

Chavez deports opposition journalist back to Colombia

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The government of Venezuelan President Hugo Chavez summarily deported journalist Joaquin Perez Becerra to Colombia Monday, igniting protests in Venezuela and elsewhere in Latin America.

Perez Becerra, a Colombian national who obtained political asylum and later citizenship in Sweden, is the editor of Annacol, or the New Colombian News Agency, founded in 1996. He directs a widely read web site based in Stockholm that describes itself as a “voice for the voiceless sectors of Colombia.”

He was grabbed last Saturday by Venezuelan security forces after flying from Sweden, via Germany, to Caracas’ Maiquetía Airport. After Becerra was held incommunicado, denied access to lawyers and representatives of the Swedish embassy, the Chavez government summarily deported the journalist to Colombia, where he has been locked up in a maximum security prison to await trial on terrorism charges.

Opponents of Perez Becerra’s deportation have compared the episode to the grisly repression carried out under the CIA-backed Operation Condor of the 1970s, in which Latin American military regimes collaborated in the cross-border repression of their left-wing opponents.

As for the Chavez government itself, it has offered no explanation of its actions, aside from a curt press release providing the details of the arrest. It stated that “The Bolivarian government ratifies its unshakeable commitment in the struggle against terrorism.” The PSUV (United Socialist Party of Venezuela), the main political instrument of Chavez government, has said nothing about the deportation.

Normal judicial proceedings were circumvented, with the deportation based on a personal phone call from Colombian President Juan Manuel Santos to Chavez last Saturday, telling him of the journalist’s imminent arrival in Caracas and asking for his deportation. By sending Perez Becerra back to Colombia, Venezuelan authorities

rode roughshod over his rights as a political refugee and international treaties governing extraditions. Colombia is notorious for its extra-judicial executions of civilians.

The Chavez government and its apologists claim that it had no choice but to arrest and extradite the journalist, based on the claim that INTERPOL had issued a “red alert” against him.

It is clear, however, that this supposed “red alert” did not cause Swedish authorities to arrest and extradite him nor, for that matter, make German security forces to take him into custody as he changed planes in Frankfurt. Either no such “alert” existed, or the Colombian government saw to it that it was issued only after Perez Becerra was en route to Caracas, where Santos counted on Chavez’s help.

After the arrest, Santos praised his Venezuelan counterpart. “It’s another sign that Chavez is true to his word,” he said. “We thank him for it.”

These unusually friendly statements between the Colombian and Venezuelan governments come after Colombia’s decision to extradite a wanted drug trafficker, Walid Makled, to Venezuela rather than to the US. Both the Chavez government and the Obama administration had sought the extradition of Makled, a Venezuelan national.

In a prison interview with the Spanish-language network Univision, Makled had claimed to have extensive evidence of complicity by top-ranking Venezuelan military, police and civilian officials in his drug smuggling, which allegedly shipped as much as 10 tons of cocaine a month to the United States. US officials clearly intended to use his testimony as a means of painting Chavez’s Venezuela as a “narco-state”.

It is within this context that the extradition of Perez Becerra has taken place. It has all the hallmarks of a filthy deal with Colombia, in which Makled’s silence on Venezuelan state complicity in the drug trade is secured in

return for the sacrifice of a political opponent of the Uribe-Santos regime in Bogota.

The Swedish government has demanded a formal explanation of the actions taken against Perez Becerra. “Sweden has asked Venezuela for explanations of why the Swedish authorities were not informed when they detained a Swedish citizen and extradited him to Colombia,” a spokesman for the country’s foreign ministry said on Wednesday.

Colombian authorities dismissed such considerations. The country’s Justice Minister German Vargas told reporters that the journalist “is not a Swedish citizen.” He claimed it was a case of a Colombian “who was traveling under another identity and on a Swedish passport, but this doesn’t take away his condition as a Colombian national.”

The Swedish foreign ministry insisted that Perez Becerra, 55, has been a Swedish citizen since 2000.

He first went to Sweden in 1994, having fled Colombia following the bloody suppression of the *Unión Patriótica* (UP, Patriotic Union), a political party formed in the 1980s by the Colombian Communist Party, the FARC (*Fuerzas Armadas Revolucionarias de Colombia*—Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia), the country’s main guerrilla movement, and other social movements after a ceasefire negotiated between the FARC and the Colombian government.

The party, in which Perez Becerra was a municipal council member in the town of Corinto, was subjected to systematic extermination, with thousands of its members along with two of its presidential candidates, 70 council members, 13 national deputies, 11 mayors, and eight congressman murdered by security forces and right-wing death squads. Among those killed was Perez Becerra’s wife.

The Colombian government viewed the journalist as a thorn in its side, both for his web site’s exposure of the mass human rights violations and corruption that has dominated the Colombian government under former President Alvaro Uribe and his defense minister and successor, President Santos, and because of his organization of events in Europe exposing these crimes.

“We’ve been after him (Perez Becerra) for a long time,” Santos commented last weekend, charging that the journalist “has been the one responsible over very many for all of this bad propaganda that the FARC has made against Colombia in Europe.”

This statement amounts to a tacit admission that Perez Becerra has been seized, extradited and imprisoned, not

for any “terrorist” crime, but for his writings, the so-called “bad propaganda” exposing state-sponsored massacres and terrorism in Colombia.

Colombian authorities claim that their evidence that Perez Becerra “was part of the FARC and received money from the FARC” consists of emails purportedly found on a computer belonging to FARC commander Raul Reyes. Reyes was killed in the Colombian military’s illegal cross-border raid into Ecuador in 2008.

Under Uribe, the Colombian government claimed that the same computer contained emails and files implicating Venezuela’s President Chavez in backing the FARC. Since then, investigators have found that Colombian military and police officials tampered with and manipulated the computer’s files to such an extent that they could not be used as evidence in any genuinely fair trial.

At the time, the Chavez government insisted that the FARC was not a “terrorist group” and that its designation as such was due solely to the policies and pressures exerted by Washington. Now, three years later, it has extradited a journalist to face charges of terrorism for expressing similar views.

The extradition of Perez Becerra is part of an increasing rapprochement between Chavez and the right-wing government in Colombia, as the so-called Bolivarian Revolution itself swings further to the right.

Chavez had broken off relations with Colombia in July of last year, precisely over charges made by Uribe that Venezuela was harboring FARC guerrillas. He then restored ties last August, three days after Santos was sworn in as the new Colombian president.

The two met earlier this month in the Colombian city of Cartagena and signed 16 bilateral agreements designed to revive cross-border trade, which previously had amounted to some \$8 billion a year.



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