The image shows two tall flagpoles against a cloudy sky. The left pole holds the Brazilian flag, and the right pole holds the Venezuelan flag. In the foreground, there is a monument with colorful sections and the word 'BRASIL' visible. The background features a rocky landscape with some trees.

VOICES FROM KUMARAKAPAY

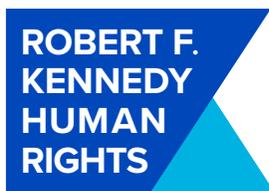
Survivor testimonies from our
fact-finding mission to the
Brazil-Venezuela border

VOICES FROM KUMARAKAPAY

Survivor testimonies from our
fact-finding mission to the
Brazil-Venezuela border

Robert F. Kennedy Human Rights

April 2019



Contents

Introduction	1
The context of the Venezuela crisis	4
The violent repression on the border with Brazil, February 22-28, 2019	6
Survivor testimonies	7
Acknowledgments	14

Introduction

Once the prime example of a thriving South American nation, for over two decades now, Venezuela has been on a downward spiral. An incremental but steady erosion of democratic principles, as well as failure to shore up the economy and maintain basic infrastructure, has led the country to an unprecedented and multifaceted crisis. It is a crisis that is no longer only political, but economic and humanitarian.



VOICES FROM KUMARAKAPAY

Although many of the measures that did away with the separation of powers, a functioning opposition and the media started under the government of Hugo Chávez, systematic repression of civil liberties and indiscriminate use of arbitrary detention became the new normal under his chosen successor, Nicolás Maduro. The constant violations of fundamental rights and the lack of provision for basic necessities, including food and healthcare, have deeply affected Venezuelans and has pushed over 3 million people out of the country.

One of the affected groups of the population that has not been looked into as much, has been the indigenous communities. A 2011 census estimated that there were 725,128 indigenous people, belonging to 51 distinct groups, living in Venezuela. These groups routinely face discrimination with respect to extraction of natural resources on their ancestral homelands and lack of access to essential services such as education and health services.¹ They have been strongly impacted by this repression and humanitarian crisis.

Robert F. Kennedy Human Rights has been working on the human rights situation in Venezuela for several years. In 2017, the Robert F. Kennedy Human Rights Award was presented to Alfredo Romero, the President of Venezuelan non-governmental organization Foro Penal, which provides legal assistance to victims of arbitrary detention and other human rights violations. As a result of this partnership, Robert F. Kennedy Human Rights has increased its attention to the situation in the country.



Members of the joint Robert F. Kennedy Human Rights - Foro Penal fact-finding mission to Boa Vista and Pacaraima, in Brazil, near the border with Venezuela.

Photo courtesy of Luan Pablo Amarante

¹ Minority Rights Group International, World Directory of Minorities and Indigenous Peoples - Venezuela, December 2017. Available at: <https://minorityrights.org/country/venezuela/>.

SURVIVOR TESTIMONIES FROM OUR FACT-FINDING MISSION TO THE BRAZIL-VENEZUELA BORDER

At Foro Penal's request, Robert F. Kennedy Human Rights conducted a fact-finding mission to the Brazilian side of the Brazil-Venezuela border from March 30 to April 2, 2019. The mission was led by Kerry Kennedy, President of Robert F. Kennedy Human Rights and accompanied by Angelita Baeyens, Director of the International Advocacy and Litigation program. Foro Penal's delegation included Karina Mora, Coordinator of Foro Penal's chapter in Boavista, Olnar Ortiz, Coordinator of the indigenous peoples chapter of Foro Penal, and Ricardo Delgado, a Venezuelan Pemón indigenous leader from Gran Sabana. The primary goal of the fact-finding mission was to collect victims' testimonies and document the violations suffered by the Venezuelan population living in the communities along the Brazilian border. These communities were directly affected by the violent repression by armed forces and other groups under orders from Nicolás Maduro who aimed to prevent the attempted entry of humanitarian aid to Venezuela from Brazil on February 23, 2019. The violence documented during the mission covers different related incidents between February 22-28, 2019.

The mission travelled to Boa Vista, Pacaraima and several rural indigenous communities along the border with Venezuela, in the state of Roraima, Brazil. Delegation members interviewed survivors and witnesses of the Massacre of Kumarakapay, as well as of the violent attacks on civilians in the border town of Santa Elena de Uairén and near the military base of "El Escamoto." In Pacaraima, the delegation visited the humanitarian encampment established under the "Operacao Acolhida" by the Brazilian Army to receive the tens of thousands of Venezuelan migrants and refugees crossing the border into Brazil.

