

#OperationTrueno

Human Rights Abuses During 'Operation Trueno'

Atagracia de Orituco - Venezuela



**DEFIENDE
VENEZUELA**

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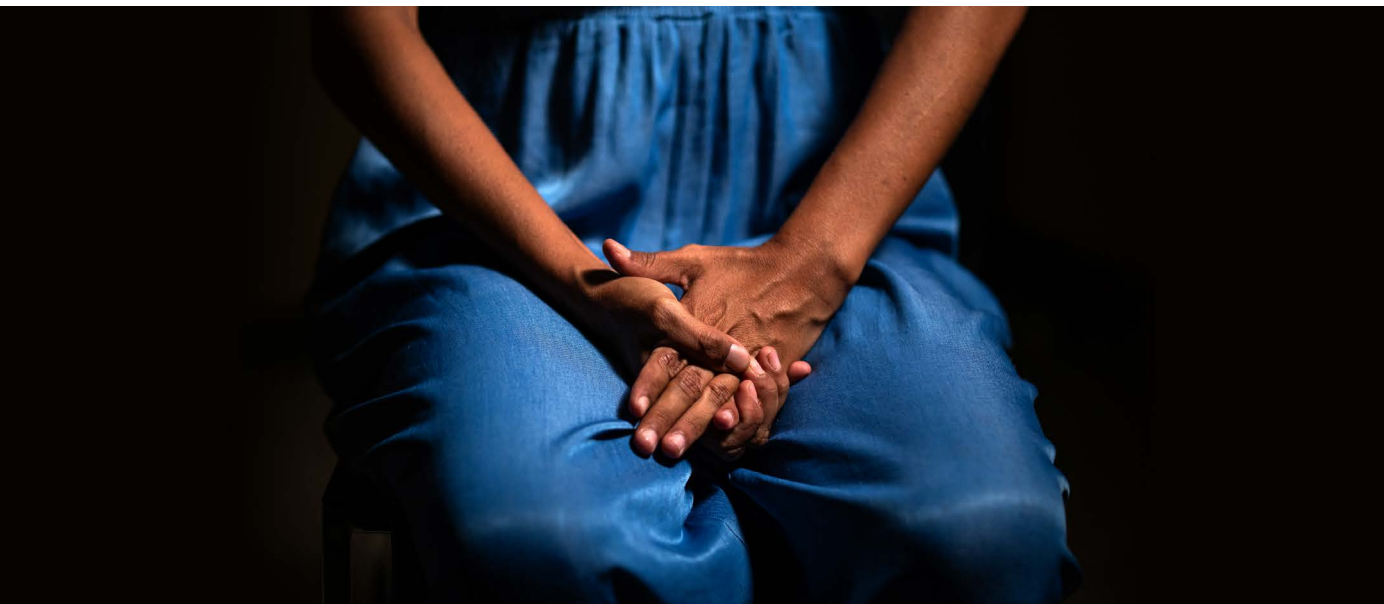
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Introduction

Venezuelan security forces committed a range of abuses against the population of the parish of Altagracia de Orituco during a military operation to find members and collaborators of the criminal organization the [Tren del Llano](#).

On the night of April 20, 2022, around 800 troops deployed to Altagracia de Orituco, in the José Tadeo Monagas municipality, in the state of Guárico. The Strategic Operational Command of the Bolivarian National Armed Forces (Comando Estratégico Operacional de la Fuerza Armada Nacional Bolivariana - CEOFANB) called the deployment “Operación Trueno” or Operation Thunder.

During the operation, troops carried out raids without judicial authorization, forced disappearances, and arbitrary detentions, with those detained suffering torture, sexual violence, and cruel treatment. Many of the detainees – who did not actually belong to Tren del Llano – were arrested based on false reports and evidence. Others had to pay bribes to security forces to receive basic services in the prisons where they were held.

