Input to the United Nations Committee on Enforced Disappearances and the Working Group on Enforced and Involuntary Disappearances

Enforced Disappearance in the Context of Transnational Repression

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I. Introduction: Enforced Disappearance and Transnational Repression

Enforced disappearance has long been used by States as a tool of political control. Concealing victims' whereabouts and placing them outside the protection of the law allows the State both to remove perceived or active political opponents from public life and to deter further opposition by instilling fear. In recent years, enforced disappearances have been observed increasingly frequently in transnational contexts, as States extend repressive measures beyond their borders to target perceived opponents and other vulnerable individuals abroad.

Under international law, enforced disappearance is defined as "the arrest, detention, abduction or any other form of deprivation of liberty by agents of the State or by persons or groups of persons acting with the authorization, support or acquiescence of the State, followed by a refusal to acknowledge the deprivation of liberty or by concealment of the fate or whereabouts of the disappeared person, which place such a person outside the protection of the law."[1] This definition encompasses three cumulative elements: i) "deprivation of liberty against the will of the person," ii) "involvement of government officials, at least by acquiescence," and iii) "refusal to acknowledge the deprivation of liberty or concealment of the fate or whereabouts of the disappeared person."[2] The Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR) notes that "while there is no official definition of transnational repression, the term is commonly used to describe acts conducted or directed by a State, or its proxies, to deter, silence, or punish dissent, criticism, or human rights advocacy expressed from outside its territory."[3] When enforced disappearance occurs in a transnational context, it constitutes an especially severe form of repression, combining the denial of liberty with cross-border obstacles to protection, accountability, and effective remedy.

II. The Case of Venezuela:

1. Enforced Disappearance under the Maduro Regime

Enforced disappearance has been one of the most prominent tactics used by the regime of Nicolás Maduro to consolidate control in Venezuela. In the past decade, domestic and international human rights groups have documented hundreds of cases of enforced disappearance. The 2025 joint report from Foro Penal and the Robert & Ethel Kennedy Human Rights Center[4] notes five prominent motivations historically observed behind enforced disappearances in Venezuela:

- "Exclusion: The use of repression to remove individuals from political life and neutralize them as critics or focal points for mobilization.
- Intimidation: directed at individuals who may not represent a direct political threat but belong to social groups, such as students, human rights defenders, journalists, judges, military officers, and activists, that the regime seeks to suppress.

[1] International Convention for the Protection of All Persons from Enforced Disappearance, G.A. Res. 61/177, U.N. Doc. A/RES/61/177 (Dec. 20, 2006), entered into force Dec. 23, 2010.
[2] OHCHR. About Enforced Disappearance, https://www.ohchr.org/en/special-procedures/wg-disappearances/about-enforced-disappearance (last visited 2026, Jan. 28).
[3] OHCHR. Transnational Repression. https://www.ohchr.org/sites/default/files/documents/publications/transnational-repression-1-en.pdf (last visited 2026, Jan. 28).
[4] Formerly "Robert F. Kennedy Human Rights".

- Propaganda: the targeting of individuals not necessarily viewed as threats to the regime, but whose persecution helps construct political narratives that deflect blame for State failures and sustain impunity.
- Extraction: the detention or imprisonment of individuals to obtain information, usually through torture, instrumental in persecuting others, typically family members or friends.
- Personal interest: the abuse of political power to defend or advance the private interests of public officials, without a strict political end."[5]

The same report also notes an emerging sixth category: the increasing prevalence of foreigners and dual nationals to be used as bargaining chips, "openly leveraging their arbitrary detention for international recognition, political legitimacy, or even commercial advantages on the international stage."[6]

In recent years, the Maduro regime appeared to be expanding its use of enforced disappearances to areas outside of its own borders. Case studies show these transnational disappearances being used both as a tactic to exert the same sort of political control over growing Venezuelan exile communities as the regime does domestically (particularly those dedicated to the defense of human rights or political activism) and as an extension of the effort to target foreigners as potential bargaining chips.