While the fact-finding mission looked at the broader human rights and humanitarian challenges evident during the visit, this report focuses on the findings related to the violence and repression perpetrated by armed forces and other groups under the orders of Nicolás Maduro in the towns of Kumarakapay and Santa Elena de Uairén between February 22-28, 2019. It captures the conversations and testimonies collected from interviews with several dozen survivors and witnesses of those violent acts who were forced to flee to Brazil to seek medical attention and safety.

The context of the Venezuela crisis

Since the time of President Hugo Chávez, who took office in 1999, civil liberties and the rule of law in Venezuela have suffered a downward spiral, but it was under the government of Nicolás Maduro who assumed power in 2013 that the decay of the State's institutions, the country's economy, and the oil industry visibly joined that trend. For years, the Venezuelan executive actively blurred the limits and distinctions between the three branches of power, eliminating most guarantees of judicial independence, neutralizing political opponents and critics, and co-opting the legislative branch to grant the President far-reaching legislative powers. The economy also progressively deteriorated particularly since 2014 the shortages of food and medicine have greatly intensified. The combination of the political repression, generalized violence and an escalating humanitarian crisis has forced out of the country over 3 million Venezuelans in the last few years.

On 23 February 2019, after Maduro was sworn in for a second presidential term through an electoral process widely dismissed as rigged, the President of the National Assembly, Juan Guaidó, declared he was assuming the role of interim President. Initially, a group of countries in the Western hemisphere, including the United States, Colombia and Brazil, as well as other members of the international community officially recognized him as the interim president. Other States around the world eventually joined. One of the initiatives launched to address the worsening humanitarian situation was a joint plan by the U.S., Colombia and Brazil to send truckloads of aid through the Venezuela-Colombia and Venezuela-Brazil border crossings on February 23.

Maduro considered the humanitarian aid as part of a coup plot against him and broke diplomatic relations with Colombia ahead of February 23, accusing its government of supporting a U.S.-led effort to oust him from power and staging a military invasion.² He further accused the U.S Government of “fabricating a crisis to start a war in South America.”³ While most of the international attention was focused on the Colombia-Venezuela border during the days leading up to February 23, armed forces in Venezuela also started to mobilize at the border with Brazil to ensure no aid would come in via that channel as well. This included violently repressing any perceived action of support to the entry of the international humanitarian aid.

The situation of indigenous people in the larger context of the Venezuela crisis

Although in many respects, the basis for the current authoritarian regime was established early on by Hugo Chávez during his first presidential term, the rights of indigenous peoples in Venezuela saw their most important recognition during that same period. When the Constitution of 1999 was adopted, for the first time in the history of the country the indigenous population obtained constitutional recognition of their rights to their ancestral lands and territories, including the right to use its

² The Columbus Dispatch, Venezuela standoff turns deadly as troops block aid delivery, Christine Armario and Luis Andres Henao, February 24, 2019. Available at: <https://www.dispatch.com/news/20190224/venezuela-standoff-turns-deadly-as-troops-block-aid-delivery>

³ ABC News, Venezuela President Nicolas Maduro accuses US government of fabricating a crisis to start war in South America, Tom Llamas, Ignacio Torres, Kirit Radia, Aicha El Hammar Castano, Joshua Hoyos, Julia Jacobo, February 26, 2019. Available at: <https://abcnews.go.com/International/maduro-accuses-us-government-fabricating-crisis-start-war/story?id=61215212>

SURVIVOR TESTIMONIES FROM OUR FACT-FINDING MISSION TO THE BRAZIL-VENEZUELA BORDER

natural resources as well as to be informed and consulted on any project that could affect them.⁴ This earned Chavez wide support from the indigenous base in Venezuela, even though the Government failed to complete the process of demarcation of indigenous lands within the following two years,⁵ a process that has not been completed to date.⁶

The Pemón indigenous people, the fourth largest indigenous group in Venezuela, live in the southwest of the country, near the border with Brazil. Estimates of the group's total population vary greatly, but according to the 2011 census, the Pemón number over 30,000 people.⁷ The Pemón are divided into three sub-groups with distinct dialects: the Kamarokoto, Taurepan, and Arekuna.⁸

