is grave.

The policing of public demonstrations has frequently resulted in human rights violations by the police and security forces in Venezuela over the last 15 years. The authorities have consistently failed to investigate and punish officials responsible for abuses or effectively implement United Nations guidelines on the use of force or firearms. Incidents of political violence, attributed to both government or opposition supporters, that have taken place under President Chavez's administration, such as the deaths and injuries that occurred in the context of the attempted coup of 11 April 2002, have not been investigated effectively and have gone unpunished. The impunity enjoyed by the perpetrators encourages further

human rights violations in a particularly volatile political climate.

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For more information please call Amnesty International's press office in London, UK, on +44 20 7413 5566

Amnesty International, 1 Easton St., London WC1X 0DW. web: <http://www.amnesty.org>

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