

FAIR Study

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Human Rights Coverage Serving Washington's Needs

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amplifying Venezuela's

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Fairness & Accuracy In Reporting

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Human Rights Coverage Serving Washington's Needs

By Steve Rendall, Daniel Ward and Tess Hall

Any evenhanded comparison of the Colombian and Venezuelan governments' human rights records would have to note that, though Venezuela's record is far from perfect, that country is by every measure a safer place than Colombia to live, vote, organize unions and political groups, speak out against the government or practice journalism.

But a new survey by FAIR shows that, over the past 10 years, editors at four leading U.S. newspapers have focused more on purported human rights abuses in Venezuela than in Colombia, and their commentary would suggest that Venezuela's government has a worse human rights record than Colombia's. These papers, FAIR found, seem more interested in reinforcing official U.S. policy toward the region than in genuinely supporting the rights of Colombians and Venezuelans.

Colombia's 'appalling' record . . .

Over the past 40 years, Colombia has been known for its rampant human rights violations, untouchable drug cartels, government-linked death squads and violent guerrilla groups. The principal specialist on Colombia for the nonprofit group Human Rights Watch (HRW), Maria McFarland Sanchez-Moreno, told Congress (4/23/07), "Colombia presents the worst human rights and humanitarian crisis in the Western Hemisphere." She also noted that government-linked paramilitary groups are largely responsible for Colombia's grim status.

Though Colombia is not the chaotic state it was in the late 1980s and early '90s, and violence and repression have not been uniform, HRW's Americas director José Miguel Vivanco has called Colombia's cur-



Colombia President Álvaro Uribe: personally linked to death squads.

rent human rights situation "appalling" (Human Rights Watch, 1/22/08).

Killings of civilians by uniformed Colombian military and police totaled 329 in 2007 (*Los Angeles Times*, 8/21/08), and the country's unfolding "para-political" scandals have revealed "links between rightist death squads and dozens of officials loyal to President Álvaro Uribe" (*Boston Globe*, 12/14/06). Everyone from senators to cabinet members to judges have been implicated—even Colombia's top general, Mario Montoya, whom the *Washington Post* (9/17/08) described as "a trusted caretaker of the sizable aid package Washington provides Colombia's army."

A 2005 report by the Colombian Commission of Jurists (6/21/05) estimated paramilitaries have killed at least 13,000 people since 1996 alone.

The country is, in Sánchez-Moreno's words (4/23/07), "the murder capital of the world for trade unionists"; estimates of the number of unionists killed in the last two decades range from 2,700 (Human Rights Watch, 11/20/08) to 4,000 (AFL-CIO Solidarity Center, 6/06; U.S. State Department,

cited in *Miami Herald*, 4/16/07).

Journalists have not fared much better. In 2001, the Committee to Protect Journalists described Colombia as "by far the most dangerous country in Latin America for journalists" (*New York Times*, 7/12/01). According to recent statistics by the organization (12/31/08), there were 40 journalists killed in Colombia from January 1992 until January 2009, making it the fourth-deadliest country during that period, following Iraq (137), Algeria (60) and Russia (49).

Judicial Watch

. . . vs. 'relatively open' Venezuela

Although Colombia's human rights record ranks among the worst of the worst, it is Venezuela's record that seems to grip the attention of U.S. newspaper editors.

HRW has published numerous reports in the past on the state of human rights in Venezuela. In a 230-page retrospective titled "A Decade Under Chávez" (9/18/08),* HRW attempted to assess the Venezuelan government's impact on vital democratic institutions—"the courts, the media, organized labor and civil society"—during the Chávez presidency. The report judged Chávez on two main fronts—political discrimination and limits on freedom of expression and association.

Among the worst charges HRW listed

* In a 12/15/08 letter addressed to HRW's board of directors, more than 100 Latin American scholars accused HRW of harboring a "politically motivated" bias against Hugo Chávez and Venezuela, and stated that HRW's report on Venezuela "does not meet even the most minimal standards of scholarship, impartiality, accuracy or credibility." The letter, circulated by the Council on Hemispheric Affairs, has sparked an exchange between its authors and HRW

against the Venezuelan government: practicing political intimidation by, among other things, blacklisting Chávez opponents from government jobs; packing the country's supreme court with allies; denying a license renewal to a popular television station for political reasons; and restricting the public's access to official information by taking, on average, 38 days, "almost twice the legal maximum," to reply to journalists' requests for information.