The failure to keep the promises set forth in the Constitution by the Chavez and then Maduro governments, the increasing impact of the economic crisis on the general population, and the incremental exploitation of natural resources in complete disregard of the rights of indigenous peoples affected by these activities, started to create more frequent tensions between indigenous communities and the Maduro government. On February 24, 2016, the Government created by Decree the so-called "Strategic Development Zone of the Orinoco Mining Arch" (AMO for its acronym in Spanish) covering approximately 12% of the national territory south of the Orinoco river, where more than 54,000 indigenous people live, including the Pemón people. This Decree sought to promote the extraction and commercialization of gold, diamonds, iron, copper and other minerals in open disregard of the protections and rights granted to indigenous peoples by the Venezuelan Constitution.⁹

Many of those interviewed during the fact-finding mission agreed that the security conditions in Gran Sabana, a Venezuelan municipality on the border with Brazil where the Pemón people live, changed dramatically when the project started to expand in the AMO zone. They indicated that they were no longer allowed to go to many parts of their ancestral lands and that the territory was not even guarded by Venezuelan forces but by groups of Colombian rebel groups members and 'colectivos' authorized by Maduro and the military leadership of Venezuela. "It became common in recent years to see military trucks loaded with mining equipment crossing the area," one witness stated.

However, many indigenous communities in Gran Sabana decided to confront the Maduro regime on the issue of humanitarian aid. A few weeks before February 23, 2019, the date announced by the widely-recognized interim President Guaidó for the humanitarian aid entry into Venezuela from Colombia and Brazil, several Pemón indigenous leaders from Gran Sabana announced that their people were set in their decision to let the humanitarian aid enter the territory even if it meant going against Nicolás Maduro and his security forces.

4 See in particular Articles 119, 122, and 123 of the Constitution of the Bolivarian Republic of Venezuela. Available in Spanish from the Consejo Nacional Electoral Poder de la República Bolivariana de Venezuela at: http://www.cne.gob.ve/web/normativa_electoral/constitucion/indice.php. (Last accessed July 10, 2019). English version available from ConstituteProject.org at https://www.constituteproject.org/constitution/Venezuela_2009.pdf. (Last accessed July 10, 2019).

5 According to twelfth transitory disposition of the Constitution, "the demarcation of the indigenous habitat referred to in Article 119 of this Constitution shall be carried out within 2 years counting from the entry into force of this Constitution." See ConstituteProject.org, Venezuela (Bolivarian Republic of)'s Constitution of 1999 with Amendments through 2009, pg. 99. Available at: https://www.constituteproject.org/constitution/Venezuela_2009.pdf.

6 Inter-American Commission on Human Rights (IACHR), Democracy and Human Rights in Venezuela, OEA/Ser.L/V/II., Doc. 54.

December 30, 2009, paras. 1066-1067. Available at: <http://www.cidh.org/countryrep/Venezuela2009eng/VE09CHAPVIIENG.htm#D>.

7 María Lucía Allais, El Nacional, Opinión: El pueblo pemón, February 27, 2009. Available at: http://www.el-nacional.com/noticias/columnista/pueblo-pemon_272456

8 See Minority Rights, Venezuela: Pemón. Available at: <https://minorityrights.org/minorities/pemon/>. (Last accessed July 10, 2019).

9 El País, Arco minero del Orinoco: la crisis de la que pocos hablan en Venezuela, Rafael Uzcatogui & Marianna Belalba Barreto, September 11, 2018. Available at: https://elpais.com/elpais/2018/09/03/planeta_futuro/1535983599_117995.html.

The violent repression on the border with Brazil, February 22-28, 2019

The Massacre of Kumarakapay

The community of San Francisco de Yuruaní, also known as Kumarakapay, is an indigenous community of the Pemón ethnic group. It is located 30 miles from Santa Elena de Uairén in the municipality of Gran Sabana, in Bolívar State, and is about 50 miles north of the border with Brazil.

Kumarakapay is well-known by tourists wishing to visit the Canaima National Park, the location of Angel Falls, the highest waterfall in the world, and to climb Mount Roraima. The national park was declared by UNESCO as a world heritage site in 1994.¹⁰ For decades the community had relied heavily on tourism as a source of income, but in recent years the security in the area had deteriorated and the overall crisis in Venezuela took a toll on the number of visitors to the park. The community was experiencing severe financial hardship and publicly welcomed the humanitarian aid offered by members of the Venezuelan opposition and some members of the international community that was going to try to enter the country on February 23, 2019.

