

Human Rights Watch

Torture, Former Combatants, Political Prisoners, Terror Suspects, & Terrorists

<https://www.hrw.org/news/2018/01/10/why-jonatan-diniz-was-lucky>

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On December 27, the powerful Chavista politician Diosdado Cabello announced the detention of Jonatan Diniz, a Brazilian living in Los Angeles who was visiting Venezuela for a nongovernmental group that he directs, which provides food and aid to people in need. Diniz had been detained, Cabello said, for belonging to a criminal organization with international reach.

Cabello [accused](#) Diniz of using the organization as a faade to receive dollars and to finance terrorists. After Diniz spent nearly 10 days incarcerated at intelligence headquarters in Caracas, the Brazilian Foreign Affairs Ministry was able to negotiate his [release and departure](#) from Venezuela.

Many others havent been so lucky. Since 2014, dozens of political prisoners have been held at the same intelligence offices where Diniz was held, some of them for months on end. A [crackdown on dissent](#) between April and July 2017 left dozens of people dead, hundreds injured, and thousands detained. More than 750 civilians have been prosecutedimproperly, in military courtsfor offenses including rebellion and treason.

Detainees have been systematically abused and in some cases tortured by techniques that include electric shock and asphyxiation. The overwhelming majority of these crimes have gone unpunished.

Massive demonstrations against shortages of food and medical supplies and the governments moves to consolidate its power dwindled in the second half of the year. But the government has continued its excessive and arbitrary response, and has given itself unjustifiably broad powers to incarcerate participants.

In December, several street [protests broke out](#) in Venezuela after the government failed to deliver *pernil* a leg of pork traditionally served at Christmas in Venezuelato Venezuelans with access to boxes with food items subject to government price controls. Officials had [promised](#) to include *pernil* in the boxes, and in a country facing [severe shortages of food](#), this was a valuable opportunity for people to secure protein, which is limited in many Venezuelans diet.

On December 28, President Nicols Maduro [called](#) protests earlier that year violent and terrorist acts and threatened a firm hand in responding.

On December 31, a member of the Bolivarian National Guard who, according to witnesses, was drunk, opened fire without warning on a line of people waiting for the expected rations of *pernil*, [killing an 18-year-old pregnant woman](#) who had stood in line for hours. After the news of the killing went viral, a Bolivarian National guard sergeant was detained in relation to this case.

During a protest in Valencia on January 3, 30 people partially closed a road, burned tires in front of a mayors office, insulted security agents, and shouted: Damn Nicols Maduro! At the protest, police detained Ronald Cevilla, 25, and Erika Palacios, 41. The charges against them include instigating hatreda crime established in November by the pro-government Constituent Assembly that seized powers from the opposition-led National Assembly in August. The vague and overbroad language of the [law](#) imposes prison sentences of up to 20 years for those who encourage, promote, or incite hatred. Cevilla and Palacios remain behind bars.

No independent institutions remain in Venezuela to act as a check on executive power. Without strong international pressure, 2018 may well be the year in which Venezuelas government entrenches its repressive powers and the impunity it has enjoyed for terrible abuses.

The Brazilian government should work with other governments in the region to prevent that. It should support targeted sanctions against key Venezuelan officials implicated in abuses, pressure the Venezuelan government to accept international humanitarian assistance, and promote the creation of pathways for victims to get justice abroad if they cant get it at home. If Brazil and other governments stand by

and do nothing, there may be nothing that can stop Venezuela from [sliding into dictatorship](#).

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