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VENEZUELA: HEADED TOWARD CIVIL WAR?

I. OVERVIEW

Venezuela, the world's fifth-largest oil exporter and wealthiest member of the Community of Andean Nations (CAN), is in deep political crisis, with high risk that its democratic institutions could collapse, and some possibility of civil war.

During the first months of 2004, tension between the government of President Hugo Chavez and the political opposition, organized under the umbrella Democratic Coordinating Instance (Coordinadora Democratica, CD),¹ approached a breaking point. The Chavez administration's apparent determination to do everything in its power to block a recall referendum has angered growing sectors of society.

¹ The CD is a loose and heterogeneous alliance of diverse political forces, not a unified political bloc. It is composed of 25 political parties, the trade union and employer organizations CTV and FEDECAMARAS, and 21 civic organisations. Among the first are Accion Democratica (AD), La Causa R, Partido Socialcristiano (COPEI), Movimiento al Socialismo (MAS), Primero Justicia, Proyecto Venezuela and Union. The country's two traditional parties, AD and COPEI, which for years alternated as its dominant political force, and the business community and labor organisations are the core elements. Also important politically is the MAS, which initially was with Chavez but switched even though its former presidential candidate, Jose Vicente Rangel, is Chavez's appointed Vice President. CD is coordinated by a five-member executive committee, which includes Enrique Mendoza (governor of Miranda federal state), Julio Borges (head of the Justice First party), Juan Fernandez (head of the civil association Oil People), Enrique Salas Roemer (head of the Project Venezuela party) and Henry Ramos Allup (head of AD). The CD claims that President Chavez has made a concerted effort to restrict pluralistic democracy and has violated the principle of separation of powers. It alleges violations of labor and property rights, harassment including violence against journalists, placement of active and retired military in civilian government agencies, partisan use of state resources and intimidation against business opponents.

Between 27 February and 4 March, clashes between the national guard (GN) and opposition protesters left at least fourteen dead and close to 300 wounded. Torture, arbitrary detention and excessive use of force were reported.² There is a clear trend of increasing and unpunished human rights violations since President Chavez was inaugurated in 1999.³ While the press has not been openly restricted, and several leading journals are vitriolic in their criticism, the government exerts multiple pressures on reporters, journalists and TV stations. Several opposition politicians who exercised their constitutional right to sign a petition for the president's recall have been arrested, and public employees reportedly were threatened with dismissal.⁴

Following the collection of recall signatures, the government-controlled National Electoral Council (CNE) entered into direct confrontation with the electoral chamber of the Supreme Court (Tribunal Supremo de Justicia, TSJ), which had declared the signatures valid and ordered the CNE to schedule the referendum.

The confrontation over the recall referendum is only the tip of the iceberg. The 1958 Punto Fijo accord⁵ established what was viewed as one of the

² A recent report of the Venezuelan Ombudsman's Office stated that nine persons died in the clashes. Defensoria del Pueblo, "Informe Preliminar Derechos Humanos 27 de febrero al 05 de marzo", Caracas, March 2004.

³ PROVEA, "Situacion de los Derechos Humanos en Venezuela, octubre 2003-septiembre 2003", Caracas, 2003. Also report of the OAS InterAmerican Commission on Human Rights, December 2003, at <http://www.oas.org/main/main.asp?sLang=E&sLink=http://www.oas.org/OASpage/humanrights.htm>, and "Letter to President Hugo Rafael Chavez Frias", Human Rights Watch, 9 April 2004, at <http://hrw.org/english/docs/2004/04/12/venezu8423.htm>.

⁴ See section IV. below.

⁵ On 31 October 1958, representatives of Venezuela's social democratic, conservative and liberal political parties (Accion Democratica, COPEI and Union Republicana Democratica) signed the Punto Fijo agreement (named after the house of

most solid democracies in Latin America. Since its rupture in 1989 and the demise of the oil-financed social welfare state and the associated spread of poverty, Venezuela has been in a downward spiral of economic and political polarisation.

President Chavez and his "Bolivarian Revolution" are no accident. In 1998 and 1999, despite a prior conviction for seeking to overthrow an elected government, Chavez won sweeping electoral victories. He promised the poor and dispossessed majority that he would found the republic anew and, with the active support of his followers, end corruption and the staggering social inequality. The result has been drastically sharpened political divisions, a deterioration of living standards and personal security, restrictions on rights and increased likelihood of violence.

The country is at a crossroads. The democratic opposition has gambled, asking nearly 1 million supporters to reconfirm their signatures on presidential recall petitions during a three-day "signature repair" (*reparo*) period at the end of May 2004 that has been agreed with the government. Despite many observers' strong belief that the government is still manoeuvring to avoid a recall election, the opposition, with difficulty, accepted international pleas not to resort to violence. If the government does not allow the recall process to move forward -- and there are a range of legalistic tactics it can still employ -- the opposition and the international community will face difficult choices.

Some in the opposition will urge taking to the streets. If that view prevails, the potential for violence is high. The other choice would be to regroup and focus on local and gubernatorial elections scheduled for late September 2004 and a subsequent presidential vote. That option would need a complementary strategy that could bring the government to respect Venezuela's historical adherence to democratic elections. A weakness in the opposition's campaign has been failure to develop and unite behind a viable democratic platform that responds to the unmet demands of a population that has moved from 25 per cent poverty in the late 1970s to 75 per cent today, most of whom voted for Chavez five years ago. Ending the

crisis requires the democratic opposition to concentrate on building a political platform and program capable of challenging Chavez in the next presidential election, whether that is 30 days after a successful recall referendum, a snap vote called by him, or in 2006, as constitutionally scheduled.

The international community and particularly members of the Organisation of American States (OAS) will have to decide whether the Inter-American Democratic Charter,⁶ which demands respect for elections, the rule of law and constitutional procedures, has any teeth when violated. The OAS secretary general and his mission along with the Carter Center have been in Venezuela with a mandate to observe these procedures and to help negotiate a solution to the political crisis.⁷ The recent whiff of authoritarianism -- violence against protestors in February, actions that jeopardise judicial independence⁸ and serious distortions in managing the recall process -- deserves sharp international rebuke.

At the same time, the international community also has to convince Chavez that it is not who wins the recall or the election that is at issue, but rather whether the process is transparent and free and democratic norms are respected. If the OAS mission report following the *reparo* finds fraud and gross violations of democratic norms by a member government, the regional body's capacity for response will be tested along with the political will of its governments.