2. Repression in a Post-Maduro Context

While all of the cases of enforced disappearances in the context of transnational repression discussed in this submission occurred under Nicolás Maduro, the patterns of repression that occurred during his rule remain relevant after his recent capture by the United States. His removal alone has not dismantled the security and intelligence apparatus that carries out enforced disappearances, nor has it removed the political incentives that underpin them. Those currently running the country all worked in the Maduro regime. Acting President Delcy Rodríguez had served as his Vice President, while Interior Minister Diosdado Cabello and Defense Minister Vladimir Padrino López remain in the same positions they occupied under Maduro. Moreover, no steps have been taken to dismantle the institutions responsible for carrying out disappearances, primarily: the General Directorate of Military Counterintelligence (in Spanish: *Dirección General de Contrainteligencia Militar* - DGCIM), the Bolivarian National Intelligence Service (in Spanish: *Servicio Bolivariano de Inteligencia Nacional* - SEBIN), the Bolivarian National Police (in Spanish: Policía Nacional Bolivariana - PNB), and the Bolivarian National Guard (In Spanish: *Guardia Nacional Bolivariana* - GNB).[7]

Though some of the political prisoners taken during Maduro's rule have been released since his capture, the process has been slow and has lacked transparency.[8] As of 26 January, 2026, Foro Penal verified 266

[5] Foro Penal & Robert F. Kennedy Human Rights. (2025). *Electoral Repression, Enforced Disappearances and Political Control in Venezuela*. Available at: https://rfkhumanrights.org/wp-content/uploads/2025/10/Electoral-Repression-Enforced-Disappearances-and-Political-Control-in-Venezuela.pdf, p. 1.

[6] *Id.*

[7] *Id.*, p. 21.

[8] De los Ángeles Graterol, María and Phillips, Tom. (2026, Jan. 26). 'It's a farce': families of Venezuela political prisoners still await their release. *The Guardian*. Available at: https://www.theguardian.com/world/2026/jan/26/families-venezuela-political-prisoners-waiting-release.

releases,[9] while many more – at least 600 – remained behind bars.[10] Furthermore, even the releases that have occurred are far from unconditional, with all released prisoners subject to strict precautionary measures, including prohibitions on leaving the country and speaking to the press, as well as periodic court appearances.[11]

In addition, in the brief period since Maduro's removal, the regime has already demonstrated a willingness to continue the same repressive tactics. The government has already ordered police to "immediately search and capture" supporters of the US invasion.[12] Paramilitary groups have been patrolling the capital, searching citizens' phones and parsing their social media posts and private messages for evidence of political opposition.[13] Thus, any of the tactics of political repression employed by the Maduro regime, including the transnational enforced disappearances discussed here, should be assumed to be a continuous threat in the present era.

3. Emblematic Case: Ronald Ojeda

The kidnapping and assassination of former Venezuelan military officer Ronald Ojeda Moreno provides a particularly stark example of enforced disappearance being used to target opponents of the regime in Venezuelan communities abroad. Before fleeing the country, Ojeda had been arrested and tortured along with three fellow soldiers in April 2017. The government alleged they were involved in acts with "conspiratorial purposes and planning of terrorist actions."[14] In November of the same year, while being transported from the Ramo Verde military prison to the Fuerte Tiuna military courts, Ojeda and several other former soldiers successfully rebelled against their guards and escaped. Ojeda fled Venezuela and eventually settled in Chile, where he was granted political asylum in November 2023.

On 21 February 2024, Ojeda went missing from his home in Santiago. His body was found 10 days later, stuffed into a suitcase and buried under cement, and showing clear signs of having been tortured by his kidnappers.[15] Chilean authorities have found multiple signs of direct involvement of the Venezuelan government in the killing. According to police, a fingerprint belonging to Colonel Alexander Granko Arteaga, head of Venezuela's General Directorate of Military Counterintelligence (DGCIM), was found at the scene.[16] In addition, a witness confirmed that Interior Minister Diosdado Cabello ordered the murder.[17]

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[9] Romero, Alfredo [@alfredoromero]. (2026, Jan. 26). *#26ene 9am (Venezuela) 266 excarcelaciones de presos políticos verificadas por el @ForoPenal desde el 8 de enero de 2026. Estamos verificando otras del día de ayer*. X. https://x.com/alfredoromero/status/2015774510453084321.

[10] De los Ángeles Graterol, María and Phillips, Tom. (2026, Jan. 26). 'It's a farce': families of Venezuela political prisoners still await their release. *The Guardian*. Available at: https://www.theguardian.com/world/2026/jan/26/families-venezuela-political-prisoners-waiting-release.

