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fVENEZUELA: @HUMAN RIGHTS ECLIPSED
BY RISING INSTABILITY AND VIOLENCE

Human rights are coming increasingly under fire in Venezuela, where security forces have reacted to civil disorder with violence and murder, Amnesty International said today.

"Venezuela has enjoyed a fairly good reputation for human rights in the past," said the human rights organization, "because of decades of relative stability and civilian governments. But it can no longer hide behind an increasingly tarnished reputation - events of the last four years or so have shown that human rights have been well and truly eclipsed in Venezuela.

"Torture and ill-treatment are now reported to us all the time, the legal system is riddled with shortcomings and, more worrying still, whenever there is political tension leading to disturbances within the country, the security forces open fire. They seem to be killing with complete impunity, knowing they will face no serious consequences for the blood on their hands."

The number of killings has increased dramatically during periods of mass protests or organized threats to the government, but numbered among the dead are many uninvolved in any opposition. Amnesty International is currently carrying out a massive international campaign against political killings, and among the cases highlighted by the organization is that of a 21-year-old Venezuelan medical student, shot dead on his university campus.

Luis Enrique Landa Díaz was celebrating the medical school's 17th anniversary one afternoon in September 1992, when members of the National Guard began patrolling the area. Some of the students argued with the guards, who began firing tear-gas and bullets at the defenceless students - Luis Landa was shot in the head and died instantly.

When his father spoke to the media about his son's death, he received threats. Later he was shot at and wounded, later still a passing car rained bullets on his home. Although an official investigation into the killing

was launched, the case is still languishing in the judicial system and no-one has been brought to justice.

And the killings are still going on - in September of this year Amnesty International called on its members to act urgently on behalf of a university employee in Venezuela, shot dead during a student demonstration, and two students arrested and feared tortured after the same event.

Students have been particularly singled out for torture in Venezuela, along with other political and grass-roots activists, but no-one is completely safe from torture and ill-treatment. Even children and disabled people have been targeted - in January 1993 a three-year-old boy was detained and beaten when his father was arrested, and in July this year a group of blind people staging a peaceful demonstration were beaten and shot at with rubber pellets, leaving at least six with serious injuries.

Torture is widespread, and sometimes results in death. All too often it is used against the poorest or most vulnerable sectors of society, typically, to intimidate and extract confessions from criminal suspects. Methods are simple but sophisticated, designed to cause maximum pain and leave minimum traces - blows to the ears, near-asphyxiation in plastic bags filled with irritants such as ammonia, near-drowning in toilet bowls and electric shocks, for example.

And the torturers continue to go about their ghastly business because nothing truly effective is done to stop them. Impunity is almost inevitable, prisoners can be held for up to eight days before going before a judge and police routinely flout constitutional safeguards and hold prisoners incommunicado, cut off from lawyers and relatives who might help them.

"The whole judicial system is badly flawed," said Amnesty International. "All of these problems make it easy for torture to continue and give prisoners little recourse to the law.

"There are also laws which keep people locked into the criminal system - laws which allow repeated administrative detention, without charge or trial, for up to five years at a time, simply because of a past criminal record. We know of one man who has spent more than 10 years behind bars, tortured after every one of his six arrests - and all for one offence."

Amnesty International has put forward a list of more than 70 separate recommendations, aimed at significantly improving respect for human rights in the country. "Elections are due to take place in Venezuela in December

this year," said Amnesty International. "We hope all candidates will support our recommendations and act on them."

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