Some of these are serious matters, worthy of press attention. But they do not compare to the situation in Colombia; Venezuelan journalists, trade union activists and innocent civilians do not live in fear of government-linked death squads.

When all is said and done, though, Vivanco described Venezuela as a "relatively open society" (*New York Times*, 9/19/08), and HRW's report pointed out that, excluding the court-packing charge,

"the most dramatic setback" to Venezuelan democracy was the 2002 coup that temporarily removed Chávez from office—an action cheered by both the White House and many U.S. newspaper editors (*L.A. Times*, 4/17/02; *New York Times*, 4/13/02; *Chicago Tribune*, 4/14/02).

By the numbers

FAIR's survey looked at every editorial addressing human rights in Colombia and Venezuela over a 10-year period (1998–2007) in four influential U.S. newspapers—the *New York Times*, *Washington Post*, *Los Angeles Times* and *Miami Herald*.

The four papers ran a total of 191 editorials on both countries' human rights records: 101 addressing Venezuela's record and 90 on Colombia's. (FAIR's study, focused on assessing the editorial treatment

of the Colombian and Venezuelan governments, did not address coverage of human rights abuses by the FARC and ELN in Colombia, or other non-governmental groups in either country.)

While the overwhelming majority of Venezuelan pieces presented a strictly negative view of its record, a majority of the Colombia editorials presented either a mixed or wholly positive view of its record. Of the 101 editorials on Venezuela, 91 solely described the country's record negatively. Ten had both positive and negative things to say. Not a single editorial portrayed Venezuela's record in a strictly posi-

tive light. Of 90 editorials on Colombia, 42 only portrayed Colombia's situation as negative, 32 expressed a mixed assessment, and 16 were entirely positive.

At one end of the spectrum, *Washington Post* editors offered the most positive view of the Colombian government's human rights record. Of the paper's 13 editorials on Colombia's record, seven presented a positive view and six were mixed. No *Post* piece was exclusively negative about the Colombian record. Of 23 *Post* editorials on Venezuela, 22 were negative and one was mixed.

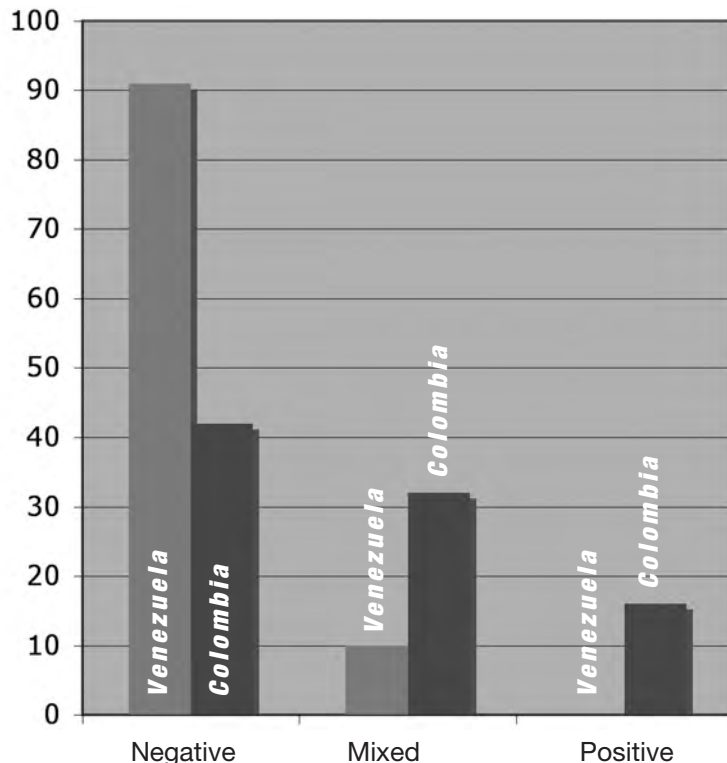
At the other end of the spectrum, the *New York Times* held the Colombian government's human rights record in the lowest esteem. Of its 29 editorials on Colombia, 20 were negative, none were positive, and nine held a mixed view. The *Times*, whose views on Colombia were closer to those of human right advocates than the other papers', wrote that Uribe's claims to have cleared up death squads rang hollow (9/20/03). But the *Times* did not stray far from the norm with regard to Venezuela, with nine out of a total of 12 negative and three mixed.