[11] Foro Penal (2026, Jan. 23), *"Los excarcelados podrían volver a ser detenidos", alertó un abogado venezolano* https://foropenal.com/los-excarcelados-podrian-volver-a-ser-detenidos-alerto-un-abogado-venezolano/

[12] Nicas, J. (2026, Jan. 7). Maduro Is Gone, but Repression in Venezuela Has Intensified. *New York Times*. Available at: https://www.nytimes.com/2026/01/07/world/americas/venezuela-repression.html.

[13] Carroll, Rory. (2026, Jan. 6). Armed militias deployed in Venezuela as regime attempts to impose authority. *The Guardian*. Available at: https://www.theguardian.com/world/2026/jan/07/caracas-venezuela-paramilitary-groups.

[14] La Hora de Venezuela. (2025, Feb. 21). The Targeted Assassination of Ronald Ojeda. *Caracas Chronicles*. Available at: https://www.caracaschronicles.com/2025/02/21/the-targeted-assassination-of-ronald-ojeda-moreno/.

[15] *Id*.

[16] *Id*.

[17] *Id*.

While in Chile, Ojeda had been actively critical of Maduro's government on social media. He frequently shared reports of arbitrary detentions and other human rights violations in Venezuela on X (formerly Twitter). He also gained some attention for a protest he staged in front of Chile's presidential palace, calling attention to the condition of a Venezuelan political prisoner on hunger strike.[18] His status as an outspoken political opponent of Maduro appears to have turned him into a target. Ojeda's kidnapping and murder provide a clear example of the regime using enforced disappearance to intimidate and silence political opposition from Venezuelans living abroad.

4. Transnational Repression of the Venezuelan Community in Colombia

In addition to those in Chile, opponents of the regime living in Colombia appear to be vulnerable as well, particularly given the large size of the Venezuelan community there, as well as the geographical proximity and large shared border. On 10 March 2024, Pablo Parada, a Venezuelan student activist living in Bogotá, nearly escaped kidnapping.[19] While returning home from a meeting at approximately 10:30 p.m., Parada encountered two black cars and six unknown men talking to his neighbor. When the neighbor shouted for him to run, he fled and was pursued by the men. He escaped them by hiding in a drainage pipe overnight.[20]

Although the involvement of the Maduro regime cannot be directly confirmed, partially due to his escape, it seems distinctly likely for two reasons: Parada's activism against the regime, and the regime's apparently increasing willingness to engage in transnational repression in Colombia. For example, October 2025 saw the attempted murder of two Venezuelans living in exile in Bogotá.[21] Yendri Velásquez, founder of the Venezuelan Observatory of LGBTIQ+ Violence, had previously been targeted by the regime before fleeing his home country. When attempting to travel to Switzerland for a human rights event, he was detained at Venezuela's main airport for six hours and had his passport canceled.[22] Luis Peche, a political consultant, had also fled to Colombia due to political persecution.[23] On 13 October 2025, as Velásquez and Peche were exiting a building in Bogotá, they were both shot in a "hitman-style" attack.[24] Both men survived but were seriously injured and required hospitalization.[25] Velásquez, who still suffers from pains and difficulty sleeping resulting from the shooting, does not see himself as any safer under current leadership: in January

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[18] *Id.*

[19] Semana. (2024, April 21). Habla Pablo Parada, señalado por régimen de Venezuela de querer derrocar a Nicolás Maduro: 'No participé en ningún plan conspirativo'. Available at: https://www.semana.com/mundo/articulo/habla-pablo-parada-senalado-por-regimen-de-venezuela-de-querer-derrocar-a-nicolas-maduro-no-participe-en-ningun-plan-conspirativo/202458/.

[20] *Id.*

[21] Reuters (2025, Oct. 13). Human rights activist among two Venezuelans attacked in Colombia. Available at: https://www.reuters.com/world/americas/human-rights-activist-among-two-venezuelans-attacked-colombia-2025-10-13/.

[22] The Guardian (2025, Oct. 14). Two Venezuelan exiles wounded in 'targeted' shooting in Colombia. Available at: https://www.theguardian.com/world/2025/oct/14/two-venezuelan-exiles-wounded-apparently-targeted-shooting-colombia.