Ahead of February 23, most of the international attention was on the attempt to get the humanitarian aid in via the border between Colombia and Venezuela, but Nicolás Maduro also ordered the Venezuelan armed forces and other armed-groups to reinforce the borders with Brazil near Kumarakapay to ensure that no aid entered Venezuela.

Around 5:30 am on February 22, 2019, three military trucks including two large trucks or “convoys” capable of carrying over 40 people each, entered the village of Kumarakapay heading in the direction of the border. The villagers came out of their houses and were able to stop the third vehicle, a smaller truck. They had the soldiers get off the vehicle and interrogated them on the purpose of their incursion into the village. The two larger trucks had continued on to the end of the village and, after a while, several dozen soldiers got out of the trucks and started walking towards the members of the community on the main road. As the soldiers slowly approached, the villagers started saying “If you’re going to come through you have to leave your arms behind,” and “Let’s respect the people, let’s respect the people!”¹¹ As the soldiers continued to advance, the villagers approached them. One of the soldiers fired a shot into the ground, and ten seconds later several soldiers started shooting at the villagers. The delegation spoke with some of the survivors who believed that the initial shot fired into the ground was a sign to the rest of the military troops that they were to start shooting at the people. Video footage taken with cell phones by surviving members of the community shows the soldiers aiming directly at the villagers who were shouting at them. It also shows that the villagers were unarmed.¹²

10 United Nations Educational Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO), Canaima National Park. Available at: <http://whc.unesco.org/en/list/701>. (Last accessed July 10, 2019.)

11 Video footage of that moment is available on YouTube at: “Aquí lo que pasó 22 de febrero en Kumarakapay Bolívar donde se evidencia el uso de...” <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=GMjHhFSQyVM>. (Last accessed July 10, 2019.)

12 ADD Link to video RFK

SURVIVOR TESTIMONIES FROM OUR FACT-FINDING MISSION TO THE BRAZIL-VENEZUELA BORDER

The first person to be shot was Zoraida Rodriguez (45 years old). A mother of 5, Zoraida had been preparing breakfast for her family when she saw from her house the trucks approaching the village via the main road and went out to see what was going on. When her husband, Rolando García (52 years old), saw that she had been shot, he picked up a stone and threw it at the soldier who had shot his wife. The soldiers then aimed at him and also shot him. Both were taken to the local health unit. Zoraida died shortly after the attack. Rolando remained in critical condition for over a week and ultimately died as a result of the gunshot wounds in a hospital in Boa Vista, Brazil, where he had been taken by members of the community. Zoraida and Rolando left 5 children behind.

Survivor testimonies



Elvia Delgado

Nobody expected something like this to happen. It was 5:30 am when we heard the first shots. One of my daughters ran outside our house to see what was going on and I followed her. I thought the police were chasing a thief or something, but then my phone rang. It was the doctor I work with at the community health center. She was telling me that there were many wounded people and that she needed me to go as soon as possible to help her there. I raced to the health center. I was afraid because my daughter had left the house too and I didn't know what was happening. When I arrived and saw all these neighbors and members of my own family there, wounded, I tried as much as I could to not think of them as my family. It was really hard to remain focused and not go crazy with desperation.

When Zoraida arrived I could immediately see how serious her wound was. I could only provide very basic care because our center lacks everything. It was all so hectic and there were so many wounded people that I didn't see my own brother had been shot. It was my father who told me that my brother Alberto [Delgado] had been taken to the hospital in Santa Elena. I also left for Santa Elena with other wounded people to tell the doctors there what I knew. As we were driving to Santa Elena, we had to cross another town and the community there wouldn't let us pass because they were Maduro supporters, but we managed to continue.

VOICES FROM KUMARAKAPAY

Angelina Pérez (Alberto Pérez's mother)

When the communal guard¹³ and some of the villagers stopped the pickup truck with soldiers and made them step out, I approached them and started yelling at them "When will you stop harassing us?"

My son Wilmer asked me to take his 4-year old son to a safe place because the military soldiers were coming. I took him somewhere safe and then I received a text message saying that my [other] son Alberto had been shot. When I returned to check on him, I saw blood everywhere, as if a cow had been slaughtered.