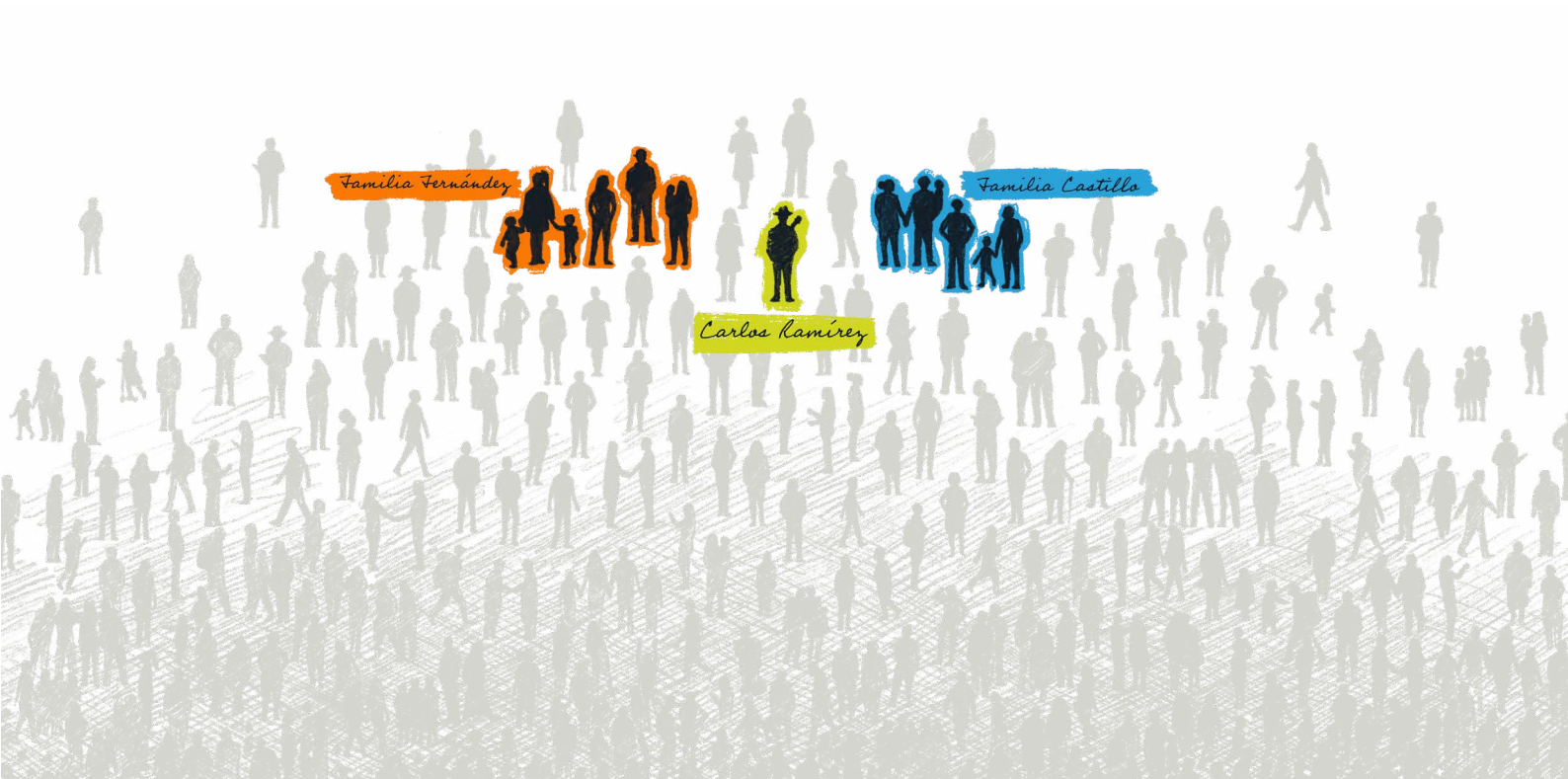


Although some of the victims were released after only a few days, the majority remain imprisoned today, two years later, in inhumane conditions, deprived of food and medical care.

Operation Trueno took place in five regions of Venezuela: Guárico, Anzoátegui, Aragua, Miranda, and Yaracuy. However, Defiende Venezuela's investigation focused on the events that occurred in Guárico, specifically in Altagracia de Orituco.