[23] Reuters. (2025, Oct. 13). Human rights activist among two Venezuelans attacked in Colombia. Available at: https://www.reuters.com/world/americas/human-rights-activist-among-two-venezuelans-attacked-colombia-2025-10-13/.

[24] *Id.*

[25] *Id.*

2026, he stated that though he intends to return to Venezuela once it is safe to do so, "[t]he conditions aren't right for [him] to return because this interim government is a continuation of Maduro's government."[26]

These transnational attacks on Venezuelan communities in Chile and Colombia seem to be aimed at politically-active opponents of the regime, with the likely goal of silencing not only those kidnapped or killed, but also any other potential critics, through the implied intimidation. This fact was not lost on Pablo Parada: when asked what was going through his head while hiding in the drain pipe, he answered [our translation]: "I knew that I could suffer the same fate as Ronald Ojeda, who was kidnapped and subsequently was assassinated."[27] Though Parada, Veláquez, and Peche have all survived and remain vocal critics of the regime, Parada's observation that he was susceptible to the same fate as Ojeda highlights the success of this campaign of intimidation. By carrying out enforced disappearances outside of its borders, the regime has made it clear to those who have fled the country's political repression that they intend to exert the same form of control over dissidents abroad as they do at home.

5. Targeting Foreign Nationals: Lucas Hunter and Camilo Castro

While the regime's use of enforced disappearance against political opponents has increasingly extended beyond Venezuela's borders, it has also expanded another of its objectives in the use of enforced disappearance into a transnational context as well: the targeting of foreign nationals with the intent of using them as bargaining chips. Emblematic of this tactic is the case of Lucas Hunter, a dual citizen of France and the United States who traveled to Colombia as a tourist in December 2024.[28] On 7 January 2025, while operating a rented motorbike, Hunter became lost and unintentionally approached the Paraguachón border checkpoint. Crucially, he had not entered or attempted to enter Venezuelan territory when Venezuelan forces arrested him on Colombian soil. Between his arrest and 9:00 a.m. on the following day, he sent several WhatsApp messages to his sister, in which he stressed the Venezuelan authorities knew he had not intended to enter the country. However, from 8 January onward, he was held incommunicado until 18 July 2025, when he was released along with nine other U.S. citizens in exchange for the release of Venezuelan nationals who had been deported from the U.S. and held at CECOT in El Salvador.[29] While this form of enforced disappearance for bargaining power has not extended beyond the area immediately surrounding Venezuela's borders, Hunter's case still represents a dangerous encroachment onto Colombian territory to carry out his kidnapping.

Lucas Hunter is not the only foreign national to have been taken from the Paraguachón border crossing and subjected to enforced disappearance. On 26 June, 2025, Camilo Castro, a French-Chilean dual national, was also seized by Venezuelan authorities at the checkpoint. Castro, a yoga teacher, had been living in

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[26] Lavers, Michael K. (2026, Jan. 16). Gay Venezuelan opposition leader: Country's future uncertain after Maduro ouster. *Washington Blade*. Available at: https://www.washingtonblade.com/2026/01/16/gay-venezuelan-opposition-leader-countrys-future-uncertain-after-maduro-ouster/.

[27] Semana (2024, April 21). Habla Pablo Parada, señalado por régimen de Venezuela de querer derrocar a Nicolás Maduro: 'No participé en ningún plan conspirativo'. Available at: https://www.semana.com/mundo/articulo/habla-pablo-parada-senalado-por-regimen-de-venezuela-de-querer-derrocar-a-nicolas-maduro-no-participe-en-ningun-plan-conspirativo/202458/.

[28] Foro Penal & Robert F. Kennedy Human Rights. (2025). *Electoral Repression, Enforced Disappearances and Political Control in Venezuela*. Available at: https://rfkhumanrights.org/wp-content/uploads/2025/10/Electoral-Repression-Enforced-Disappearances-and-Political-Control-in-Venezuela.pdf, p. 38.

