

VENEZUELA'S RECORD IN COMBATING Human Trafficking

Since 2000 the U.S. State Department has issued a yearly report on the status of trafficking in persons (TIP) throughout the world. In June 2006 the Office to Combat and Monitor the Trafficking of Persons, the State Department body responsible for studying TIP and issuing the report, characterized Venezuela as an egregious human trafficker and designated it a Tier 3 nation, subject to economic sanctions. The TIP Report claims that Venezuela “does not fully comply with the minimum standards for the elimination of trafficking and is not making significant efforts to do so.”¹ This ruling, for the second year in a row, sits in stark contrast to the facts surrounding Venezuela’s human trafficking record.

VENEZUELA'S RECORD AGAINST HUMAN TRAFFICKING

According to official statements made by the State Department’s own 2006 report, its rulings reflect a nation’s efforts in “prosecution, protection, and prevention” as well as “rescue, rehabilitation, and reintegration.”² The selective criteria used by Washington to gage a nation’s level of participation in trafficking is guided by The Trafficking Victims Protection Act (TVPA) of 2000 which defines the purpose of the report “to ensure just and effective punishment of traffickers, to protect their victims, and to prevent trafficking from occurring.”³ A tier 3 nation is a country that does little or none of these. **Venezuela does not fit the above-noted standard** for a Tier 3 nation. The TIP report explicitly states:

“The government [of Venezuela] significantly increased efforts to raise awareness and train officials as the reporting period progressed. In December 2005, the government launched a national campaign to educate the public about the dangers of trafficking using posters and radio and television spots. The government also increased public awareness about trafficking by hosting a hemispheric meeting on trafficking and encouraging in-depth media coverage of the event both in Venezuela and throughout the region. The Ministry of Interior and Justice’s Crime Prevention Unit held 65 training sessions on identifying trafficking and illegal migration that reached 1,544 government officials in eight states. National toll-free crime line personnel received training for handling trafficking-related calls.”⁴

In addition, the State Department’s own 2005 Human Rights Report on Venezuela, the South American nation is depicted as a cooperative, pro-active and concerned nation with regard to human trafficking.⁵ The report states:

¹ Office to Monitor and Combat the Trafficking of Persons, *2006 Trafficking in Persons Report* <http://www.state.gov/g/tip/rls/tiprpt/2006/65983.htm>, June 5, 2006.

² Ibid.

³ Ibid.

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ U.S. State Department’s 2005 Human Rights Report, <http://www.state.gov/g/drl/rls/hrrpt/2005/61745.htm>

- “The government assisted with international investigations of trafficking.”
- “In July authorities assisted in the repatriation of three Colombian victims of trafficking.”
- “In January the Ministry of Foreign Affairs hosted the OAS and the International Organization for Migration for the anti-trafficking workshops to raise public awareness of the problem.”
- “The government provided trafficking victims with psychological and physical examinations.”

This language indicates that the Government of Venezuela is making significant efforts to comply with the law.

VENEZUELAN GOVERNMENT STATISTICS

Between 2004-2006 the Venezuelan Attorney General's Office reports that there have been thirty-seven cases of human trafficking reported in Venezuela.⁶ The Common Crimes Department Director in the Attorney General's Office, Nerva Ramirez, says that the Metropolitan area has registered fourteen of them, in which twenty-three people have been arrested including Venezuelan, Chinese, and Haitian nationals.⁷ Nationwide, twenty-four people have been tried for human trafficking and two are currently serving sentences.⁸ Public officials and government employees involved in trafficking are held accountable as well. Recently, two National Guardsmen were arrested for their alleged involvement in a trafficking ring. Moreover, earlier this year, in coordination with the Organization of American States, Venezuela hosted the first hemispheric conference on human trafficking in Caracas and has instituted a national commission to study human trafficking to devise clear guidelines for future policy.⁹

Unfortunately, the State Department continues to ignore this publicly available data and, contrary to its own assertions, refuses to correct its own inaccuracies. In June 2006, when asked by reporters about the Venezuelan government's earlier prosecutions of human traffickers, State Department spokesman Sean McCormick stated that "If the government of Venezuela has in fact done these prosecutions... certainly that will be reflected in future reports".¹⁰ Incredibly, the only mention of these prosecutions in the most recent report comes in the form of denial when it says "there were no reports of prosecutions or convictions of traffickers for the fourth consecutive year."¹¹

IS VENEZUELA'S TIER 3 DESIGNATION POLITICALLY MOTIVATED?