Kliber Pérez (24 years old), another member of the indigenous community, was also fatally shot early that morning in Kumarakapay. As with Rolando García, Kliber did not die at the scene but several days afterward at the General Hospital of Boa Vista, across the border in Brazil, where he had been urgently transferred by his family.



Melanie Oviedo (Wife of Kliber Pérez)

Around 5:30 am on February 22, we heard all this noise from big trucks approaching and went outside our houses to see what was going on. My neighbors and I approached the trucks and started confronting the military officers about why they were coming to our town. When soldiers started shooting at us, I saw how Zoraida was shot and then her husband.

I never thought they would shoot at us. We were unarmed. We wanted to confront them about why they were coming to our town like this but never expected them to attack us like this. They used live ammunition against us... Kumarakapay is a very quiet town, nothing like this had ever happened. I saw how everybody was being shot at, how the officers wanted to kill us... I laid down on the floor, thinking it could only be a nightmare but giving thanks to God that my children were still sleeping.

¹³ Communal guard in this context is the community's self-organized guard in charge of keeping the village safe through check-points and watch rounds. The Community Guard members do not carry any weapons.

SURVIVOR TESTIMONIES FROM OUR FACT-FINDING MISSION TO THE BRAZIL-VENEZUELA BORDER

The witnesses and survivors interviewed by the delegation all highlighted how they never thought, even for a second, that the soldiers would shoot at them. This explains why they had left their homes and were so ready to confront the soldiers even though the soldiers were carrying rifles while they were unarmed. Kumarakapay had always been a peaceful community, and although the community was aware of the violence and repression predominating most of the country, they felt that the military would not do any harm to them.

In addition to the three fatal victims resulting from this military incursion into Kumarakapay, 12 other members of the community were shot and seriously wounded. But the repression did not stop there. During the day on February 22 and up until the early hours of February 23, the military returned to the village of Kumarakapay several times, and even threw tear gas canisters to the houses near the main road, forcing the villagers to take their children out of the village and far away from the roads to make sure they would be safe. On February 23, nine members of the community were arbitrarily arrested by members of the Bolivarian Intelligence Service (SEBIN).

Evencio Soza, 44 years old.

On the night of February 21 we were told that three military ‘convoys’ were heading up towards our community of Kumarakapay. It’s a small community. We have approximately 1,500 inhabitants. I am one of the members of the community’s territorial guards. As is our tradition as indigenous people, we assembled the community to inform them that the militaries were heading toward our village. That night, we were prepared to receive them. At 3 am a military convoy arrived. We alerted the community and the villagers came out of their homes. We told the militaries not to advance. They went back to wait for reinforcement. Around 5:00 am, they returned. The first vehicle to arrive was a Toyota pick-up, with armed soldiers. We stopped them and made them get out of the vehicle. We interrogated them on why they were coming to our village but they kept silent. three military large trucks followed. The trucks crossed quickly through the main road. The soldiers got out of the trucks fully armed and started walking toward the villagers. The villagers started shouting at them “respect the people, respect the people.” We were completely unarmed. We kept shouting and then they started shooting their arms, first to the air and then towards us. We all started running away. I saw people falling to the ground because they had been shot. One of my friends was shot and she



VOICES FROM KUMARAKAPAY

died shortly after. I was running as well when I saw a military officer who looked at me and shot me. The bullet entered through one leg and exited through the other. We were picked up by a civilian in a pickup because there are no ambulances in the village and together with other friends that were wounded we were taken to Santa Elena, but there the hospital didn't have the supplies either. When our wounds were cleaned and we were given some pain killers, we were brought in an ambulance to Boa Vista. Here [in Boa Vista] they treated us. I'm waiting for my third surgery. The Brazilian public health system is taking care of me. I'm waiting to have my surgery to return.

All my family is back home. I have three boys. But I'm very concerned about how I will provide for them after this.

Before all this happened, I used to work as a tourist guide, but when the tourism in the region started to decline in 2014, I had to switch to work in artisanal gold mining. But I had to stop that too because it was too difficult to make a living from that, so I started working the land, helping my mother with her 'conuco' (small parcel of land) but now I don't know if I will be able to work the same as before.

I am fearful of returning, but I have to. My family is there, my land is there.



