

Written contributions / Report prepared by “Saul Landau, Institute for Policy Studies” for the summary prepared by the Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights Universal Periodic Review of the Bolivarian Republic of Venezuela

1. Since 1963 IPS has distinguished itself as an enduring Washington “think tank” for its prescient scholarship and insightful policy proposals. Its fellows and staff have had a long and fruitful relationship with UN officials (like Iqbal Riza and Kofi Annon) and UN committees.

2. For over more than four decades, IPS scholars have used their independence from government and corporate influence to provide critical support for the great social movements of our time to produce seminal books, films and articles; educating key policymakers and the general public; and crafting practical strategies in support of peace, justice, and the environment.

3. My report is based on two research trips to Venezuela in 2003 and 2009 and visits to various locations in Caracas and other cities. I interviewed scholars, activists and officials, heard opinions from all sides of the political spectrum and studied the facts and figures I could locate after I returned.

4. I observed that over the last decade, the government of Venezuela has led the poorest classes toward greater social justice. It has improved their standard of living, their health and increased their participation in the political process as well. One would hardly know

that President Chavez has effectively reversed forty plus years of kleptocratic government if one followed the “prestigious press” in the United States.

5. Since Chavez won the popular vote for President, Venezuelan workers have made substantial gains. Oil revenues, which did not find their way into social programs, now get invested in public health and education. Three fifths of the budget is directed toward raising health and education levels and other social policies. Under Chavez, job creation programs have reduced unemployment and also contributed to raising the country’s minimum wage – among the highest in Latin America.

6. I observed that more workers – some 12% -- belonged to trade unions. Compare this to Honduras where union leaders become assassination targets, or Colombia where union activists routinely get harassed. Unions have also increased worker participation in the work place.

7. Since 1998, the government has promoted the creation of cooperatives. Most of these – now almost 100,000 of them – train and educate their members and make credit available as well. In some areas, this business form has permitted workers to take over certain enterprises that closed years before. Moreover, the former workers become factory managers in some instances.

8. Prior to the late 1990s, Venezuela’s agricultural sector had languished or was foreign owned. Chavez initiated significant land reform that has allowed a million plus members of the rural zones to own land, and obtain the necessary education and training to farm

efficiently. The government has also made available certain basic needs like modern technology, crop credits, and easier access to urban markets.

9. The quality of life has improved according to government and UN figures. Extreme poverty, which existed side by side for decades with extreme oil wealth, has significantly decreased. This is due to government food, medical and education programs (like Mission Robinson and Barrio Adentro) and also to the fact that the government has helped create jobs. According to government figures, not disputed by international agencies, unemployment fell from almost 15% in 1999 to 7% by the end of 2010.

10. In higher education, the government over the last 12 years has promoted entrance into universities. In 1999, the amount of Venezuela's gross domestic product that went to education was less than 5%. Less than 700,000 students attended institutions of higher learning. By 2007, thanks to government incentives and a significant increase in education investment, upwards of 2 million Venezuelans went to college. Similarly, in grade school and high school significant leaps were made in getting kids to school and keeping them there.

11. When colleagues ask why Chavez remains popular – enough to continue winning elections – I refer them to programs like the Mission Barrio Adentro, which provides doctors and preventive care facilities in most neighborhoods. Venezuela now has free health care and thanks to a program that has placed thousands of Cuban doctors and other medical personnel in the country, Venezuela shows a dramatic decrease infant mortality.

Before the Chavez government, infant mortality was about 19.0 per 1,000 live births. By 2008, this figure had dropped to 13.9 per 1,000. Venezuelans' life expectancy rose from 72.4 years in 2000 to 73.9 in 2009.

12. The government has promoted widescale public education around health and nutrition. It has also provided food for those who often went hungry. As a result of this, most poor Venezuelans now consume the recommended number of daily calories, and malnutrition and illness and death resulting from it have been reduced from almost 5 death per 1000 people to just over 2, between 1998 and 2007.

13. I visited schools during the school-feeding program, and observed a few of the 4 million students who get them and enjoyed balanced meals and snacks.

Another government achievement, and all this adds up to fulfilling obligations to meet basic human needs or rights, was in the improvement of the drinking water supply. An estimated of 90+ percent of Venezuelans now enjoy access to clean drinking water. Before Chavez, 12% less (4 million people) had clean water.

14. The government since 1998 has also increased the amount paid out in pensions and social security and has extended coverage to sectors of the poor not previously included in these programs. It raised the percentage of investment in these areas from 2.28% of GDP in 1999 to 4.75% in 2008.

15. According to Latinobarómetro, an annual public opinion survey of 19,000 interviews in 18 Latin American countries, Venezuelans claim to experience higher levels of general satisfaction than most Latin Americans (they are second).

Conclusion

16. The government of Venezuela faced a serious destabilization effort over the last decade, highlighted by the attempted coup in 2002, the 2003 oil strike and a 2008 global economic slump. Nevertheless, its programs have succeeded in meeting a high level of the basic needs of most working people. The recession still looms as an obstacle to the government meeting all its people's needs, but the upward movement for the poor and wage workers continues. I sincerely hope the UN will help the Venezuelan institutions to realize the quest to bring forever the fullest measures of human rights to all of its citizens.