The *Miami Herald* published the most editorials on each country. Of its 36 editorials addressing Colombia's human rights record, 17 were negative, nine were positive, and 10 were mixed. Fifty of 51 editorials about Venezuelan rights characterized the Venezuelan government negatively.

Official echo chamber

What leads editors to discuss Colombia's nightmarish human rights record with less alarm than Venezuela's flawed but clearly superior record? The answer seems to lie in the relationship between the editors' views and U.S. strategic thinking. Over the time frame of this study, U.S. officials have

Editorial evaluations of human rights situations



FAIR survey of *New York Times*, *Washington Post*, *Los Angeles Times* and *Miami Herald*, 1998-2008.

highlighted human rights concerns in Venezuela out of opposition to the populist policies of its President Hugo Chávez, which they see as threatening to U.S. interests. At the same time, officials have tried to diminish the gravity of Colombia's human rights problems in order to sustain political support for a number of military, anti-drug and trade projects the U.S. shares with Colombia.

Much of the editors' human rights commentary on Colombia came in editorials supporting President Uribe and his predecessor Andrés Pastrana, U.S./Colombia projects such as the drug war collaboration Plan Colombia (e.g., **L.A. Times**, 8/3/05; **Miami Herald**, 9/11/01) and so-called "free trade" agreements (**Washington Post**, 11/17/06; **Miami Herald**, 7/24/07). Commentary on Venezuela was often found in editorials disparaging populist Venezuelan policies such as oil nationalization and land reform (e.g., **Miami Herald**, 5/6/07; **New York Times**, 8/22/07).

The editors have created a virtual echo chamber for official U.S. concerns regarding Venezuela's record on human rights and democratic liberties: "Chávez and his cronies have been . . . stripping Venezuelans of their basic rights and freedoms" (**L.A. Times**, 12/18/04); he has taken steps to "eliminate independent media and decapitate the opposition" (**Washington Post**, 3/1/03) and "has regularly called the commercial news media the 'voice of the oligarchy,' thus targeting reporters as enemies of the state" (**Miami Herald**, 3/11/04).

In particular, Chávez has been heavily criticized for his refusal to renew the license of the privately owned **Radio Caracas Television** station (**RCTV**) in 2007 (**Extra!**, 11–12/06). This decision "quashed freedom of expression" and "was payback for the network's ongoing criticism and support of the opposition in 2002" (**Miami Herald**, 6/13/07). Generally unmentioned was that **RCTV's** "support of the opposition" involved backing the 2002 coup by "incit[ing] people to join a general strike, march through the streets and topple the government," leading coup leaders to thank **RCTV** for its help during their two days in power (**Guardian**, 12/10/07).

The theme that Chávez, who enjoys high approval ratings and has been repeatedly re-elected, is waging a war on democratic freedoms is a common editorial refrain, with editors characterizing him as a "strongman" intent on an "outrageous power grab" (**New York Times**, 12/4/07),

and seeking "to intimidate the private sector and independent media" (**Washington Post**, 8/19/04). Chávez's nationalization of the oil industry, wrote **Miami Herald** editors (5/6/07), "is not, as Mr. Chávez would have it, a victory for 'the people' or any such neo-Marxist nonsense, but rather part of a giant power grab that takes Venezuela further down the road to totalitarianism." A piece in the **Los Angeles Times** (2/10/07) closed with a quip: "[Chávez] is no Hitler. Now Mussolini, on the other hand. . . ."

The most frequent human rights theme addressed in Venezuela editorials was democratic rights, mentioned in 75 percent of the pieces, followed by abuse of journalists (46 percent) and the rights of dissenters (15 percent). Treatment of labor activists was addressed in just 2 percent of Venezuela editorials.