Despite the *reparo* agreement, no one should be sanguine that the political crisis has been resolved. The opposition has good reason to distrust the Chavez government, which has shown considerable

Rafael Caldera, leader of COPEI). The agreement followed the ousting of Dictator Marco Perez Jimenez (1952-1958) and established the basis for a steady cycle of democratic elections and alternating AD and COPEI governments until 1989.

⁶ Inter-American Democratic Charter, Organization of American States, adopted 11 September 2001, at <http://www.oas.org/main/main.asp?sLang=E&sLink=http://www.oas.org/documents/eng/documents.asp>.

⁷ CP/RES. 833 (1349/02) corr. 1, "Support for the Democratic Institutional Structure in Venezuela and the Facilitation Efforts of the OAS Secretary General", adopted 16 December 2002 by the Permanent Council of the Organization of American States.

⁸ The Chavez government was charged with packing the Supreme Court, evenly divided ten-ten between government supporters and opposition, by promoting legislation adopted 30 April 2004 to add twelve new members and permit impeachment of justices by a simple majority of the legislature. "Storm Over Venezuela Court Reform", at <http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/americas/3675115.stm>.

astuteness in not quite obliterating the line between adherence to the law and manoeuvres within the law, confronting the CD with one institutional hurdle after the other and employing intimidating force only in relatively small doses.⁹ Despite its seeming single-minded determination to rid the country of Chavez, the opposition fortunately has turned away from unconstitutional actions such as the coup attempt of April 2002.

Given the extreme polarisation within the country and the importance of avoiding institutional implosion and large-scale bloodshed, democrats on both sides ought to pursue the recall referendum option as the one constitutional avenue for measuring public antipathy during the life of the government. Regional institutions and the international community have a joint responsibility to ensure that such a process is fairly run.

The Organization of American States (OAS), the Carter Center and UNDP should continue to support this endeavour. The Group of Friends -- established in early 2003 and led by Brazil, with Chile, Mexico, Spain, Portugal and the U.S. -- should play an even more active role in helping to resolve the crisis. At the very least, the international community should monitor every one of the 2,700 sites around the country during the *reparo* process. But it also must be prepared to determine whether the government, as called for by the Inter-American Charter, respects democratic norms. If Venezuela implodes, the consequences for the Andean region and for democracy in the Americas would be devastating.¹⁰

II. BACKGROUND

Since the election of Hugo Chavez, retired army colonel and presidential candidate of the Polo Patriótico, in December 1998, Venezuela has

witnessed far-reaching institutional, political and social change.¹¹

Chavez's ascendancy ended 40 years of democratic rule based on the 1958 Punto Fijo accord, which was characterised by the alternation in power of the two main political parties, Acción Democrática (AD) and Comité de Organización Política Electoral Independiente (COPEI).¹² Chavez and his Movimiento Quinta República (MVR) have launched a project that aims to overhaul the political system and keep Chavez in power. Although elected, he was convicted of attempting a military coup in 1992 and later pardoned. His quest for political and social primacy has not only antagonised traditional political and economic sectors, but alienated some of his own supporters as well. Divisions within the opposition, which also harbours intransigent right-wing groups, and the absence of an alternative program that responds to the changes of the past two decades aggravate the crisis.

The current situation pits a heterogeneous political opposition against a populist and increasingly authoritarian -- but democratically elected -- regime that continues to have substantial support. To be fully understood, the crisis has to be seen in historical perspective.

The milestones of political and social disintegration and destabilisation include the violent repression of a spontaneous popular uprising in Caracas that left perhaps as many as 1,000 or more dead in 1989 (the so-called Caracazo)¹³, two failed coups in

⁹ A recent example of informative, but biased, reporting on the situation is the article "La batalla del referendo" by Maurice Lemoine in *Le Monde diplomatique*, April 2004. The author is prepared to give the Chavez government the benefit of the doubt but never poses, let alone answers, the question whether the opposition's quest for a recall referendum has some legitimacy.

¹⁰ A forthcoming ICG report will examine relations, and especially border problems, between Colombia and Venezuela and Ecuador.

¹¹ As one opposition leader put it recently: "It is unbelievable what has happened to the Venezuela we knew, how the country has changed over the last five years". ICG interview, Caracas, 15 March 2004.

¹² AD is of social democrat and COPEI of Christian social or conservative origin. See footnote 5 above.

¹³ Following President Carlos Andres Perez's announcement of the implementation of a strict IMF-supported economic adjustment program on 16 February 1989, massive riots broke out in all major cities on 27 February. Faced with this spontaneous popular uprising, triggered by a drastic hike in petrol and public transport prices (100 and 30 per cent, respectively), Perez declared a state of emergency and instructed the National Guard and the army to repress the protests, which included destruction of public transport utilities and wide-spread looting. According to official sources, some 300 were killed and close to 1,000 were wounded in the ensuing clashes. Unofficial sources put the documented death toll at 400. See Human Rights Watch, at www.hrw.org/reports/1994/WR94/Americas-11.htm, and U.S. Department of State, "Country Reports on Human

1992, and the impeachment of President Carlos Andres Perez on corruption charges in 1993. The demise of Venezuela's two main political parties, AD and COPEI, became evident in the 1998 and 2000 elections. The most recent benchmarks of a severely divided polity were the temporary ousting of President Chavez in April 2002, and the general strike in late 2002 and early 2003.

Several authors have convincingly argued that today's political division was preceded and conditioned by deepening social fissures since the mid-1980s. Venezuela once was hailed as an extraordinarily stable democratic system and among the wealthiest economies in Latin America. It suffered a drastic fall in oil revenues, poorly planned and managed expenditure of public funds on large infrastructure projects and very high levels of corruption. It was further crippled by a currency devaluation and growing foreign debt servicing problems.

The implementation of orthodox "neoliberal" economic policies under Presidents Carlos Andres Perez (1989-1993) and Rafael Caldera (1994-1999) did not stem the rise in unemployment or the impoverishment of broad sectors of the population.¹⁴ Venezuelans accustomed to support from the oil-financed social welfare state lost faith in the traditional political class and democratic institutions.

In large part, Chavez owed his sweeping victory in 1998 to his promise to apply a radical cure to the ills of the so-called "Fourth Republic" (1958-1998).¹⁵ His "Fifth Republic" would break with the past and be based on a completely different set of institutions, including a new constitution replacing the one adopted in 1961. Chavez emphasised the central role of the dispossessed and poor majority in the construction of the "new republic" and the victory of the "Bolivarian revolution".¹⁶ Internationally, he strongly questioned Venezuela's traditionally close

relations with the U.S. and spoke of a multi-polar world in which Third World countries, especially those with strategic natural resources, would have greater importance. He criticized Plan Colombia as U.S. interference in Latin America's internal affairs and never distanced himself unequivocally from the Colombian insurgent groups FARC and ELN. Perhaps less surprisingly, he also promoted an even more active role for Venezuela in OPEC.