Alberto Pérez

I am indigenous, Pemón – taurepán. I am a teacher. I specialized in bilingual intercultural education. I was the Secretary of the Community of Kumarakapay. Through my work I have been able to see how the Chavista regime has impacted the Pemón people. We have nothing. No education, no medical supplies. The regime is only empty talk. So as a community we have been very critical of the government and we started to be labeled as members of the opposition. We started organizing as a community to make demands for all the things we were lacking. So when we heard the humanitarian aid was coming, as a community we met and decided to support the entry of that aid. We decided, as an indigenous community, to be firm against the government and make everything possible to ensure the aid would come into the country.

On February 22, around 5:30 am, I heard gunshots. I left my home, took my motorbike and approached the main road of the village where I saw the army trucks crossing the checkpoint that we have at the entrance of the village. I saw more than 50 soldiers coming out of the trucks and starting to walk toward the villagers, who

SURVIVOR TESTIMONIES FROM OUR FACT-FINDING MISSION TO THE BRAZIL-VENEZUELA BORDER

were confronting them, asking them what they were doing there. We had never seen anything like that before. They were pointing at the villagers with their rifles. And when I arrived on my motorbike, is when all the soldiers started to shoot indiscriminately. I dropped the motorbike and hid where I could but when I tried to hide somewhere else and start running, the soldiers shoot me. The bullet fractured my femurs. The bullet entered one leg and exited through the other. I still have the bullet inside. I started crawling and saw my leg wide open. I kept thinking 'oh my god, I'm going to lose my legs. A pickup truck took me and other wounded people to Santa Elena, about an hour away from our town. When we arrived at a health center there, we were given painkillers. Then we were transferred to the hospital in Santa Elena. There, my legs were stabilized with planks and a few hours later the doctor came to check on me and said: "you're fine, you can go home and I'll see you in 3 months'. [But] I almost cannot cross the border to get to Boa Vista and get medical attention. Thanks to the ambulance driver, who took me and other wounded people to Brazil, my legs were saved. I'm waiting for another surgery that will remove the bullet and place a plate in my legs.

I don't want to return yet because I've heard that we are on a watch list. I asked my family to come here and they crossed the border. All of them have come, my wife and children, my parents, my siblings and their families. We have always lived together in the community in Kumarakapay. They are now staying in an indigenous community in Pacaraima, [in Brazil] near the border with Venezuela.

I hope Maduro's heart softens. So that he resigns and leaves power. We cannot continue like this. As a parent, I have goals and dreams. I have my children, including a 2-month old baby...that's the pain that I feel, because... I feel guilty... my children are suffering right now... this is the first time I've been away from my children and I know they need me... that's the greatest pain I feel. It's not the wound from the gunshot, it's being away from them.

I am scared for the future. I don't know if I will be able to provide for my family with my leg like this. I have 16-year old twins, a 3-year old girl, a 2-year old boy and a 2-month old baby that I haven't seen in more than a month.

Repression of protesters in Santa Elena de Uairén and “El Escamoto” military base on February 23, 2019

On February 23, residents of the border town of Santa Elena de Uairén got ready to protest. They had heard of the events of the previous day in Kumarakapay and also wanted to demand that the government of Nicolás Maduro allow the entry of the humanitarian aid being dispatched from Brazil.

That morning, hundreds of people gathered in the center of town. The protests started around 10:00 am and were met by an increasing presence of Venezuelan armed forces, as well as groups of paramilitary-type militias known as “colectivos.” Just after 11:00am tensions erupted and the army and national guard started attacking the unarmed civilians who were protesting.

While this was happening, another group of protesters was being violently repressed by members of the Venezuelan Armed Forces in “El Escamoto,” a military base located a few miles from the border crossing with Brazil.

Carlos Herrera, 17 years old.

On February 23 I was at home in Santa Elena. I knew almost everybody in town was going to participate in a massive protest. The protest was partly in reaction to what had happened the previous day in Kumarakapay, but it was also in favor of the humanitarian aid. A friend and I decided to go as well and we joined the protest around 11:30 am. It had already started. When the armed forces arrived, we didn't have anything to defend ourselves with other than stones we would find on the ground. Then they started to fire their guns. That's when they hit me. When I fell to the ground I saw two people dying in front of me.

I was first taken to the hospital in Santa Elena. They stabilized me as best they could, even though the hospital lacked almost everything. I was transferred to Pacaraima (Brazil) after. An ambulance in Pacaraima transferred me here to Boa Vista. I've been here since. I'm waiting for my third surgery on my leg because the hospital does not have the necessary supplies as yet.