Unspecified abuses

Specific human rights themes in stories about Colombia were harder to find. Despite the wealth of information about Colombia's human rights record, editorials about Colombia tended to be vaguer, often mentioning human rights without specifying the nature of the abuses. For example, a **Washington Post** editorial (9/24/07) questioned human rights activists who were opposed to passage of the Colombia Free Trade Agreement, "because, they claim, President Álvaro Uribe hasn't done enough to punish human rights abuses," but the editors never specified what those abuses are.

When specific abuses were raised, democratic rights was also the top theme in Colombia editorials, but these were discussed in only 21 percent of the editorials—less than one-third as often as in editorials about Venezuela. Abuse of journalists was a theme in 15 percent of Colombia editorials, or one-third the rate at which it was a theme in Venezuela editorials, despite Colombia's far bloodier record of repressing journalists.

When praising the Colombian government's record, editorials focused on one of two interlocking subjects: Colombia's reincarnation as a tough-on-crime, peace-making nation, and its support for various pieces of U.S./Colombia legislation. A **Washington Post** piece (5/6/07) applauded Uribe as perhaps "the most popular democratic leader in the world," claiming he had brought Colombia back from the brink of failed statehood, and that "for the first time thugs guilty of massacres and other human rights crimes are being brought to justice,

and the political system is being purged of their allies." The same paper, years earlier (11/9/99), had similarly commended Pastrana's "commit[ment] to ending the abuses that fueled the insurgencies," and argued that U.S. aid should continue because "making peace requires money."

Many of the Colombia editorials included in the mixed category were classified as such due to one or two negative lines in an otherwise neutral or positive piece. For instance, following George W. Bush's March 2007 visit to Colombia, the **L.A. Times** (3/10/07) praised him for "rightly back[ing] President Álvaro Uribe in his efforts to strengthen Colombia's democracy." It called Uribe "one of the most successful Latin American leaders in recent years" and described Colombia's "democratic institutions, civic society and independent media" as "stronger than those in most other Latin American countries." While noting news of further government links to death squads, including links which caused Uribe's own foreign minister to resign, the **L.A. Times** editorial still found a way to praise the government over the news:

Even the recent scandals are telling. Independent courts are holding powerful interests accountable, and the connected paramilitary leaders are being locked up. This is not the "banana republic" that some in the U.S. nostalgic for ideological battles over Central America want it to be.

Curiously, though government-linked Colombian death squads were in the habit of killing journalists, political activists and trade unionists over the entire time span of this study, virtually no editorials questioned the health of Colombia's democracy, in stark contrast to the editors' almost obsessive concern about the perilous state of Venezuela's. Indeed, though President Uribe has been linked with death squads (**Washington Post**, 4/18/07), and former President Pastrana presided over a government with extensive death squad ties, the editors felt a need to insist time and again that the Colombian leaders were true and dedicated democrats.

True to the propaganda model

A similar twisted standard holding Venezuela to far greater scrutiny was observed in a recent report by the North American Congress on Latin America (NACLA).

In the report (12/19/08), author Kevin Young studied editorials and news articles in the **New York Times** and **Washington Post** concerning parallel news events to see how they fit with the Edward Herman/Noam Chomsky propaganda model which predicts, as Young explained, “that the news media will look favorably upon the Colombian government of Álvaro Uribe, a close U.S. ally, while consistently vilifying the Venezuelan government of Hugo Chávez, whom the U.S. government frequently identifies as an antagonist.”

Young found, true to the Herman/

Chomsky model, that while much disapproving ink was dedicated to the Venezuela stories about **RCTV** and Chávez’s 2007 push to have presidential term limits lifted, very little attention was paid to closely analogous stories in Colombia, where Uribe in 2004 pushed through a term-limit extension and dismantled **Inravisión**, a public broadcasting station that occasionally criticized the president and whose workers belonged to a powerful union.

As with the FAIR study, selective concern for these issues was the rule, a system

in which editors seemed to have internalized U.S. strategic thinking, subordinating human rights commentary and reporting to politics, where a given country’s human rights record is held to greater or lesser scrutiny based on how friendly the country is with the U.S.

Rather than independently and critically assessing the Colombian and Venezuelan records, major corporate newspaper editors, to one degree or another, have subordinated crucial human rights questions to what they see as the U.S.’s interests in the region. ■