Above all, however, Chavez was able to capitalise on the weakness of the old political parties. The Polo Patriotico, a heterogeneous political movement comprised of his MVR, former military officers and members of insurrectionist groups as well as renowned personalities of the Left, drew votes from a broad political and social spectrum, including entrepreneurs, the dispossessed and poor, and diverse social and cultural groups. After his pardon by President Caldera and release from prison in 1995, Chavez's anti-establishment history added to the romantic nature of his appeal and contributed to his electoral victory.¹⁷

In power Chavez proceeded swiftly. He proposed a referendum for a constituent assembly, which was established in 1999 and charged with drafting a new "constitution of the Bolivarian Republic of Venezuela", which entered into effect in March 2000.¹⁸ It incorporates, with direct reference to the "liberator" Simon Bolivar,¹⁹ a commitment to democratic and popular values.²⁰

Rights Practices for 1993" at http://dosfan.lib.uic.edu/ERC/democracy/1993_hrp_report/93hrp_report_toc.html.

¹⁴ Despite his initial rhetoric, Caldera pursued policies that were only slightly less neoliberal in the end than those of Perez. He saw his plans undercut by low oil prices.

¹⁵ Chavez ran as the candidate of the Movimiento Quinta Republica (MVR) and obtained 56 per cent of the vote, leaving his main contender, Henrique Salas, far behind. Salas ran as an independent but obtained, at the last minute, the support of the traditional parties AD and COPEI, which had fielded a weak candidate (Luis Uceró, AD) and a former Miss Universe (Irene Saez, COPEI).

¹⁶ ICG interview, Caracas, 17 March 2004.

¹⁷ In 1992, the then lieutenant colonel was involved in a failed coup, in which a group of young military officers sought to take power away from what they perceived to be corrupt, inefficient and outlived political parties. Although they failed, disenchanted parts of the electorate nonetheless reacted sympathetically because their action had appeared to represent an initiative to bring about a change in an ailing economic, political and social system. The coup attempt also gave Chavez the unexpected opportunity -- in the same moment he was arrested -- to transmit via radio the message that he and his fellow conspirators had failed in their attempt to change the country "for now" (*por ahora*).

¹⁸ Through the referendum Chavez by-passed the parliament in which the two traditional parties, AD and COPEI, held enough seats to veto the constitutional reform project. The referendum on the establishment of a constituent assembly received the support of 92.4 per cent who voted on 15 December 1999.

¹⁹ General Simon Bolivar (1783-1830) is one of the greatest figures of Latin American independence. He was born a Spanish subject in Caracas and became the leader of the struggle for independence from Spain in the Andean region. In

The new constitution expands the powers of the president considerably, including extending the term from five to six years and allowing immediate re-election. The bi-cameral congress was replaced by a single-chamber national assembly (Asamblea Nacional, AN). The "Moral Republican Council" (*poder ciudadano*) was established alongside the executive, legislative and judicial branches of government.²¹ Another new power, the National Electoral Council, was created, comprised of five "independent" members to be chosen by the AN. Through article 72, all elected public officials, from the president to municipal councillors, can be subjected to a recall referendum by the electorate.²²

General elections were held on 30 July 2000 under the new constitution. Chavez obtained a second sweeping victory winning 59 per cent of the votes. The runner-up was Francisco Arias, a retired army officer who was involved in the 1992 coup attempt with Chavez and exemplifies the early fissures

1819, he won a crucial military victory over the Spanish, with the support of British troops, at Boyaca River, Colombia (until 1863 named New Granada). In September 1821, Bolivar was elected president of Colombia and Venezuela. It is said that Chavez always saves a seat for Bolivar at the conference table in the Miraflores presidential palace in Caracas.

²⁰ Constitucion de la Republica Bolivariana de Venezuela, Preamble, 24 March 2000. It declares the "supreme aim of founding the republic anew in order to establish a democratic, participative and protagonist, multiethnic and pluri-cultural society within a federal and decentralised state of justice that consolidates the values of liberty, independence, peace, solidarity, the common good, territorial integrity, life in society and the rule of law for this generation as well as those of the future".

²¹ The Moral Republican Council is composed of the Ombudsman, the Attorney General and the Comptroller General. Its principal function is to control the activities of state institutions, in particular to prevent corruption, in cooperation with civil society organisations. It appears that the Council is not yet functioning. Constitucion de la Republica Bolivariana de Venezuela, articles 273-278.

²² A minimum of 20 per cent of the electorate is required to support a petition for the recall of any elected public official, including the president. However, the petition cannot be initiated until the public official is halfway through his or her term in office. The CNE rejected the opposition's first attempt to force a recall referendum because the estimated 3.2 million signatures it provided had been collected more than a year prematurely. A recall is successful if at least 25 per cent of the electorate votes in the referendum and a majority, which also has to be at least the same number of votes plus one that brought the official into office, approves it. This establishes a high threshold for a Chavez recall referendum since the president received 3,757,773 votes in the 2000 election, 59 per cent of those cast.

within the political movement that brought Chavez to power. A number of the president's followers, including members of the MBR-200 and others who expected a more democratic attitude within the MVR, left the movement. However, they failed to constitute a significant political counter force.²³

Despite widespread discontent with the new constitution, the traditional parties were in disarray after Chavez's victory in 2000 and unable to block his far-reaching reform projects. Smaller left-wing non-government parties, such as La Causa R (LCR) and Izquierda Democratica (ID), also failed to gather sufficient support to establish a viable political opposition.

Chavez, in turn, made ample use of the special legislative powers granted to him by the AN, in many instances governing by decree. He showed considerable communication skills, creating the sensation among the poor majority of the electorate that his government was serious about easing their plight. Highly targeted, but in the long-term possibly unsustainable, social programs, such as Barrio Adentro and Plan Robinson, as well as personal rewards to listeners and participants in his popular personal radio show, "Alo Presidente", underpinned Chavez's popularity.²⁴

The army has been an important support of the Chavez government since the beginning. The 1999 constitution gives the armed forces broad new powers, including autonomy in arms procurement.

