



Embassy of the Bolivarian Republic of Venezuela in the United States

## *Fact Sheet:*

# **About the Attack on a Caracas Synagogue**

On the night of January 30th, 2009, approximately 15 armed individuals broke into the synagogue located in the Maripérez neighborhood of Caracas and vandalized the premises. The following morning President Chávez and other high officials deplored the incident and called for a swift and efficient investigation. Within a week, Venezuela's Attorney General and the Corps for Scientific Penal and Criminal Investigations (CICPC, in Spanish) announced that 15 suspects had been detained.

Though some have tried to use this deplorable, but isolated incident to suggest that the Venezuelan government is guilty of promoting anti-Semitism, **President Chávez and other high-level Venezuelan officials have condemned this act in the strongest terms and have frequently emphasized that the Venezuelan government will not tolerate any form of anti-Semitism.** In fact, as President Chávez has repeatedly said, among the key principles of the Bolivarian Revolution are respect and justice for all peoples, regardless of religion, ethnicity, gender or any other quality.

### **Immediate Response to the Attack**

President Chávez immediately repudiated the attack on the morning the news was disseminated, saying: "We condemn the [vandalism of] the Caracas synagogue. We condemn violence where it arises, and we will fight it wherever it arises."<sup>1</sup>

Following up on government promises for a quick, yet thorough and careful investigation,

<sup>1</sup> President Chávez condemns attack on synagogue, February 2, 2009. <http://www.embavenez-us.org/news.php?nid=4811>

15 people were arrested one week later on suspicion of having carried out the attack.<sup>2</sup> These suspects include police officers, private citizens, common criminals, and one of the synagogue's security guards.

In a TV interview on February 8<sup>th</sup>, the President of the Republic, Hugo Chávez, explained that "the leader of the group of police officers and civilians charged with the attack on the synagogue is an official from the Metropolitan Police who worked as a personal bodyguard for the synagogue's Rabbi for the past four years." According to a news report published on the website of the Confederation of Venezuelan Israeli Associations (CAIV), the President explained that the investigations demonstrate that the Rabbi's former bodyguard "cut the security system's electricity from the inside, not from outside. That facilitated their entrance." The President also asserted that "there were opposition spokespersons and a television channel that immediately pointed fingers at the government... Well, it turns out that the government has nothing to do with this attack." Finally, **President Chávez sent a direct message to the Jewish community: "For the Jewish family that lives with us and is a big part of the Venezuelan family: they should not let themselves be manipulated. It is not the government of Chávez [who did this]; this government is not anti-Semitic or anti-Jewish."**<sup>3</sup>

<sup>2</sup> Seven officials and four civilians arrested in synagogue case, February 9, 2009. <http://www.embavenez-us.org/news.php?nid=4828>; Four more suspects arrested for the synagogue attack, February 10, 2009. <http://www.embavenez-us.org/news.php?nid=4832>

<sup>3</sup> "Investigation into AIV synagogue attack continues", February 9, 2009. [http://www.caiv.org/noticias.php?noti\\_id=1068&apartado=venezuela&seccion=Noticias%20de%20Venezuela](http://www.caiv.org/noticias.php?noti_id=1068&apartado=venezuela&seccion=Noticias%20de%20Venezuela)



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## Reaching out to the Jewish Community

In August 2008, President Chávez met with a delegation of national and international representatives of CAIV, the Latin American Jewish Congress (LAJC), and the World Jewish Congress (WJC) to discuss efforts to end anti-Semitism and discrimination of any kind in Latin America. A pledge was made at the meeting to keep the lines of communication open between the government and the Venezuelan Jewish community.

After the synagogue attack, President Chávez acted on this pledge by instructing several Ministers, including Foreign Minister Nicolás Maduro, to meet with representatives of the Jewish community to hear their concerns. This meeting was described by Jack Terpins, President of the Latin American Jewish Congress, as “cordial and fruitful.”<sup>4</sup>; Foreign Minister Maduro assured them of the government’s “willingness to keep the channels of communication open, and called upon people of the Jewish faith to turn a deaf ear to those who would manipulate, for political reasons, this act [of vandalism] that we repudiate.”<sup>5</sup>

### Joint Declaration against Racism

On December 16<sup>th</sup>, 2008, President Chávez signed a joint declaration condemning all forms of racism with Presidents Fernández de Kirchner and Lula da Silva of Argentina and Brazil. The Presidents observed “with serious worry that at the beginning of the third millennium a countless number of humans

continue to be victims of racism, discrimination or religious intolerance, in particular, anti-Semitism and anti-Islamism, racial discrimination and other related types of intolerance, and that racist and discriminatory ideologies and practices have resurfaced or persist in various regions of the world.”<sup>6</sup> Additionally, they agreed to “renew their commitment to continue working at the national, regional and international levels to strengthen the mechanisms for the promotion and protection of human rights in order to assure their full respect without regards to race, ethnicity, sex, religion, political ideology, or any other characteristic.”<sup>7</sup>