Between May and June 2022 and between February and March 2023, Defiende Venezuela interviewed 69 direct and indirect victims from a total of 34 families that were affected by the operations in Altagracia de Orituco. The organization also conducted interviews with journalists, agricultural associations, and merchants.

Defiende Venezuela also examined accounts provided by the victims, including photos, videos, and recordings of the multiple abuses committed against the population of Altagracia de Orituco. All of this information was shared with local authorities.



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Operation Trueno Context

Altagracia de Orituco is the operational headquarters of the Tren del Llano, which engages in drug trafficking, extortion, and kidnapping and has been behind the murder of several agricultural workers.

Altagracia de Orituco, Guárico, Venezuela



The group usually maintains a low profile with local authorities, but in April 2022, during Holy Week, hundreds of residents, including Mayor Pedro Solórzano Jerez, were participating in various [recreational activities](#) in the Guanapito beach resort in Altagracia de Orituco when, according to witnesses, visibly armed members of the Tren del Llano gang appeared.

“There were about 60 of them,” a witness said. “And they were all carrying long guns.”

The attendees were frightened, and many left the event, including the mayor.

Around the same time, there was a rumor in the community about a stash of several thousand dollars belonging to Tren del Llano. The loot had allegedly been sent by members of the gang to their base in Altagracia de Orituco following the death in November 2021 of alleged gang leader, Gilberto Hernandez, alias “[Malony](#).”

It was in this context that the Directorate against Organized Crime (Dirección contra la Delincuencia Organizada - DCDO), the Criminal Investigations Directorate (Dirección de Investigaciones Penales - DIP) of the Bolivarian National Police (Policía Nacional Bolivariana - PNB), and the National Anti-Extortion and Kidnapping Command (Comando Nacional Antiextorsión y Secuestro - CONAS) of the Bolivarian National Guard (Guardia Nacional Bolivariana - GNB) began Operation Trueno in Altagracia de Orituco on April 20, 2022. Security forces set up control points on the main roads and in areas with high vehicle and pedestrian traffic in town, like outside the hospital and private clinics. They even set up a heliport in front of the CONAS facilities, where high-ranking officers were brought in on two aircraft.

On April 21, Minister of the Interior, Justice and Peace Remigio Ceballos Ichaso gave a [first report](#) of results of the operation in Altagracia de Orituco: 24 “terrorists” captured and 31 cellular phones, 12 firearms, 21 vehicles, 1,500 rifle cartridges, as well as radios, clothing, ski masks and military uniforms seized.

Months later, on September 6, 2022, the Security and Citizen Defense Secretariat of the Governor's Office of Guárico stated in a police report broadcast by [Venevisión](#) that 14 alleged members of the criminal organization had been killed, and 178 people detained during the operation, which was carried out in four municipalities in the state. However, according to Defiende Venezuela's findings, the vast majority of these people were not actually connected to Tren del Llano.

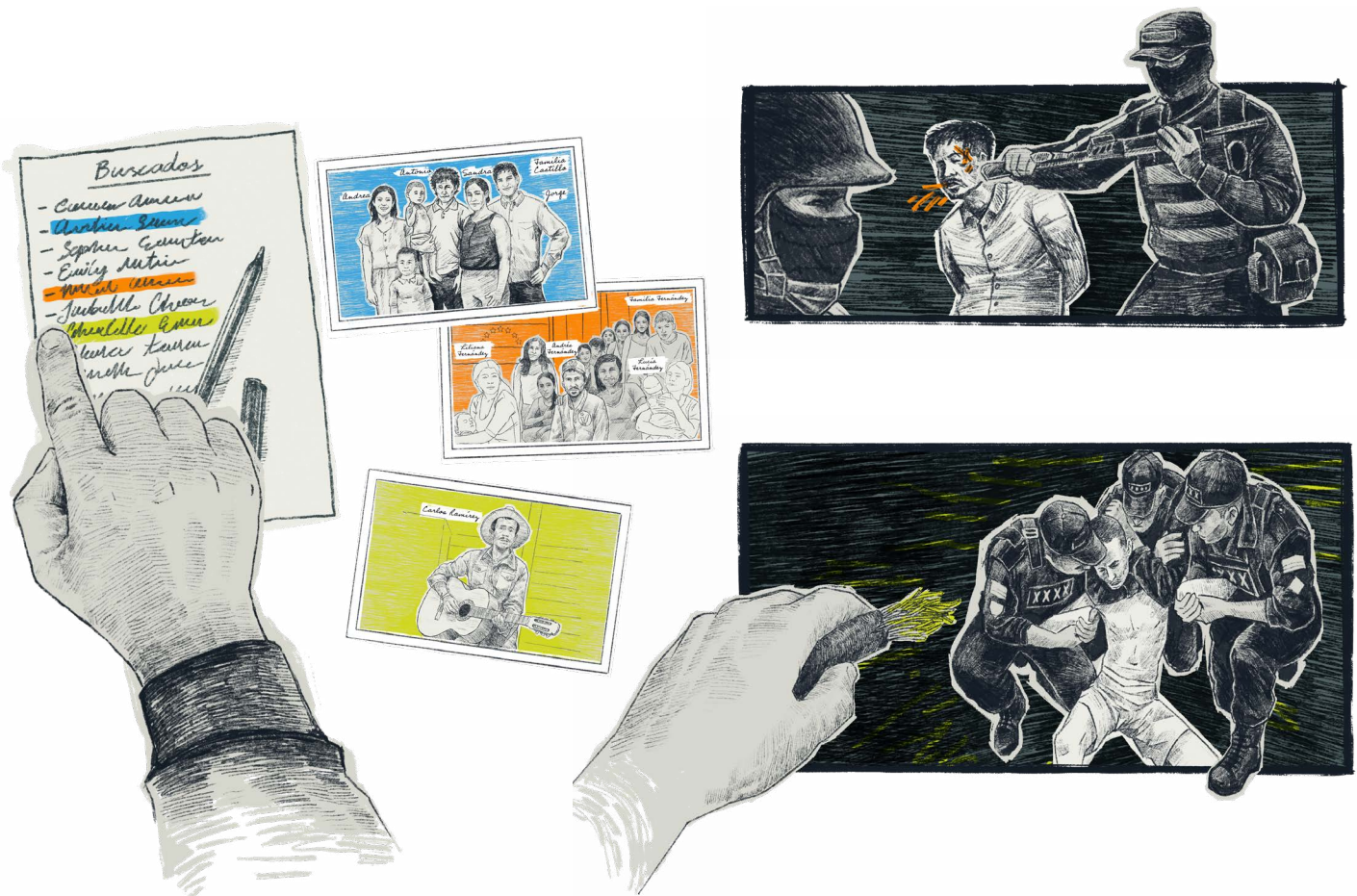
Ultimately, Operation Trueno failed to dismantle Tren del Llano, which continues to operate in Altagracia de Orituco and adjacent areas. But the countless atrocities committed by security forces during the operation left an indelible mark on the community.

3

Human Rights Violations During Operation Trueno

Defiende Venezuela collected testimonies of 34 cases of human rights violations that took place during Operation Trueno in Altigracia de Orituco. Many of the victims were part of a list of alleged Tren del Llano members drawn up by security forces. In reality, the list contained very few names of actual members of the criminal organization. It was mostly people with family or social connections to gang members, people who had been forced to collaborate with the gang – including its extortion victims – and people living in marginalized neighborhoods.

The following sections describe the types of abuses suffered by victims, including specific testimonies from people who spoke to Defiende Venezuela. The names of the victims have been changed to protect their identities.



Arbitrary Searches and Detentions



Security forces raided several homes and commercial premises in Altigracia de Orituco without a warrant. In Venezuela, personal liberty and property are protected by law, and those protections can only be suspended with an order from a judge or when the person is in flagrante — caught in the act.

In every single documented case, victims of raids and arbitrary detentions told Defiende Venezuela that the security forces agents did not show a warrant. Moreover, when victims demanded to know the reason for the arrests, security force agents showed them a list on their phones citing the names of alleged Tren del Llano members and claimed that it was an order from President Nicolás Maduro.

This was what happened to **Camila**, a 20-year-old woman who was arrested along with a friend. The security agents, dressed in black and wearing ski masks, violently entered Camila's home without a search warrant while she and her friend were sleeping. When Camila's grandmother rebuked the agents, they said that the operation was following a presidential order.

The security agents took the two women to a government-owned house where they stripped them naked, **sexually abused them**, and cut off some of their hair. In the case file, however, police officers reported that they arrested the women in the streets of Altigracia carrying "weapons of war."

Another case was that of **Tomás**, who was detained at his mother-in-law's home. The agents forced him to his knees and beat him with pistols while telling him that he had to cooperate with the authorities because it was a "presidential order."

In a third case, **Fabián** was detained and assaulted by officers allegedly following a "presidential order."

Camila, Tomás, and Fabián have been detained in an overcrowded prison without due process for more than two years. There is no mention of the alleged presidential order in their judicial files — it was merely used as a justification to subdue them.

Police Abuses

Defiende Venezuela identified several distinct attacks perpetrated between April and July 2022 by the police and military commission that incorporated different divisions of the Directorate of Strategic and Tactical Actions of the Bolivarian National Police (Dirección de Acciones Estratégicas y Tácticas de la Policía Nacional Bolivariana - DAET) and the CONAS, which **violated the right to life, personal integrity and liberty** of the residents of Altagracia de Orituco. Among the most common abuses identified were **acts of torture, property theft, sexual abuse, and forced disappearances**.

Acts of torture and cruel treatment took place in 61.79% of the cases. These tactics were used to obtain confessions or incriminating evidence against alleged members of Tren del Llano, and to link victims to the gang via financial transactions. People interviewed by Defiende Venezuela also said that security agents insisted on obtaining the names of Tren del Llano leaders, even though this information is public knowledge.

One such case is that of **Darío**, who was detained by a mixed force from various police agencies near his wife's work. They took him to his house, entered his room, demanded the keys to his motorcycle, and arrested him.



On May 15, 2022, his wife was able to visit him at the facilities of the Strategic Intelligence Directorate (Dirección de Inteligencia Estratégica - DIE), located in La Quebradita, Libertador municipality, Capital District. Darío told her that while he was held in Altagracia de Orituco, he was choked with a bag over his head and beaten by agents who demanded that he reveal the names of gang members.

There is also the case of **Rubén**, who was detained on the afternoon of April 21, 2022, by security agents who entered his home without a search warrant while he was sleeping. After his arrest, he was “ruleteado” – a common practice used by Venezuelan security forces that consists of transporting or parking with detained people for hours instead of taking them directly before a judge or to a detention center – through the sectors of San Miguel, Los Robles, Corocoyal, and El Botalón de Altagracia de Orituco. During that time, security forces beat him and demanded that he identify members of the gang. Five hours after his arrest, he was transferred to the PNB facilities in San Juan de los Morros.

In the case of **Valentina**, which occurred on April 20, 2022, security agents entered her house without a warrant and told her that she had to change her clothes and accompany them. They put her in a vehicle, and at the Peña de Mota sector, near where the headquarters of the Bolivarian Intelligence Service (Servicio Bolivariano de Inteligencia - SEBIN) is located, the security agents pushed her down and hit her in the ribs and in the leg with their weapons. As they beat her, they demanded she tell them the location of her brother, an alleged Tren del Llano collaborator.

“You must know where he is, bitch,” Valentina recalls the agents telling her.

Later, she was taken to a police station, where she continued to be harassed. According to Valentina, one of the officers shouted at her and other relatives of alleged members of the criminal organization: “They are scoundrels. We should kill them all.” The official also repeated the phrase, “The moon is beautiful for killing.”

Many female victims reported the absence of female security agents who could provide adequate attention and respect for their integrity during operations. They also stated that male security agents were often under the influence of psychoactive substances, which increased the risk of the victims suffering some type of sexual violence.

This was the case for **Matilde**, a woman arrested on April 23, 2022, by more than 30 security agents who entered her home without a search warrant. The victim was isolated in a room while officials threatened her, demanding she hand over her valuables.

“Fucking bitch, we’re going to kill you,” she recalls the law enforcement officers saying to her.

Matilde was taken to the CONAS facilities in Altagracia de Orituco. There, she was detained without being told the reason for her arrest. She was also not allowed to contact her relatives or a lawyer. Fearful of losing what little she had left, Matilde swallowed her wedding ring to keep it from the security guards, but when they found out, they forced her to also swallow the bracelets on her wrists, which they stuffed into an old loaf of bread.

Then, the agents intentionally opened a pipe to flood the cell where Matilde was being held along with six other women, forcing them to spend the night wet through.

A female security agent, taking advantage of Matilde's terror, demanded US\$4,000 in exchange for not transferring her to Valle de La Pascua, a city elsewhere in Guárico. The agent told her that if she was transferred, she would suffer all kinds of abuse there.



"You'll get fucked so hard, cum will be coming out of your ears," the agent said threateningly.

During Operation Trueno, attacks on property, robbery, and extortion were also common, mainly against merchants and farmers. In 55.88% of the cases documented by Defiende Venezuela, the victims said that during the raids, security agents stole their belongings.

Daniel, a local farmer who was detained along with his son, was accused by security agents of being a criminal who had contact with "malandros" (gangsters). They told him that he had to pay them US\$5,000 in cash to "buy" his freedom and demanded that he give three cows to a security agent in Caracas. Daniel got the money from a local moneylender.

Pedro, a businessman who was detained on April 20, 2022, was the victim of a similar case. His wife was arrested first, and security forces took his pickup truck to use on their patrols.

When he learned of his wife's arrest, Pedro went to his home, where he was apprehended by security agents. In addition to arresting him, they took his phone, wallet, and US\$900 that he was going to use to pay some suppliers. They also took a second pickup truck from him under the pretext that they needed it "to move some motorcycles."

In addition, the National Office Against Organized Crime and Terrorist Financing (Oficina Nacional contra la Delincuencia Organizada y el Financiamiento al Terrorismo - ONCDOFT) seized various assets belonging to the victims without respecting their right to defense and other procedural guarantees.

This is what happened to Luis, a farmer who had vehicles, machinery, and hundreds of animals seized from his farms. His wife and family members initiated an investigation with the human rights section of the Public Prosecutor's Office, but the investigative unit was unable to continue with the investigation, citing a lack of budget and other institutional barriers imposed by their superiors.

Conducting her own investigation, Luis' wife later found that the animals and machinery were on the farm of a general of the Venezuelan armed forces in the state of Barinas.

Finally, Defiende Venezuela identified that in 100% of the cases of imprisonment, victims were subjected to a brief or long-term **forced disappearance**.

After security agents removed people from their homes, they regularly denied the victims' families information about their whereabouts. Some of the victims were taken to clandestine torture centers, and others to the CONAS facility in Altigracia. Except in a few isolated cases, most of the victims were subsequently transferred to the terrorism courts in Caracas, where police records containing manipulated evidence and false information were used against them.

Of these cases, one of the most dramatic was that of **Beatriz**, a young woman who disappeared for two days. During that time, she was taken against her will to a hotel in the area. There, security personnel forced her to incriminate people as members of Tren del Llano, although she repeatedly claimed that she had no knowledge of these people.

The security agents finally agreed to let Beatriz see her family and arranged to meet Beatriz's father at a restaurant in town on the condition that he pay for the agents' food expenses.

Another documented case was that of **Carlos**, a former resident of Altigracia who had moved to Caracas when Operation Trueno began. Carlos was arrested in the capital, where he was tried and accused of being a Tren del Llano accomplice.

After his arrest, he was transferred to La Guaira, where he was tortured for information about the gang. During his interrogation, they held him underwater in the sea. Later, they put him in a van with a bag over his head and drove for about 40 minutes until they arrived at a clandestine torture center, where he was locked in the basement.

Five days later, Carlos was taken to court. The judge did not allow him to appoint a trusted lawyer, forcing him to use a public defender. Although he was assigned a detention center, Carlos remained in the clandestine torture center for another month until, following complaints filed by Defiende Venezuela, he was transferred to the PNB Zone 07 police station in Miranda State.

Torture Centers

In addition to the PNB, SEBIN, and CONAS headquarters located in Altigracia de Orituco, private properties were used to house security agents or to serve as detention, interrogation, and torture centers.

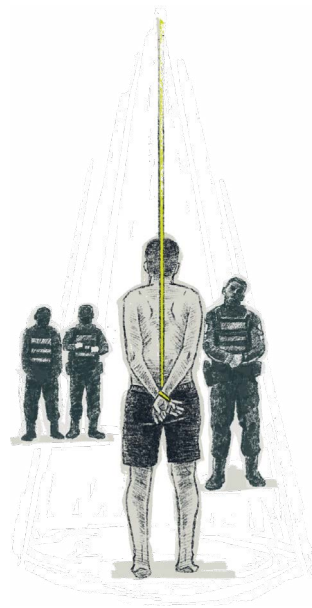
One such property was the Campanario hotel, which received an order from the Ministry of the Interior, Justice, and Peace to house many of the security agents that arrived in Altigracia from Caracas. The hotel was also used for interrogations.

Adjacent to the hotel is the El Caney del Coleador restaurant, which was used to torture the detainees, including a minor and his uncle. The minor was detained in a patrol car and received death threats, while his uncle was tied up and beaten to obtain confessions related to Tren del Llano.



Security forces also seized a local cattle rancher's vehicles, farm, and personal items and used his house to torture detainees. Neighbors reported seeing alleged sex workers enter the house.

The same occurred in two other houses. One was located in the Paural sector, which was raided and used by the security agents as a base of operations. The other was in Camoruco, where the agents spent the night and organized parties.



4

Response from Local Courts and International Organizations

In response to the attacks carried out during Operation Trueno, Defiende Venezuela designed a litigation strategy aimed at documenting victims' cases, drawing attention to the abuses, and protecting the human rights of the residents of Altagracia de Orituco.

Citing the “risk of irreparable harm” to locals, Defiende Venezuela requested precautionary measures before the Inter-American Commission on Human Rights (IACHR).

During Operation Trueno, victims had no specialized authorities to turn to for help. The nearest human rights prosecutor's office is in San Juan de los Morros, capital of Guárico, four hours from Altagracia.

To address this, Defiende Venezuela filed several complaints – with the victims' permission – requesting protection measures directly with the General Directorate of Human Rights of the Public Prosecutor's Office in Caracas.

In response to these complaints, the Public Prosecutor's Office visited the town of Altagracia ten months after the operation took place. However, to date, no perpetrators have been identified or charged.

With no response from the state, Defiende Venezuela prepared three reports for different United Nations agencies, detailing the cases of the 34 direct victims of the operation. Defiende Venezuela also prepared six complaints to the United Nations special protection mechanisms, including the Special Rapporteur on Violence against Women, its causes and consequences; the Working Group on Discrimination against Women and Girls; the Special Rapporteur on Torture and Other Cruel, Inhuman or Degrading Treatment or Punishment; the Working Group on Enforced or Involuntary Disappearances; and the Working Group on Arbitrary Detention (WGAD).

The WGAD was the mechanism most used, and Defiende Venezuela obtained two favorable resolutions through this group.

In both resolutions, the arbitrary and disproportionate actions of the security forces are evident. The [WGAD](#) considered that these cases “are part of a systematic practice of depriving people of their freedom without respecting the rights enshrined in international law, and may constitute crimes against humanity.”

The first case is about two women in their 60s who were victims of evidence tampering: they were detained, and their files contain false or manipulated information. When analyzing the case, the WGAD highlighted the inconsistencies in the reports of the security forces and declared that the agents' version was not credible since they said that several security officials chased the two women on vehicles and motorcycles and only caught up with them at their house, where the women supposedly had weapons and ammunition.

There were other inconsistencies in this case. The government reported that they were detained on April 27, 2022, but the official document states that it was April 26. However, reports published by local media date the arrests to April 23.

In the second case, the Maduro government claimed that a person had been detained under an arrest warrant. However, the warrant was issued on the same day of the arrest. The state presented a record of the presentation hearing that was not signed by the victim or his attorney, which clearly shows that the person was not brought before a judge within the time period ordered by law.



According to the WGAD, these facts indicate that the “government did not provide a credible account of the detention, nor did it sufficiently explain how the detention was generated, nor the reasons on which it was based.”

The WGAD determined that the victim in this case was subjected to acts of torture and cruel, inhuman or degrading treatment with the purpose of forcing her to provide an incriminating confession. This is in violation of the peremptory norm of international law that prohibits torture and of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights.

The WGAD resolutions include a series of recommendations, including the release of the victims and the development of exhaustive and independent investigations. However, the state has yet to implement these recommendations. In fact, the victims continue to be subjected to arbitrary detention and have low expectations of justice.

5

Recommendations to the Venezuelan State

Defiende Venezuela, in accordance with the recommendations issued by international organizations, urges the Venezuelan government to take the following actions to address the harm incurred by Operation Trueno:

Regarding the guarantee of human rights protection in security operations:

- Implement the recommendations of the reports of the Independent International Fact-Finding Mission on Venezuela, especially with regard to reports A/HRC/54/57 and A/HRC/45/33.
- Conduct prompt, effective, thorough, independent, impartial, and transparent investigations into all violations and offenses documented in this report and other disclosures on the matter.
- Act on allegations of torture and sexual and gender-based violence, and conduct a review of all cases, in order to investigate the allegations and ensure that victims have access to assistance, including comprehensive medical and psychological support.
- Ensure that all security agents involved in Operation Trueno are investigated.
- Reform the DAET police force and attached divisions, including its senior and middle management, and establish an independent oversight mechanism to ensure real, effective and lasting change in the practices of its divisions.
- Take steps to remedy the situation of all victims of Operation Trueno, without delay and in accordance with relevant international standards, including those set forth in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights.
- Disseminate the decisions and recommendations of international human rights protection bodies, especially the favorable resolutions of the WGDA.

- Release all unjustly detained persons from prison and ensure a mechanism for access to assets seized by the state.
- Approve legislative amendments and make modifications with the purpose of harmonizing Venezuela's laws and practices with its international obligations.
- Accept technical assistance and visits from the Working Group on Arbitrary Detention, the Working Group on Enforced or Involuntary Disappearances, and the United Nations Special Rapporteur on Extrajudicial, Summary or Arbitrary Executions.

About Defiende Venezuela:

Defiende Venezuela is a non-governmental organization dedicated to the defense and promotion of human rights. We have represented more than 2,000 victims in different proceedings before the Inter-American Commission and Court of Human Rights, the United Nations and the International Criminal Court. We have trained more than 3,000 activists on human rights issues.



About InSight Crime:

InSight Crime is a nonprofit organization dedicated to the study of the principal threat to national and citizen security in Latin America and the Caribbean: organized crime. For more than a decade, InSight Crime has crossed borders and institutions -- as an amalgam of journalism outlet, think tank and academic resource -- to deepen the debate and inform on organized crime in the Americas. On-the-ground reporting, careful research and impactful investigations are hallmarks of the organization from the very beginning.

For more information, visit insightcrime.org



Explore more about Operation Trueno

InSight Crime partnered with Defiende Venezuela to expose the actions of security forces and highlight the work of human rights organizations through a series of graphic stories depicting the horrific abuses suffered by residents of Altagracia de Orituco during Operation Trueno. Explore the full series here.



Operation Trueno

10 Jul 2024

Operation Trueno began on the night of April 20, 2022, when around 800 police and military officials traveling in 30 cars and 10 armored vehicles descended on the municipality of Altagracia de Orituco in the state of Guárico...

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The Castillo Family

10 Jul 2024

Antonio and Sandra live in Altagracia de Orituco with their two grandchildren, aged 7 and 1. One of the children is the son of their daughter Andrea, who emigrated from Venezuela, and a Tren del Llano member she had been in a relationship ...

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Tren del Llano

31 May 2024

Tren del Llano (Train of the Plain) is one of the first large criminal gangs, known locally as "megabandas," to emerge in Venezuela. The group grew in tandem with the rising notoriety of its leader and founder, José Antonio Tovar Colina, alias "El Picure" who was killed by Venezuelan authorities...

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