[29] *Id.*

Colombia and had traveled to Paraguachón to renew his Colombian residency visa.[30] By September, Castro's family had received only one communication from him: a voice message in July in which he called for help.[31] Venezuelan authorities refused, at first, to acknowledge his detention and, when they eventually did, did not explain the reasons for it.[32] Ultimately, he was arbitrarily held for four months.[33] Though French authorities say Castro's release did not entail any quid pro quo,[34] his kidnapping and prolonged incommunicado detention despite having no connection to Venezuela or its political situation suggest that his case fits squarely into the established pattern of strategically targeting foreign nationals.

III. Conclusions

The cases discussed in this submission paint a clear picture: that the Venezuelan government has sought to use enforced disappearances in a transnational context to accomplish goals broadly similar to those of its campaign of enforced disappearances within its own borders. The kidnapping and murder of Ronald Ojeda and the attempted abduction of Pablo Parada demonstrate attempts to stymie political opposition, both by directly silencing specific outspoken voices and by intimidating others from speaking up by making an example out of the victims. The cases of Lucas Hunter and Camilo Castro reflect attempts to leverage the capture of a foreign national in negotiations with other governments.

These cases highlight those most vulnerable to transnational enforced disappearances carried out by the Venezuelan regime. Venezuelan nationals living abroad, especially those who are vocal critics of the regime, seem to be the most vulnerable - perhaps especially those such as Ojeda whose opposition was known to the regime before they fled the country. These individuals, who have continued their activism while living outside the country, are vulnerable to transnational repression even far from Venezuela's borders. Foreign nationals with no particular connection to Venezuela are, of course, far less vulnerable, though they can find themselves in danger by merely traveling to border regions near Venezuela, in some cases without actually attempting to enter the country.

Given the particular vulnerability of critics of the regime living in exile, States such as Colombia and Chile (and other Latin American countries) that host large Venezuelan populations should not merely refrain from refoulement, but must also take active measures to identify and protect those most vulnerable to transnational repression within their borders. Where authorities are aware, or ought reasonably to be aware, that refugees face credible threats linked to their political activity, or human rights activism, effective protection should entail individualized risk assessments, rapid response mechanisms, and coordination between asylum authorities, prosecutors, and law enforcement agencies. Preventive measures should include secure reporting channels for threats and attempted abductions, witness and family protection, as well as a complete, impartial, effective, and prompt investigation into any suspected transnational repression, utilizing universal jurisdiction where appropriate. Without effective measures for active

[30] France 24 (2025, Nov. 11). French-Chilean national held in Venezuela since June arrives in France. Available at: https://www.france24.com/en/france/20251116-french-chilean-national-held-venezuela-june-released-macron-camilo-castro.

[31] Le Monde with AFP. (2025 Nov. 16). French-Chilean national who was detained in Venezuela arrives back in Paris. Available at:https://www.lemonde.fr/en/international/article/2025/11/16/french-national-held-in-venezuela-released-announces-macron_6747499_4.html.

[32] *Id.*

[33] France 24 (2025, Nov. 11). French-Chilean national held in Venezuela since June arrives in France.

[34] Le Monde with AFP. (2025 Nov. 16). French-Chilean national who was detained in Venezuela arrives back in Paris.

protection, Venezuelan political refugees will remain vulnerable to the same repression that caused them to flee their home country.

The enforced disappearances of foreign nationals from Venezuelan border crossings demonstrate an urgent need for strengthened consular protection and prompt diplomatic response. International bodies and States should reinforce consular protection by disseminating clear guidance on immediate notification, interpreter access, and independent medical verification for foreign detainees and dual nationals, given their documented vulnerability to incommunicado detention and use as leverage. States should establish early-warning and rapid-response protocols for disappearances in border regions, including 24/7 contact points, interpreter rosters, family liaison procedures, and coordinated diplomatic démarches within the first 24-48 hours of a disappearance. At the same time, the persistent practice of holding detainees incommunicado and denying consular access underscores that such measures cannot rely on cooperation by Venezuelan authorities. Accordingly, States are urged to strengthen diplomatic and legal actions necessary to immediately establish the whereabouts of any of their citizens subjected to enforced disappearance in Venezuela, and secure their release without delay, including through sustained bilateral pressure and multilateral escalation when access is refused. Additionally, States should warn their citizens against travel to areas adjacent to Venezuela's borders, especially to checkpoints such as Paraguachón with a history of enforced disappearances.