²³ The MBR-200 was founded by a group of young army officers, among them Chavez, in the early 1980s. It existed for ten years as a clandestine military cell, some of whose members participated in the 1992 coup. In 1995, MBR candidate Francisco Arias was elected governor of the state of Zulia. In 1997, Chavez transformed the MBR into the MVR, gaining thereby much support from a broad spectrum of political forces, including LCR and MAS. Daniel Hellinger, "Vision politica general", in Steve Ellner and Daniel Hellinger, eds., *La politica Venezolana en la epoca de Chavez* (Caracas, 2003), pp. 60-61; Margerita Lopez, "Hugo Chavez Frias, su movimiento y presidencia", in *ibid*, pp. 98-110. See also Carlos Romero, "Venezuela: algunos cambios, muchos deseos y pocas alternativas", in Christian Freres and Karina Pacheco, eds., *Nuevos horizontes andinos* (Caracas, 2002), pp. 109-134.

²⁴ Mision Barrio Adentro is a medical assistance program launched in poor neighbourhoods across Venezuela in which several thousand Cuban medics participate. Mision Robinson is a large-scale literacy campaign. Through Mision Mercal, the government distributes basic food stuffs at below-market prices to the poor across the country.

It also gives military personnel the right to vote and stipulates only that they abstain from "political militancy" -- not that they be "apolitical", as in the 1961 constitution. Chavez appointed a number of retired army officers to key positions in his party, government and public institutions, including embassies. Others were elected to public posts.²⁵

Despite Chavez's support for the armed forces, a small number of military officers have acted against the president on occasion. In March 2002, for example, Colonel Pedro Soto declared himself in disobedience to the president and claimed that 75 per cent of the armed forces were against Chavez. In late October 2002, eleven military officers headed by General Enrique Medina congregated on the Francia Square in the upper-middle class Caracas sector of Altamira and demanded that Chavez resign. More than 250 active-and retired military officers and non-commissioned officers joined them.

The most severe point of tension between the government and members of the armed forces occurred on 11 April 2002. Faced with a massive opposition march to the presidential palace of Miraflores, Chavez ordered the army to deploy troops and tanks and be prepared to repress the protests. This order was largely disobeyed, and officers of the three service branches requested the president to leave his post. Amid still unclear circumstances, high-ranking military officers made Chavez abandon the presidential palace. Subsequently, he was flown to, and interned on, the island of La Orchila, 150 kilometres from Caracas. Three days later, he returned to power with the help of loyal army units.²⁶

III. THE RECALL REFERENDUM

The recall referendum is the major battle in the political war. The question remains whether it also can be a process, as the constitution intended, for determining the degree of public dissatisfaction with an elected official through democratic means. The opposition has been determined thus far to stick to the rules of the game and challenge the Chavez government through institutional channels.

²⁵ See Deborah Norden, "La democracia en uniforme: Chavez y las fuerzas armadas", in Ellner and Hellinger, op. cit., pp. 121-143.

²⁶ *Revista SIC*, No. 660, December 2003, p. 569.

In February 2003, representatives of the government and the opposition signed the 'Declaration against Violence, for Peace and Democracy in Venezuela'. This was followed by a second declaration in May 2003. Both documents were attempts to establish channels of communication between the two sides and provide a platform for a peaceful and democratic solution. Among the commitments in the declarations was to use Article 72 on the holding of a referendum and an agreement to establish a "trustworthy electoral arbiter" as soon as possible. The documents were facilitated by the Tripartite Working Group composed of OAS Secretary General Cesar Gaviria, whose involvement was crucial, Elena Martinez, UNDP's assistant administrator for the Americas, and Jennifer McCoy, director of the Latin America program at the Carter Center, although their local representatives, Antonio Molpeceres (Resident Coordinator of the UNDP) and Francisco Diez of the Carter Center did the day-to-day monitoring.

This process was preceded by the general strike of late 2002 and early 2003 and the failed coup attempt in April 2002.²⁷ As one member of the opposition put it:

The opposition started off badly and the wrong way round by supporting the coup. But we have learned the lesson and are now fully committed to respecting the institutional framework in our quest to get rid of Chavez. Although there are still elements of the opposition that favour the armed struggle, we consider civil [peaceful] resistance to be the only option.²⁸

Another loser in the April 2002 coup was the U.S., which was sharply criticised for its early statements apparently welcoming the departure of Chavez and its failure to reject the coup immediately, in keeping with the Inter-American Democratic Charter. Although it backtracked the next day, this has undermined U.S. credibility and severely limited its

²⁷ Pedro Carmona, the president of the employers association, FEDECAMARAS, headed a de facto government for 48 hours during which the constitution and many laws were annulled. After Chavez returned on 14 April 2002, Carmona sought refuge in the Colombian embassy. He is currently in exile in Colombia.

²⁸ ICG interview, Caracas, 15 March 2004.

ability to play a leadership role in helping to achieve a constitutional solution to the crisis.²⁹

Venezuela's neighbour Colombia also did not unequivocally condemn the coup. A declaration by the Rio Group on 14 April 2002 seemed to imply some justification since it said the rupture of the constitutional process was "generated by a process of growing polarisation"; however, the group, which was meeting in Costa Rica, did condemn the coup and deny recognition.³⁰ The Permanent Council of the OAS, in turn, condemned the "alteration of the constitutional order in Venezuela" and decided to send a mission headed by the secretary general at the earliest possible moment.³¹

For the Chavez administration, the referendum process is a serious threat since the opposition is using the recall mechanism that Chavez himself had insisted be enshrined in the 2000 constitution. The government's recent vocal opposition to a referendum has been sharply criticised internally and internationally. The government risks defeat, not because it is bound to lose the recall referendum itself, which remains uncertain, but because it seems determined to employ every trick, legal or illegal, to prevent the vote from being held.³²

In late November and early December 2003, the National Electoral Council (CNE)³³ called on the electorate to sign petitions for three referendums: recalls of the president, government and opposition deputies in the National Assembly. The latter two petitions were promoted by the MVR, the first by the CD.

The collection of signatures for the recall provided a breathing space in the overcharged political

environment.³⁴ According to observers and participants, the CNE, working under difficult conditions and against time, organised this without great discord. Signatures were collected mostly at recognised points though 15 per cent were assembled by roving list takers. In all cases, CNE and government observers were present.³⁵ Apart from a few incidents attributed to Chavez followers, the process was tranquil. "At the end of the collection of signatures", the magazine SIC editorialised, "the voices of violence faded away and public opinion of the country witnessed an appreciable decline in its level of tension and confrontation".³⁶

The NGO Sumate ("join in"), entrusted by the opposition with organising the signatures, declared that 3,467,050 citizens supported the petition for recall of the president. It excluded 130,000 invalid signatures.³⁷ According to article 72, a minimum of 20 per cent of the total electorate must sign in order for the CNE to call a referendum. This means that a minimum of 2,430,000 citizens had to support the petition.