According to the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC) many countries with many more human trafficking violations than Venezuela have been assigned Tier 1 or Tier 2 status while others with less serious records receive Tier 3.¹² Michael Shifter of the Inter-American Dialogue notes in an opinion piece published in the New York Times that "in the State Department's 2003 Human Trafficking report Venezuela did not even appear among the five worst offenders in the

⁶[4] O'Donoghue, Patrick J., *Venezuela Reports 37 Cases of People-Trafficking Between 2004-2006*, <http://www.vheadline.com/readnews.asp?id=66896> August 27, 2006.

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ Agence France Presse, *US May Have Erred in Venezuela Human Trafficking Report*, June 6, 2006.

¹¹ Ibid.

¹² United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime, *Trafficking in Persons: Global Patterns*, http://www.unodc.org/pdf/traffickinginpersons_report_2006ver2.pdf April 2006.

Western Hemisphere” and that “the Bush administration has not provided compelling and persuasive evidence that warrants singling out one country.”¹³

Mexico serves as a case in point. In the 2006 TIP Report Mexico is described in far worse terms than Venezuela and even noted as “a source, transit, and destination country for persons trafficked for sexual exploitation and labor.”¹⁴ In contrast to Venezuela’s record, the government of Mexico has repeatedly refused to gather official data on human trafficking within its borders and keeps no law enforcement statistics on trafficking investigations, arrests, prosecutions, or convictions.¹⁵ Even more disturbing, “there are no shelters or related services that specifically aid trafficking victims” in Mexico. Despite these dismal results, Mexico was assigned a Tier 2 designation for the third consecutive year. Washington justifies this designation in the Report by noting a “future commitment” from the Mexican government to undertake efforts in prosecution, protection, and prevention. Venezuela on the other hand has pro-actively addressed all of these areas.

In a statement regarding the State Department’s Human Rights Report issued in early 2005 the Deputy Director of the Washington Office on Latin America (WOLA) Kimberly Stanton noted “political considerations are evident in some of the findings... The credibility of the reports depends on consistent, objective analysis. This year the U.S. government policy priorities are affecting the evaluation of the data in some cases.”¹⁶

Washington has also been criticized by human rights groups for inadequate reporting and data collection. In 2003 Human Rights Watch found that the TIP Report focused largely on countries in bad standing with the U.S. and lacked facts and concrete data about human trafficking in countries with which the U.S. had close ties.¹⁷ Additionally, the deputy director of Human Rights Watch’s America Division stated that “We have no reason to believe that human trafficking is a more serious problem in Venezuela than in other countries in the region.”¹⁸ In fact, the European Union thinks Venezuela fares far better; last year the EU granted trading preferences to Venezuela in recognition of its efforts to combating human trafficking and drug trafficking.¹⁹

Since the TIP findings of 2003 Venezuela has faced economic sanctions. Indeed, it has been blocked from receiving \$250 million in development loans from the international lending community and this year faces a similar fate.²⁰ Interestingly, the State Department notes in its Report that it will provide funding for “strengthening the democratic process, including strengthening political parties and supporting electoral observation and monitoring and related programs, or for public diplomacy.”²¹ Although Venezuela has appealed Washington’s most recent designation, it remains classified as a Tier 3 nation.

¹³ Schifter, Michael. Picking a Fight with Venezuela, New York Times-Opinion Section,

<http://infovenezuela.org/prensa/Picking%20a%20fight%20with%20Venezuela-The%20New%20York%20Times.html> September 20, 2004

¹⁴ Office to Monitor and Combat the Trafficking of Persons, *2006 Trafficking in Persons Report*, <http://www.state.gov/g/tip/rls/tiprpt/2006/> June 5, 2006.

¹⁵ Ibid.

¹⁶ WOLA web site, <http://www.wola.org/> WOLA Statement from February 28, 2005.

¹⁷ Council on Hemispheric Affairs, *The State Department Human Trafficking Report: Raw Ideology Rather Than Bona Fide Research*, June 28, 2006.

<http://www.coha.org/2006/06/28/the-state-department-human-trafficking-report-raw-ideology-rather-than-bona-fide-research/>

¹⁸ *U.S.-Venezuela Rift*, New York Newsday, September 26, 2004.

¹⁹ Associated Press, *EU grants trade preferences to 11 nations*, December 21, 2005,

<http://www.myrtlebeachonline.com/mld/myrtlebeachonline/business/13457213.htm>

²⁰ Council on Hemispheric Affairs, *The State Department Human Trafficking Report: Raw Ideology Rather Than Bona Fide Research*, June 28, 2006.

<http://www.coha.org/2006/06/28/the-state-department-human-trafficking-report-raw-ideology-rather-than-bona-fide-research/>

²¹ Memorandum for the Secretary of State, September 27, 2006 <http://www.whitehouse.gov/news/releases/2006/09/20060927-1.html>