

TransAfrica Forum-Venezuela-March 2, 2011

Written contributions prepared by TransAfrica Forum for the summary prepared by the High Commissioner for Human Rights Universal Periodic Review of the Bolivarian Republic of Venezuela

TransAfrica Forum is a human rights advocacy organization founded in 1977 in Washington, DC, United States. It currently works closely with grassroots movements (including civil society, labor and women's rights organizations) in Africa and throughout the African Diaspora in Latin America & the Caribbean.

The main objective of TransAfrica Forum is to provide support to civil society organizations in Africa and the African Diaspora to inform US policy. To this end, TransAfrica works with US Congress, the Administration, Diplomatic Missions as well as the general public to increase knowledge and dialogue about issues affecting Africa and her Diaspora. In its work TransAfrica seeks to bring the voice and priorities of Afro-descendants to policy makers to effectively make change. The organization prioritizes working closely with the African-American community to support its mission and

TransAfrica Forum uses this occasion with the Universal Periodic Review of Member States of the United Nations to present this written contribution to the Human Rights Commission of the United Nations on Venezuela. In particular, we hope that our findings will aid in a recognition of the Venezuelan government's continued efforts to strengthen participatory democracy, electoral transparency and social inclusion. We additionally hope our findings will encourage recognition and support of the importance of Venezuela's work regional presence, particularly with regards to Haiti.

TransAfrica Forum believes the current human rights situation in Venezuela, particularly with regard to civic participation and education, is laudable. TransAfrica staff has participated as International Electoral Accompaniers during Venezuela's two most recent electoral processes, including the Legislative Elections on September 26, 2010 and the Constitutional Referendum on February 15, 2009.

During both of these elections, TransAfrica was impressed by the high level of participation and engagement coupled with significant transparency mechanisms to ensure access and prevent fraud. Time and again, TransAfrica has heard personal accounts of the significant achievements made over the last decade to support the inclusion of historically marginalized communities. This is of particular significance with regards to Afro-descendant and Indigenous communities. Voters have told TransAfrica staff about historic challenges to obtain a national identification card (the cedula). Only following recent efforts to increase participation, including Mission Identity (Mision Identidad), have these historic barriers been eliminated. Under Mission Identity, millions of cedula were distributed and over five and a half million Venezuelans were registered to vote for the first time.

With regards to the human rights situation for the Venezuelan electorate, the government and its National Electoral Council (CNE-Consejo Nacional Electoral) are successfully working to ensure access to the vote. They continue to seek outsider

assessment and critique to make voting and the electoral process more fair and inclusive.

Recommendations made by the U.S. Observer Delegations, including TransAfrica Forum, to the Venezuelan Government to maintain and increase the high level of transparency and inclusion in elections include: additional electoral observers, increase the number of polling stations made available, carry out stricter enforcement of rules prohibiting political advertising or distribution of political propaganda within close proximity to polling locations, increase transparency of final tallying of electoral results at CNE headquarters in Caracas and increase the number of electoral education campaigns to familiarize voters with electronic voting machines and the overall voting process.

In addition to observing the Venezuelan electoral process, TransAfrica has also been able to research social endeavors pursued by the Venezuelan Government both domestically and abroad. A trip to one of Venezuela's community health clinic, part of the Barrio Adentro program, demonstrated the importance of inclusion of historically marginalized communities in social programs. According to the Venezuelan Household Sample Survey (Fourth Quarter 2008) over seven million Venezuelans rely on health services provided by the Barrio Adentro programs. This is only part of the over 80% of Venezuelans who rely on public health services. The governments' ongoing commitment to providing social services to Afro-descendant, Indigenous and working-poor communities will only continue to strengthen the basic human rights environment in Venezuela.

TransAfrica has also been able to observe some parts of the response of the Venezuelan Government to the January 2010 earthquake in Haiti. TransAfrica works closely with civil society organizations in Haiti to understand the priorities for Haiti's internally displaced persons (IDP) communities and has been profoundly impressed by the level of quality and protection for human rights at the Venezuelan-resourced IDP camp in Leogane. The President of TransAfrica Forum has traveled to the Leogane IDP camp twice, including during a March 2010 trip with Board Chairman Danny Glover.

During these trips, TransAfrica was made aware that the five Venezuelan-run camps were, at that time, the only IDP camps in Haiti being run under the United Nations OCHA Guiding Principles on Internal Displacement. The human-rights based model used by the Venezuelan Military officials, which encourages consultation and leadership by Haitian-nationals, is extremely important. Such inclusion of the affected communities should drive future involvement. Venezuela should continue to lend such social and resource support these communities as the reconstruction phase moves forward.