The government's reaction following Sumate's declaration stands in total contrast to the good faith and tranquillity that characterised the collection of signatures phase. President Chavez derided the process before it had formally ended, accusing the opposition of planning and implementing a "mega-fraud". During the process, the government closed the border with Colombia and several private airports in Caracas apparently to impede citizens living or staying in the neighbouring country from returning. It did not allow citizens abroad the opportunity to deposit signatures at embassies.

Since the apparent opposition success, the government has used delaying and obstructionist tactics. If the recall referendum takes place after 19 August 2004, the Chavez administration cannot be deposed, even if Chavez himself were to be removed. Article 233 of the constitution stipulates that new elections must be held in the absence of the president, including for

²⁹ ICG interviews, Caracas, Rio de Janeiro, Washington DC, March, April 2004.

³⁰ Juan Gabriel Tokatlian, "A 'Benevolent' Coup", in *The Boston Globe*, 25 April 2002.

³¹ OAS Permanent Council, Resolution on the Situation in Venezuela, CP/RES. 811 (1315/02), 13 April 2002.

³² See section V below as well as ICG interviews, Caracas, March 2004 and Washington DC, March-April 2004.

³³ The very existence of the CNE reflects the polarisation in the country. It was not formed until three years after the constitution called for its existence. Supreme Court intervention was required after the National Assembly had failed to agree on a compromise five-member slate. The court appointed two members recommended by the government and two members recommended by the opposition and named as the fifth Francisco Carrasquero Lopez, a former judge and law school dean from Zulia.

³⁴ The procedure was based on the above-mentioned May 2003 accords and regulated by the norms on the holding of referendums elaborated by the CNE that entered into effect on 20 November 2003. CNE, "Normas para regular los procesos de referendos revocatorios de mandatos de cargos de eleccion popular", in *Gaceta Electoral de la Republica Bolivariana de Venezuela*, No. 181, 20 November 2003.

³⁵ *Revista SIC*, No. 662, March 2004, p. 50.

³⁶ Editorial, in *Revista SIC*, No. 662, March 2004, p. 50.

³⁷ *Revista SIC*, No. 661, January-February 2004, p. 47.

reasons of a recall, during the first four years of his mandate. Chavez assumed the presidency on 19 August 2000. The CNE has scheduled the recall, assuming sufficient signatures are validated, for 8 August.

If it had picked a date after 19 August, new presidential elections would not take place even if a sufficient number of citizens approved the recall of President Chavez. In that case Vice President Jose Rangel would take over until the end of the presidential term in 2006. One of Venezuela's hardline leftwing political lions, Rangel would be unlikely to change the direction of Chavez's policies although his ability as a deal-maker might produce a less rancorous political environment.

Among the measures employed by the government to block or delay verification of signatures was direct pressure on the five members of the CNE, which effectively has lost its independence. All crucial decisions since early March 2004 were three (in favour of the government) to two (opposition). CNE president Francisco Carrasquero acknowledged that the body would not decide itself on the number of tables, number of days, or number of collection sites, but would ratify whatever resulted from the government-opposition negotiations.³⁸

On 2 March (three months after the collection of signatures had ended) Carrasquero announced that the council had validated 1,832,493 signatures. In the same breath, however, he questioned close to 900,000 signatures on so-called "planillas planas" forms that were duly signed and authorised with a finger print by citizens but not filled in completely (names, address, number of ID) by them. To speed the process, workers at many tables had filled out the names and ID numbers of those in line and then had them sign and affix their index fingerprint.

The CNE, after initially accepting the procedure, switched midway through, apparently when it was clear that the 2.4 million mark would easily be reached, even though representatives of the electoral council, the government and the opposition had been at each site, had not objected, and had signed the final file of each collection point. Monitors from the OAS and the Carter Center also had not raised questions. A close observer of the CNE process noted that while the rules issued in November 2003

had stipulated four possible objections to signatures, the CNE had come up with some 38 new ones.³⁹

Following Carrasquero's declaration, CNE Director Jorge Rodriguez presented the council's proposal on the "signature repair process" (*reparo*) required by the electoral law in case of doubt as to validity. The proposal put the burden of proof on the individual citizen, foreseeing the publication in the print media of the ID numbers of petitioners requested to reconfirm their signatures. The CNE initially stated that the process would take place at fewer than 1,000 signature review points over five days. After two days of negotiations between government and opposition, it switched that to two days at 2,700 signature review points across the country. The NGO Sumate reacted by stating that the *reparo* process, with the two-day restriction, would only allow time for some 220,000 petitioners to reconfirm their signatures.

The OAS and the Carter Center in Caracas declared that they did not share the CNE's position on the "planillas planas", believing the signatures to be valid, but offered to continue observing the process if the opposition decided to participate in a *reparo* process. Opposition leaders, among them Julio Borges of Primero Justicia and Antonio Ledezma of Alianza Bravo Pueblo, denounced the "theft" of close to one million signatures and called on citizens to keep up civic resistance. At the same time, they stressed the need for a constitutional and electoral solution to the crisis and continued negotiating.

On 15 March, the electoral chamber of the Supreme Court (Tribunal Supremo de Justicia, TSJ), viewed as leaning against the government, ruled that the "planillas planas" were valid, and the CNE was obligated to proceed with the recall referendum.⁴⁰ While the opposition hailed this as a victory, the CNE challenged the ruling. Carrasquero argued that the electoral chamber's decision had prompted a "conflict of competence" between the CNE and the Supreme Court. On 17 March, the five-member constitutional chamber of the TSJ, viewed as heavily weighted with government supporters,

³⁸ ICG interview, Caracas, 2 March 2004.

³⁹ ICG interviews, Caracas and Washington DC, 2 and 16 March 2004.

⁴⁰ The electoral chamber's ruling followed legal action taken on the part of a number of members of the CD, in particular Primero Justicia, against the CNE's decision to put close to 900,000 signatures "under observation". The ruling was backed by former decisions of the constitutional chamber of the Supreme Court that granted the electoral chamber final power of decision regarding electoral matters.

instructed the electoral chamber of the TSJ to forward all referendum files and halt all related proceedings.⁴¹

One analyst said:

The constitutional chamber of the TSJ has decided, predictably, to annul the electoral chamber's decision of last week, instructing, among other things, the CNE to declare invalid the over 876,000 signatures still "under observation."⁴²

In a decision read out on national television by Magistrate Ivan Rincon, President of the TSJ, the constitutional chamber also decided that the principle regarding the good faith of petitioners "was not applicable in the verification of acts of political participation".⁴³ The magistrate's statement thus reiterated the government's position that the burden of proof resided with citizens who had signed the petition.

