

Death toll rises to six as clashes continue in Venezuela

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21 February 2014

The death toll in the week of clashes that began February 12 in Venezuela rose to six Wednesday as President Nicolas Maduro accused Washington of fomenting violent upheavals in the country.

A stray bullet struck 23-year-old student Genesis Carmona in the head during an opposition protest in the northern city of Valencia Wednesday. Carmona, who was named the state of Carabobo's "Miss Tourism" in 2013, died from her wounds.

Also reportedly killed by gunfire Wednesday was a participant in a march by workers in support of the government in the eastern industrial city of Ciudad Guayana. According to Venezuela's minister of interior, Miguel Rodríguez, gunmen opened fire upon workers going home or back to their jobs at the end of the march, leaving one dead and at least three others wounded.

The latest fatalities came as violent clashes were being reported in 13 of Venezuela's 23 states, having escalated and spread since a February 12 demonstration called by the right-wing opposition in Caracas ended in bloodshed.

The government has charged Washington with fomenting the violence, denouncing a statement made by US president Barack Obama in Mexico on Wednesday calling on Caracas to release detained protesters, "engage in real dialogue" and address "the legitimate grievances of the Venezuelan people."

Obama also denounced the Venezuelan government's decision to expel three US embassy personnel for involvement in student protests, accusing it of "trying to distract from its own failings by making up false accusations against diplomats from the United States."

The Venezuelan foreign ministry responded with an official communiqué accusing Obama of carrying out a "new and gross interference in the internal affairs of

our country."

It demanded that the US government "explain why it finances, encourages and defends the opposition leaders who promote violence in our country." The statement vowed that the Venezuelan government would continue "monitoring and taking necessary actions to stop US agents seeking to sow violence and destabilization and to inform the world on the nature of the interventionist policy of the Obama administration in our country."

Washington stepped up its attacks on Venezuela following the arrest Tuesday of Leopoldo Lopez, a Harvard-trained economist who is part of the hardline faction within the right-wing opposition coalition known as MUD (Democratic Unity Roundtable).

Lopez, one of the main organizers of the February 12 demonstration, is the leader of the right-wing Voluntad Popular (VP—Popular Will) Party. A product of Venezuela's traditional oligarchy, he was one of the leaders of the demonstrations that were organized in April 2002 as part of the abortive CIA-backed coup against Maduro's predecessor, the late Hugo Chavez. He and his allies elaborated what they called the "exit strategy" for the latest protest campaign, meaning a drive to bring down Maduro, who was elected by a narrow margin last April.

While the government had initially said it would try Lopez for terrorism and murder, when he was arraigned Tuesday at a military prison a judge ruled only that there was evidence to hold him on charges of criminal incitement and arson.

The right wing has called for a mass march on Saturday in Caracas to demand Lopez's release.

Until now, the main violence has been concentrated in the upper middle class neighborhoods of eastern Caracas—where buses were attacked Wednesday night—and in the western cities of Merida and San

Cristóbal. There have been scattered reports of small protests in some more working class areas, including the El Valle and Caricuao boroughs of Caracas, long considered strongholds of the ruling party.

There is unquestionably growing discontent within the working class and more impoverished layers of Venezuelan society under conditions of 56 percent inflation, growing social inequality as Venezuela's bankers rake in record profits, and attacks on workers' rights. In the industrial areas of Bolivar state, a number of unions refused to participate in demonstrations called by the ruling party because of the government's refusal to settle contracts and its attacks on working class militants.

At the same time, however, the agitation of the right, which has its base in the country's upper classes, has not found support among the masses of working people. The real danger is that, outside of an independent revolutionary movement in the working class, the present crisis can lead to the government's overthrow and the imposition of a right-wing dictatorship, or to its capitulation and implementation of the policies demanded by the right and US imperialism.

Henrique Capriles, the twice-defeated presidential candidate of the right and governor of the state of Miranda, took to the airwaves on Wednesday to condemn the Maduro government, while at the same time distancing himself from the violence of the right-wing demonstrators.

Capriles also cautioned against what he warned was a threat that elements within the government could use the violence to further their own purposes. "There are elements who are interested in forcing Maduro out, because it means that Diosdado comes in," he said.

The right-wing politician was referring to speculation that within the government there is growing competition between Maduro and the president of the National Assembly, Diosdado Cabello, a former army officer who took part in the failed military coup launched by Hugo Chavez in 1992. Cabello has taken various actions recently that are seemingly of a presidential character, including a recent trip to the western state of Zulia, on the Colombian border, to announce the sacking of military officers implicated in smuggling operations. He has started his own television program on government policy, reminiscent of Hugo

Chavez's "Aló Presidente" show. It was also Cabello who showed up Tuesday at the Palace of Justice to meet Leopoldo Lopez.

The internal friction within the ruling Partido Socialista Unido de Venezuela (PSUV) reflects the conflicting interests of the social forces upon which it rests, which include the military, sections of the union bureaucracy, petty-bourgeois nationalist layers as well as the so-called *boliburguesia*, the capitalists and financiers who have enriched themselves through connections to the government.

To the extent that the government is forced to rely on the military to suppress the right-wing agitation, these frictions can only intensify. Maduro announced on Thursday that he was prepared to impose a "state of exception" in San Cristóbal, a city on the border with Colombia where the protests began and have been particularly violent. The government has charged that the upheavals there are the result of a conspiracy involving both US officials and the Colombian right.

The imposition of a state of exception, a form of martial law, would be unprecedented for the government, which even under Chavez during the 2002 coup and the subsequent management strike against the state oil company did not resort to such measures. As it is, the government has announced that it is sending a battalion of paratroopers to the city to secure transportation routes, reinforcing national guard units to restore order and deploying a contingent from the army's corps of engineers to carry out the cleanup and reconstruction of facilities damaged in attacks.



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