The statement was lauded by **Ronald Lauder** as an “important and very welcome step,” who also noted that **through this “clear condemnation of anti-Semitism, president Chávez had fulfilled the pledge given to WJC and LAJC leaders made at [the August 2008 Caracas] meeting.”**<sup>8</sup>

### Conflation of Issues

Part of the media campaign to associate the government of Venezuela with anti-Semitic policies is due to the conflation of criticism of the current government of Israel with a criticism of Judaism. Although President Chávez has been highly critical of Israel’s military action that provoked hundreds of civilian casualties in the Gaza Strip, he has been careful not to equate the actions of the current government of Israel with criticism of the Jewish faith or Jewish people. **The**

<sup>4</sup>Foreign Minister Maduro met with international representatives of the Jewish community, February 6, 2009. <http://www.embavenez-us.org/news.php?nid=4824>

<sup>5</sup>Bolivarian government affirms absolute condemnation of attack against a Caracas synagogue, February 4, 2009. <http://www.embavenez-us.org/news.php?nid=4817>

<sup>6</sup>Declaración conjunta contra todo tipo de discriminación y racismo, December 16 2008, <http://www.congresojudio.org.ar/nota.php?np=438>

<sup>7</sup>Declaración conjunta contra todo tipo de discriminación y racismo, December 16 2008, <http://www.congresojudio.org.ar/nota.php?np=438>

<sup>8</sup>WJC welcomes clear commitment by Latin American leaders, *World Jewish Congress*, December 19 2008, <http://www.worldjewishcongress.org/>



**government of Venezuela has made considerable efforts in drawing this distinction.** In the official statement condemning the Gaza bombings, it was made clear that President Chávez “has always opposed anti-Semitism as well as all types of discrimination and racism.”<sup>9</sup>

### **Media Exacerbation**

Unfortunately these efforts are often ignored and manipulated by the mainstream media, and the media have compounded this mistake by attempting to link the government to the attack on the synagogue. As President Chávez noted, the private media in Venezuela “immediately . . . came out to say it was the government.”<sup>10</sup>

As part of its so-called evidence of government anti-Semitism, media outlets cited a pro-government website. This website has no direct links to the government and does not represent official government positions. It is a private website run by private citizens.

The mainstream media has also failed to report official positions from Jewish organizations in Venezuela. It may therefore surprise many people outside of Venezuela to know that **Elías Farache, President of the Israeli Association of Venezuela**, stated that “**we never accused the government because . . . it does not sound logical that we would be attacked by a government that is liberal, that is on the left, that [supports] minorities more than those who hold power.**”<sup>11</sup> He also added that **Jewish people “have felt the support of**

**every sector of society, especially the government.**”<sup>12</sup>

### **Timing of the Attack**

The timing of the attack, with an upcoming referendum in Venezuela on February 15<sup>th</sup>, seems suspicious. President Chávez questioned this, asking: “We have to ask, as any police investigator must: Who benefits? These violent acts do not benefit the government, they do not benefit the people, they do not benefit the revolution.”<sup>13</sup>

**It is important to note that this type of sabotage during politically tense periods in Venezuela has precedents.** In 2003, in the middle of the oil lockout, bombs were planted at the Colombian and Spanish Consulates. Although some media outlets immediately tried to blame the government of President Chávez, subsequent investigations revealed that the perpetrators had taken part in the 2002 coup d’état and in presidential assassination attempts. These criminals are now fugitives presumably hiding in the United States.<sup>14</sup>

### **Conclusion**

As has occurred in the past, we have sadly witnessed the dissemination of false and misleading information that has led to a skewed perception of the government of Venezuela. **Shameful attempts have been made to portray this reprehensible act of vandalism as government policy.**

**The Venezuelan government has made clear its absolute rejection of anti-Semitism and all forms of discrimination, and emphasized its will to**

<sup>9</sup> Bolivarian Republic of Venezuela - Ministry of People's Power for Foreign Affairs – Statement, January 6, 2009. <http://www.embavenez-us.org/news.php?nid=4761>

<sup>10</sup> Telephone interview with President Hugo Chávez on “Dando y Dando” a program broadcast by Venezolana de Televisión. February 5, 2009

<sup>11</sup> Ibid.

<sup>12</sup> Ibid.

<sup>13</sup> President Chávez condemns attack on synagogue, February 2, 2009. <http://www.embavenez-us.org/news.php?nid=4811>

<sup>14</sup> Telephone interview with President Hugo Chávez on “Dando y Dando.”



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maintain the best possible relations with the Jewish community, both domestically and internationally.

**As of February 10, fifteen people have been arrested on suspicion of vandalizing the synagogue.** The government has openly embraced the Venezuelan Jewish community and has taken every necessary security measure to better protect them and prevent this type of act from occurring again.

The odious vandalism of the synagogue has been categorically denounced by President Chávez and his government. Moreover, **the President has affirmed his affection for the Jewish community**, a community he respects “and will continue to respect and protect.”<sup>15</sup>

February 10, 2009

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<sup>15</sup> Ibid.