The political ruling of the constitutional chamber indeed prompted the "conflict of competence" invoked by CNE President Carrasquero. This stand-off between two chambers of Venezuela's highest judicial body still has to be resolved by a ruling of the "full chamber" (*sala plena*) of the Supreme Court. However, that body is divided, ten-ten, between supporters and opponents of the government.

CD representatives first argued that the electoral chamber's ruling remained valid, and consequently the CNE was obligated to call for the recall referendum, as long as the full chamber did not reverse that decision. They further emphasised that the constitutional chamber's ruling was only signed by three justices, one short of a quorum.⁴⁴

However, pressed for time and underlining the importance of the May 2003 accords between government and opposition (which bound both parties to find a constitutional and democratic solution to the crisis), the CD also submitted a proposal to the CNE for the *reparo* process. It outlined four basic conditions. The most important was to have four to ten tables at each of the 2,700

points across the country where the process is to occur. A second was to have available the full five-day period set forth in the CNE guidelines.⁴⁵ The proposal further called for transparency in the process and a declaration that the referendum would be held during the first week of August at the latest. The government largely accepted these proposals at the eleventh hour.

The final decision, announced on 21 April 2004, provides that the *reparo* of 1,190,000 signatures will take place from 27 to 31 May. With the CNE having already confirmed the validity of 1.91 million signatures, a further 520,000 have to be validated in order to reach the 2,430,000 mark that would mandate the recall referendum. The OAS and the Carter Center reported that Secretary General Cesar Gaviria and former U.S. President Jimmy Carter will be present to witness the exercise.⁴⁶

The CNE set 8 August for a referendum in the event that the *reparo* process adds sufficient signatures to meet the minimum requirement. If the *reparo* process is not conducted in a minimally fair way, the OAS and the Carter Center can be expected to issue strong condemnations.

IV. TOWARD A COLLAPSE OF INSTITUTIONS?

The signature collection process in late 2003 was a ray of hope in the midst of Venezuela's entrenched political crisis. Local analysts generally have concluded that the Chavez administration is determined not to let the referendum take place.⁴⁷ The opposition is running out of time. A ruling by the full chamber of the Supreme Court on the electoral chamber's decision is not expected any time soon. Thus, even if the *reparo* process succeeds at the end of May in reconfirming the validity of 520,000 signatures, the government still has pending before the Supreme Court, which it now is close to expanding by a further twelve members, its challenge to the *reparo* process itself.

The government also is doing all it can to see that the *reparo* process does not produce the necessary

⁴¹ *Revista Zeta*, 19-25 March 2004, p. 14.

⁴² Letter by Enrique ter Horst, March 2004.

⁴³ ICG interview, Enrique ter Horst, 24 March 2004.

⁴⁴ *Revista Zeta*, No. 1458, 19-25 March 2004, pp. 52-54.

⁴⁵ CNE, "Normas", op. cit.

⁴⁶ "Venezuela: Recall Dates Set", *The New York Times*, 22 April 2004; ICG interviews, Washington DC, 30 April 2004.

⁴⁷ ICG interviews, Caracas, 15-19 March 2004.

number of signatures. State officials and employees who signed the petition continue to be dismissed or threatened with dismissal if they reconfirm their signature.⁴⁸ Opposition leaders also are subjected to pressure. In mid-March Henrique Capriles, mayor of the Caracas municipality Baruta and member of the "Primero Justicia" (Justice First) party, was arrested on charges of participating in incidents at the Cuban embassy during the temporary ousting of President Chavez in April 2002.⁴⁹ The government levied heavy taxes on four television stations that aired publicity spots endorsing the general strike of 2002-2003. The Inter-American Press Association (IAPA) has denounced abuses against, and intimidation of, journalists and reporters by government agents.⁵⁰

In a recent critical report, the Inter-American Commission on Human Rights (IACHR) expressed deep concern over human rights violations and the deterioration of the rule of law in Venezuela. The report concluded:

The Commission has observed...that between March 2002 and [the] first quarter of this year [2003] more than 40 people were killed and some 750 injured as the result of street protests. The extreme political polarisation and the resulting acts of violence that erupt periodically between demonstrators of different persuasions illustrate the growing political intolerance in the country. Among the signs of institutional weakness are the failure to enforce the new constitution, the perceived lack of independence of the branches of government, the growing concentration of power in the national executive, the impunity with which armed civilian groups and death squads conduct their activities, the tendency to confrontation and to denigrate the traditional political opposition on the part of the government, the constant attacks on journalists and the news media, the tendency to militarisation of public administration through the increasingly prominent role of the armed forces ...⁵¹

Prominent Venezuelan human rights organisations, such as PROVEA and COFAVIC, also have denounced persistent high levels of human rights violations and impunity in 2003 and early 2004.⁵² The latest PROVEA report asserts there were 165 extra-judicial killings between October 2002 and September 2003.⁵³ COFAVIC charged that the government made "disproportionate use of force" in its attempt to dissolve the opposition marches in late February and early March 2004. Reportedly, fourteen people died in clashes with state security forces, 261 were hurt and a number of detained persons were tortured. The national assembly has not passed pending legislation that would establish a Truth Commission charged with investigating the violence and killings that occurred during the chaos surrounding Chavez's ousting in April 2002.

If the *reparo* process ends without offering an opportunity for a recall referendum, and there is widespread belief that the outcome was fraudulent, the potential for violent confrontation is real.

The elements that justify serious concern include.

- ❑ Many believe the country's political polarisation is at the level of Nicaragua in the 1980s or Chile in the early 1970s.⁵⁴
- ❑ There has never been a satisfactory determination of responsibility for the deaths which occurred during the April 2002 coup attempt.
- ❑ The deaths of at least fourteen people during clashes between opposition marchers and the national guard in late February and early March 2004 have added new venom to the environment.
- ❑ Rhetoric on both sides increasingly involves incitement to armed action. "People say", warns a recent SIC magazine editorial, "that faced with the government's violence and impertinence... The moment has come to change the form of struggle, bullets count".⁵⁵ All over Altamira, an upper-middle class Caracas neighbourhood, graffiti reads "RR o 350" (recall referendum or -- armed - resistance as stipulated in article 350 of

⁴⁸ ICG interview, Enrique ter Horst, 21 March 2004.

