

Webster University Geneva Hosts High-Level Panel to Discuss Human Rights Violations in Venezuela

As the United Nations Human Rights Council met in Geneva in its annual September session, Webster University Geneva hosted a presentation and panel discussion about the UN report by the High Commissioner for Human Rights on the recent documented abuses of Human Rights in Venezuela. The event, hosted by Webster Geneva Campus Director Clementina Acedo (a Venezuelan national) and Webster's International Relations department, was co-sponsored by *Iniciativa por Venezuela* and *Venezuela Urgente*. These NGOs are committed to exposing the current situation in Venezuela and to reversing the trend of human rights regression in the country.

Guests from "Genève Internationale" and Webster University students heard documented stories of the oppression, abuse and violations, shared by Hernan Vales, Human Rights Officer in the Rule of Law Section of the OHCHR, who personally led the investigation team and interviews for the High Commissioner's recent report.

Mr. Vales gave examples of excessive use of force, arbitrary detentions, ill treatment of detainees, violent house raids, inappropriate neglect of due process, harassment, repression and detention of journalists and the systematic block of peaceful protests—and even the free movement of people. His stories also shed light on the so-called "Collectivos", violent armed groups who operate without interference of police and security forces. Mr. Vales also alluded to reports of killings perpetrated by these Collectivos, who are feared and whose direct actions may be contributing to the subsequent decrease in protests.

The goal of the report, according to Mr. Vales, was to shine a spotlight and to make recommendations to the government of Venezuela, to political parties and to the Human Rights Council—to both minimize possible further violations and to promote accountability. Defending the report against false rumors, he was vocal in his reminders that there was a clear mandate by the UN High Commissioner (OHCHR) to conduct this investigation—and that the methods used were consistent with other similar investigations. However, as this was a mandate from the OHCHR (and not the HRC), it was not the goal of the investigations, nor under its authority, determine about Crimes Against Humanity (an investigation which, if pursued, would have its own mechanisms, time on-the-ground in Venezuela and processes).

Mr. Vales was joined on a subsequent panel discussion which included Professor Victor Rodriguez Cedeño, former Ambassador of Venezuela to the UN and previously Deputy Chairman of the UN's former Commission on Human Rights, and by Dr. Natalia Brandler, Director of the Group of Political Studies on Latin America (a Venezuelan academic now based in France).

Panelist Ambassador Cedeño emphasized that it is important to understand that the issues within this report are not only the problem of a few countries, but concern every nation and every one of us. He discussed some of the diplomatic protocols, mechanisms and options that remain available to the international community of nations. What ultimately will need to happen, in his opinion, is an intervention for justice and a peaceful transition of power in the future toward a new leadership, if the Venezuelan democracy is to continue as such.

Continued...

Dr. Brandler took her moments on the panel to give a broader context to recent events. She remind the audience that abuses by the government had been consistent and systematic long before the recent drop in oil prices, which are often falsely cited as reason for the current situation in Venezuela, rather than a contributing, final factor in what has been decades of corruption and abuse of power. As an academic who formerly taught at top universities in Venezuela, she believed that “if Political Science is a science, then it should be able to do more than describe; we should be able to predict these kinds of situations.” She cited that the media, political analysts and academia should have been more vocal and clear about what they were witnessing during the era of Hugo Chavez, for example.

Mass protests have essentially been suppressed in Venezuela and the government has retained power, yet but hundreds remain in detention, and consequences (from stolen property to medical injuries) continue to have an impact on the deteriorating social fabric of the country. While most in and outside Venezuela recognize that there is a humanitarian crisis unfolding, the current government of Venezuela refuses to recognize it as such, and continues to decline international aid.

The panel was moderated by Prof. Giancarlo Melloni, Webster University Geneva, who led the Q&A session that followed their presentations. Following the panel, there was an exhibition of photographic reportage taken directly by on-the-ground photographers and journalists.



In collaboration with:

