

IACHR: Session concludes with denunciation of reprisals and call to combat impunity

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The 154th session of the Inter-American Commission on Human Rights has concluded with a denunciation of reprisals against those who cooperate with the Commission and a call to better protect human rights defenders and end impunity for attacks against them.



(Washington D.C.) - The 154th regular session of the Inter-American Commission on Human Rights has closed with a categorical denunciation by Commissioners of reprisals against defenders who participated in hearings. The risks, threats and attacks faced by human rights defenders in national contexts was a topic of several hearings during the session, and reprisals against those attending the IACHR session served to throw these into sharp relief.

Venezuelan defenders participating in the Commission hearings have been [victim of reprisals](#) due to their cooperation with the mechanisms. [In their press statement at the conclusion of the session](#), the IACHR stated it was 'absolutely unacceptable' for a State to take steps to intimidate those that engage with the Inter-American human rights system. The Commission reminded States of their responsibilities to grant the necessary guarantees to those cooperating with the mechanisms and refrain from carrying out reprisals against them or their families.

'Reprisals against Venezuelan activists engaging at this session of the Commission is a reminder of the unacceptable risks that defenders face, including whilst seeking accountability where national level systems fail,' said ISHR's Eleanor Openshaw. 'The Commission has a good record of regularly reminding States of their obligations to ensure the safety of those engaging with IACHR, and denouncing reprisals where they occur. It is time for OAS States to step up their commitment to eradicate reprisals,' she said.

The Commission's call to better protect human rights defenders came as ISHR delivered a [statement to the UN Human Rights Council](#) in Geneva calling on Guatemala, Colombia and other Latin American States to ensure that mechanisms for the protection of defenders are established and effective.

In regard to the human rights situation in the region as a whole, the Commission noted progress made in regard to the respect of rights since the transition to democracy in many Latin American countries in the mid-1980s, whilst speaking of 'the profound challenges' to the 'fulfillment of human rights in the democratic present'.

As part of those challenges the Commission highlighted threats, harassment and killings of human rights defenders and journalists, a high percentage of which go unpunished. The situation for human rights defenders, and the exercise of freedom of peaceful assembly and association, was a topic addressed in several hearings during the session. The situation of human rights defenders of the Shuar People in Ecuador, and the forced migration and persecution of LGBTI defenders in Central America were discussions held at the petition of NGOs.

A hearing focusing on 'Social Protest and Human Rights in the Americas', requested by a broad spectrum of civil society organisations from the region, prompted the Commission to conclude that 'in many countries in the region there is a tendency to criminalize and suppress social protest'. In addition, the Commission noted that it had received information indicating that in some countries the armed forces are routinely used to control demonstrations, a practice that runs contrary to inter-American human rights standards.

During the session, the Commission launched its report on the 'Right to Truth in the Americas', which highlights the importance of addressing and eradicating impunity for violations, as a key component in securing the respect of human rights. IACHR Executive Secretary Emilio Álvarez Icaza [stated](#) that the report is not 'only about the past, but a contribution to the present to help ensure .. that the democracies of today can move forward in settling the debt that remains'. He added '..it is also a contribution to the future, because

guaranteeing the right to truth makes it possible to build a future free of these types of abuses.'.

Several hearings sought to highlight the connections between human rights and extractive industries, prompting the Commission to conclude that 'development projects are often not managed with strict adherence to human rights'. It noted that 'it is essential that any development project is carried out in keeping with the human rights standards of the inter-American system, including the requirement of prior consultation.' The Commission also noted its concern regarding the existence of a relationship between companies in the extractive industry and members of the police said to be hired by them.

'The question of responsibilities of businesses in regard to human rights abuses is one that has gained considerable attention through the Commission. We are keen to encourage the Commission to put its attention on the question of the protection of human rights defenders across the region calling for corporate accountability,' said ISHR's Ben Leather.

The Commission noted that its new Special Rapporteurship on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights will be operational by the end of the year, provided it receives the funds it requires. The IACHR invited OAS Member States to contribute to a special fund to be used for the establishment of the Rapporteurship and its activities.

The Commission announced that it will publish a Report on the 154th Session within the coming weeks.

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