



Relatives of Venezuelan Political Prisoners Beg OAS for Help

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Relatives of three prominent Venezuelan political prisoners Monday joined the leader of the Organization of American States in pleading for action to free the country from what they described as the repressive regime of President Nicolas Maduro.

“We come here to ask the OAS ... to end the dictatorship of Maduro,” activist Patricia de Ceballos said at a news conference with two other activists and OAS Secretary General Luis Almagro. Her husband, a former mayor in Venezuela, has been confined first at home, then in prison, for three years.

“Venezuela needs democracy. ... It’s urgent,” added Lilian Tintori, activist and wife of jailed opposition leader Leopoldo Lopez. The founder of the Popular Will party is serving a 14-year sentence after being convicted of inciting violence during protests in February 2014.

Last week, Almagro released a report recommending that, unless Venezuela agrees to quickly hold democratic elections, the regional organization’s Permanent Council suspend the Venezuela’s OAS membership for violating democratic norms. Violations include jailing political rivals and ignoring the results of 2015 elections. At least 22 of the organization’s 33 other active member states would need to approve suspension. A vote has not yet been scheduled.

Almagro is visiting OAS headquarters in Washington this week as the organization debates what to do about Venezuela, whose political and humanitarian crisis has deepened in the past two years.

‘Rescue democracy’

At the news conference, Almagro called on Venezuela to uphold the terms of the Inter-American Democratic Charter that it signed or face suspension.

Suspension would bring in regional monitors who would help the country “fight corruption that has infected the country,” Almagro said, citing the case of Vice President Tareck El Aissami. The U.S. Treasury Department last month announced sanctions against him on allegations of drug trafficking.

“We have the responsibility to rescue democracy in the continent,” said Almagro, a former Uruguayan foreign minister.

He accused the vice president of diverting public money while his country suffers.

“Venezuela needs that money to feed its people,” Almagro said.

Venezuelans have experienced severe shortages of basic goods, including medicine and food, with some individuals attributing unintentional weight loss to the “Maduro diet.”

The Maduro administration has blamed the deprivation on an “economic war” led by opponents, including the United States.

Seeking OAS intervention

Ceballos called for the release of her husband, Daniel Ceballos, imprisoned since August. The former mayor of the western city of San Cristobal had been under house arrest in Caracas since 2014, when he was accused of fomenting political unrest — a charge he denied.

Also at the news conference was Oriana Goicoechea, sister of Popular Will youth leader Yon Goicoechea, who was arrested in August and charged with carrying explosives. Yon Goicoechea won a 2008 prize from the Cato Institute, a Washington-based libertarian organization, for purportedly advancing democracy in Venezuela.

Tintori, speaking separately with VOA on Monday, called on OAS members to intervene and “help us to rescue democracy in Venezuela. ... The Venezuelan people have ... to fight for elections, humanitarian aid and the freedom of political prisoners.”

Venezuelan government objects

Venezuela’s ambassador to the OAS, Carmen Velasquez, interrupted the news conference to accuse Almagro of waging a “provocative media [and] political campaign against the legitimate and constitutional government. ...”

Meanwhile, Monday in Caracas, Maduro again dismissed Almagro as “a bandit, a traitor” for recommending the country’s suspension from the regional organization.

But a group of opposition leaders went to OAS offices in the capital city to show support for the suspension.

“In Venezuela, human rights are violated day by day,” said Sting Jofre, a political communications consultant. He complained about widespread hunger and deprivation, saying, “There are people who are now feeding from the trash.”