⁴⁹ *El Universal*, 17 March, p. 1/7.

⁵⁰ *El Universal*, 15 March 2004, p. 1/8. The mass media has been at the heart of the stand-off between the government and the opposition. Both sides have made ample use of it to attack and discredit the other, to the point where factual and objective reporting has almost ceased to exist in Venezuela.

⁵¹ IACHR, "Report on the Situation of Human Rights in Venezuela", 29 December 2003.

⁵² ICG interviews, Caracas, 15 and 18 March 2004.

⁵³ This figure, while high, actually represents a slight decline compared to 175 and 241 extra-judicial killings reported for the previous two periods respectively. PROVEA, "Situacion de los Derechos Humanos en Venezuela", op. cit., p. 301.

⁵⁴ ICG interviews, Caracas, 2 and 16 March 2004.

⁵⁵ "Mantengamos el rumbo", in *Revista SIC*, No. 662, March 2004, p. 51.

the constitution). This hard line is reflected particularly in statements by members of the so-called Democratic Bloc (Bloque Democrático), an opposition group of former military officers and far-right elements that once formed part of the CD.⁵⁶

- Venezuela is an armed camp. The Chavez administration has been preparing itself for a possible armed confrontation. For two years, the national guard has been equipped with modern anti-riot gear and stocks of teargas grenades and rubber bullets. The army has acquired new tanks and armoured personnel carriers, apparently of French and Russian manufacture.⁵⁷

The government also created in 2001 the Bolivarian Circles (Círculos Bolivarianos), which today are present throughout the country. The executive branch describes them as social and citizen expressions of participatory democracy.⁵⁸ The opposition charges they are replicas of Cuba's "Committees for Defence of the Revolution", designed to intimidate the opposition. Independent observers see them as fulfilling a variety of purposes, from community organisation in the poorest barrios to harassment of political opponents. Many Circles are drawn from the poor and have been accused by the opposition of acts of violence against protest marchers and vandalism in middle and upper-middle class Caracas neighbourhoods.⁵⁹ During pro-government demonstrations, the Circles identify with other state-sponsored groups, such as the Tupamaros, Carapaica and 23 de Enero.⁶⁰ There is a strong belief that these groups, or parts of them, are armed and form an integral part of the Chavez administration's "counter-revolutionary defence system".⁶¹

Although the Chavez administration denies its existence, there also are reports of a small irregular armed force that operates in the country's rural

hinterland, the Bolivarian Liberation Front (Frente Bolivariano de Liberación, FBL).⁶²

Finally, the armed forces and police forces of the state are divided between government and opposition allegiance. The constitution provides for local, regional and national police forces. This means that opposition mayors and governors have control over their own units. For example, the Metropolitan Police of Caracas, some 10,000-12,000 officers, is commanded by Mayor Alfredo Pena, a Chavez foe. The central government also has control over other police forces as well as the national guard, the army, the navy and the air force.⁶³

However, even with respect to the armed forces, there are questions about political allegiance if the issue becomes one of firing on civilian opponents of the regime. What is clear is that if the non-violent avenues for resolving the political crisis are closed, the potential is great for civil strife and substantial loss of human life.⁶⁴

V. CONCLUSION

Against this worst-case scenario stands the maturity of the moderate elements of the Venezuelan political system. Much of the opposition learned how unwise unconstitutional options are from the failed coup attempt against President Chavez in April 2002. There is also awareness that the failed general strike of 2002-2003 caused immense economic damage for

⁵⁶ ICG interview, Caracas, 19 March 2004.

⁵⁷ ICG interview, Caracas, 15 March 2004.

⁵⁸ In Chavez's words, "the Bolivarian Circles are the foundation of the popular organization of the great revolutionary Bolivarian movement, bringing together all popular and political currents in the country", *Veporlibertad, Círculos Bolivarianos* (Caracas, 2003), p. 94.

⁵⁹ ICG interviews, Caracas, 18 March 2004.

⁶⁰ These groups are mostly active in Venezuela's large urban centres, especially Caracas. They are small, pro-government militias but lack institutional support. The name "Tupamaros" is directly related to a left-wing urban insurgent group in Uruguay in the 1970s.

⁶¹ ICG interview, Caracas, 16 March 2004.

⁶² ICG interviews, Caracas, March 2004, San Cristobal, 5 February 2004. While reliable information on the FBL is very hard to obtain, some of the opposition believes the group has links to the Partido Popular de Trabajadores (PPT), a member of the governing coalition. The government asserts that this group, as well as alleged paramilitary groups financed by cattle ranchers frightened by the Chavez land reform proposals, are more criminal than political. It is estimated that the FBL currently maintains a force of some 200-400 men and is primarily engaged in criminal activities, such as kidnapping. In 2003, the FBL engaged in armed clashes with the Colombian insurgent group ELN in the federal state of Apure, close to the Colombian border. Two ELN fighters were shot dead; in retribution the ELN killed a PPT leader in Guasalito (Apure).

⁶³ ICG interview, Caracas, 15 March 2004.

⁶⁴ Observers point out that following purges in the aftermath of the failed coup, the high command of the army is considered solidly behind Chavez. Questions still arise with respect to the navy and air force, and to a lesser extent the national guard.

which the opposition incurred much of the resulting political cost.⁶⁵

Most are aware that a return to pre-Chavez Venezuela is out of the question. The disintegration of the old political and social order produced the Chavez government not the reverse. The subsequent disruptions also have profoundly altered the political landscape and prospects for the future. The government, in turn, is aware of the high political cost entailed in the repression unleashed by state security forces and the violation of human rights and the risk of substantial international isolation should it deny its own constitution's democratic options for a non-violent end to the political crisis.⁶⁶

These factors explain the last moment agreement for a *reparo* process that has kept a window open for a recall referendum. The opposition has taken risks in asking its supporters to publicly reaffirm their opposition to the regime. The government has avoided condemnation for denying the petition process and can hope that the opposition fails to produce the necessary half million signatures. If the opposition does garner those signatures, the government still has the option of asking the Supreme Court to reject the process, though this would expose it again to international condemnation and possibly OAS sanctions. Rejection of the recall, particularly if there is further intimidation of those who signed, also could trigger a popular protest that in turn could produce the armed confrontation that all sides seem to want to avoid.