I would like to go back to Venezuela but we've been told that the Venezuelan authorities are looking for all of us who came here to Boa Vista to be treated for the injuries we received during the attacks on February 22 and 23. The authorities visited the hospital in Santa Elena and asked for personal identification information about the patients that were transferred to Boa Vista. We were told that they even threatened the medical personnel to release their names, their address, and other personal information. We are all afraid to go back.



Immediate impact of the February violence on the Venezuelan indigenous population along the border with Brazil

The violent repression led by armed forces and paramilitary-type groups under Nicolás Maduro against the population of the Gran Sabana Municipality between 22-23 February resulted in 7 civilians killed (4 of them indigenous people of the Pemón ethnic group), 57 people wounded (22 of them indigenous) and 62 people arbitrarily arrested (23 of them indigenous).¹⁴

¹⁴ See Foro Penal, Reporte Especial sobre la Represión Política Ejercida en Contra de los Habitantes de las Comunidades Indígenas del Estado Estado de Bolívar en Venezuela, March 2009, page 3. Available only in Spanish at: <https://foropenal.com/wp-content/uploads/2019/04/REPORTE-MARZO-INDIGENAS-2019-V2.pdf>.

SURVIVOR TESTIMONIES FROM OUR FACT-FINDING MISSION TO THE BRAZIL-VENEZUELA BORDER

After the attack, Nicolás Maduro publicly congratulated the Venezuelan Armed Forces and the National Guard for having “successfully stopped” the entry of humanitarian aid to the country on February 23.

The increasingly violent persecution against indigenous people in the Venezuelan state of Bolívar has led to a significant number of indigenous people crossing the border to Brazil in the last two months. By early April, Foro Penal’s count estimated at least 721 indigenous people from 14 different indigenous communities of the municipality of Gran Sabana in the state of Bolívar have sought refuge in Brazil since February 22, 2019.¹⁵ Only a month later, in May 2019, that figure had risen to 911.¹⁶

Entire families have been forced to leave everything behind and the communities are broken. Ku-marapakay and other indigenous communities continue to have a heavy military presence to date. The Pemón refugees do not dare to return to their villages and territories for fear of retaliation from Venezuelan authorities under Maduro’s control. Further, the leaders of the Pemón communities who are hosting their fellow indigenous brothers and sisters in Brazil have denounced threats from Pemón political leaders.¹⁷

¹⁵ See Foro Penal, Reporte Especial, supra note 15 at page <https://foropenal.com/2019/04/24/reporte-especial-represion-politica-contra-habitantes-de-comunidades-indigenas-en-bolivar-venezuela-marzo-2019/> (Only in Spanish)

¹⁶ See IACHR, 172 Period of Sessions, Follow-Up Hearing on Precautionary Measures 70-19; 83-19; 102-19; 115-19; 150-19; 178-19; 181-19; 250-19 (Venezuela), May 9, 2019. Available at: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=sfdbh6mkOVE>.

¹⁷ See IACHR, 172 Period of Sessions, Follow-Up Hearing on Precautionary Measures 70-19; 83-19; 102-19; 115-19; 150-19; 178-19; 181-19; 250-19 (Venezuela), May 9, 2019. Available at: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=sfdbh6mkOVE>.

Acknowledgments

Many people contributed to the success of this fact-finding mission. First and foremost, Robert F. Kennedy Human Rights would like to thank all those who have entrusted us to share their stories, which meant revisiting painful experiences relating to these events. This report is dedicated to their courage.

Robert F. Kennedy Human Rights would like to give special thanks to Foro Penal for the invitation and logistical support to facilitate meeting the survivors of the Massacres of Kumarakapay and Santa Elena de Uairén and the members of the communities that have hosted the migrants and refugees from Venezuela along the border with Brazil. This visit would not have been possible without the assistance and accompaniment of Foro Penal members Karina Mora Castillo, Olnar Ortiz and Ricardo Delgado. The delegation also wishes to thank the Government of Brazil, and particularly, the Brazillan Army in charge of “Operação Acolhida” for allowing us to visit the base and respond to our inquiries. We want to recognize the extraordinary efforts that the Brazilian Army is making in the frame of this operation to provide humanitarian assistance to Venezuelan migrants and refugees. Finally, we want to thank journalist Shirley Rodrigues and photographer Luan Pablo Amarante for accompanying us during the mission and helping us document the testimonies.