Even if President Chavez loses the referendum, he still has a reasonable chance of winning a subsequent presidential vote. The opposition is seriously divided. If it wins the recall referendum -- a daunting task in view of the constitutional requirement to poll at least one more vote than Chavez's landslide in 2000 -- it must conduct a primary process to identify a unifying candidate who can offer a coherent political alternative. That alternative must not only be acceptable to the varied wings of the opposition but also answer the demands and expectations of the poor majority of Venezuelan voters, who brought Chavez to power and has kept him there.⁶⁷

How difficult a challenge this is can be seen in the run-up to the elections for 24 state governors and more than 300 municipal mayors, first scheduled for August 2004 and now postponed until late September. The opposition is divided over whether to participate with multiple candidates or to try to agree on a single candidate for each office. The latter would obviously increase the chances for victory but also requires new unity within the heterogeneous CD.

A recent opinion poll showed the Venezuelan electorate split three ways: 32 per cent with the opposition, 25 per cent with the government and close to 40 per cent undecided. The poll also showed that approval for Chavez has remained more or less stable since early 2003, while support for the opposition has fallen by ten points over the same period. Of the undecided plurality, nearly half (45 per cent) said the best way to resolve the crisis would be through a recall referendum.⁶⁸

This data indicates that Chavez has a reasonable chance to survive the recall referendum but that probably an absolute majority of Venezuelans support a constitutional solution to the crisis through use of the recall referendum provision. The April agreement for the *reparo* is an important step, however delayed, toward the recall and a democratic exit from the political crisis. However, even if the opposition wins, it will still have to define a clear political strategy geared at reaching out to an electoral majority with a program capable of challenging Chavez in a head-to-head contest for the presidency.

The international community, particularly the Tripartite Working Group (OAS, Carter Center and UNDP) and the Group of Friends, also faces a challenge. Under the leadership of the OAS,⁶⁹ the Working Group has played an important moderating and facilitating role for two years. It has been the indispensable bridge between the government and the opposition over the two months of negotiations which ultimately produced the *reparo* agreement. It will continue to be vital not only for the *reparo* process but also for any recall referendum and for helping the 2004 regional and local elections as well

⁶⁵ ICG interviews, Caracas, 15 March 2004.

⁶⁶ ICG interview, Caracas, 16 March 2004.

⁶⁷ Several analysts in Caracas pointed out that Chavez's early social-revolutionary philosophy has begun to take root among broad sectors of Venezuela's poor and lower-middle

class, which receive economic and social benefits. ICG interviews, Caracas, 15 and 18 March 2004.

⁶⁸ Poll conducted by Datanalisis, April 2004.

⁶⁹ OAS Secretary General Cesar Gaviria virtually lived in Venezuela during the time of the general strike seeking to prevent civil strife. His chief of staff, Fernando Jaramillo, has been leading the OAS mission.

as the next presidential election (whether post-referendum or in 2006) take place in a fair and free manner in accordance with the constitution.

Its task will be to guarantee an adequate international presence, initially in the form of monitors at the 2,700 signature reaffirmation points. And it should be prepared to take to the OAS conclusions with respect to the government's adherence to the Inter-American Democratic Charter.

Under the leadership of Brazilian President Lula's administration, the Group of Friends -- also Chile, Mexico, Portugal, Spain and the U.S. -- should be far more assertive as well, by offering initially to participate in *reparo* monitoring and subsequently in the recall referendum if it occurs. The new Spanish government of President Jose Luis Zapatero could give the Group of Friends' work new impetus and open up additional possibilities for a structured political dialogue with the Chavez administration.

Such a dialogue should focus on the central issues of Venezuela's position in the Western Hemisphere, the future of its democracy and the economic and social well-being of its population.⁷⁰ The international community must not leave Venezuela to its own devices in this critical period.

Quito/Brussels, 10 May 2004

⁷⁰ The Group of Friends was established during the inauguration of Ecuadorian President Lucio Gutierrez in early 2003. The initiative was launched by Brazilian President Ignacio Lula da Silva. Since then it has met several times at lower diplomatic levels. It issued statements of concern at the time of the early March 2004 protests and repression and statements of welcome when the final *reparo* was reached in late April.

APPENDIX A

MAP OF VENEZUELA



Courtesy of The General Libraries, The University of Texas at Austin.

APPENDIX B

ABOUT THE INTERNATIONAL CRISIS GROUP

The International Crisis Group (ICG) is an independent, non-profit, multinational organisation, with over 100 staff members on five continents, working through field-based analysis and high-level advocacy to prevent and resolve deadly conflict.

ICG's approach is grounded in field research. Teams of political analysts are located within or close by countries at risk of outbreak, escalation or recurrence of violent conflict. Based on information and assessments from the field, ICG produces regular analytical reports containing practical recommendations targeted at key international decision-takers. ICG also publishes *CrisisWatch*, a 12-page monthly bulletin, providing a succinct regular update on the state of play in all the most significant situations of conflict or potential conflict around the world.

ICG's reports and briefing papers are distributed widely by email and printed copy to officials in foreign ministries and international organisations and made generally available at the same time via the organisation's Internet site, www.crisisweb.org. ICG works closely with governments and those who influence them, including the media, to highlight its crisis analyses and to generate support for its policy prescriptions.

The ICG Board – which includes prominent figures from the fields of politics, diplomacy, business and the media – is directly involved in helping to bring ICG reports and recommendations to the attention of senior policy-makers around the world. ICG is chaired by former Finnish President Martti Ahtisaari; and its President and Chief Executive since January 2000 has been former Australian Foreign Minister Gareth Evans.

ICG's international headquarters are in Brussels, with advocacy offices in Washington DC, New York, London and Moscow. The organisation currently operates seventeen field offices (in Amman, Belgrade, Bogotá, Cairo, Dakar, Dushanbe, Islamabad, Jakarta, Kabul, Nairobi, Osh, Pretoria, Pristina, Quito, Sarajevo, Skopje and Tbilisi) with analysts working in over 40 crisis-affected countries and territories across four continents. In Africa, those countries include Angola, Burundi, Côte d'Ivoire, Democratic Republic of the Congo, Eritrea, Ethiopia, Guinea,

Liberia, Rwanda, Sierra Leone, Somalia, Sudan, Uganda and Zimbabwe; in Asia, Afghanistan, Kashmir, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Indonesia, Myanmar/Burma, Nepal, Pakistan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan; in Europe, Albania, Armenia, Azerbaijan, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Georgia, Kosovo, Macedonia, Moldova, Montenegro and Serbia; in the Middle East, the whole region from North Africa to Iran; and in Latin America, Colombia and the Andean region.

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