

# Venezuela Forces Killed Thousands, Then Covered It Up, U.N. Says



Venezuela's Special Action Forces carrying out a security operation in Caracas in April. Credit Credit Yuri Cortez/Agence France-Presse — Getty Images

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GENEVA — Venezuelan special forces have carried out thousands of extrajudicial killings in the past 18 months and then manipulated crime scenes to make it look as if the victims had been resisting arrest, the United Nations said on Thursday in a report detailing wide-ranging government abuses targeting political opponents.

Special Action Forces described by witnesses as “death squads” killed 5,287 people in 2018 and another 1,569 by mid-May of this year, in what is officially termed by the Venezuelan government “Operations for the Liberation of the People,” United Nations investigators reported.

Laying out a detailed description of a lawless system of oppression, the report

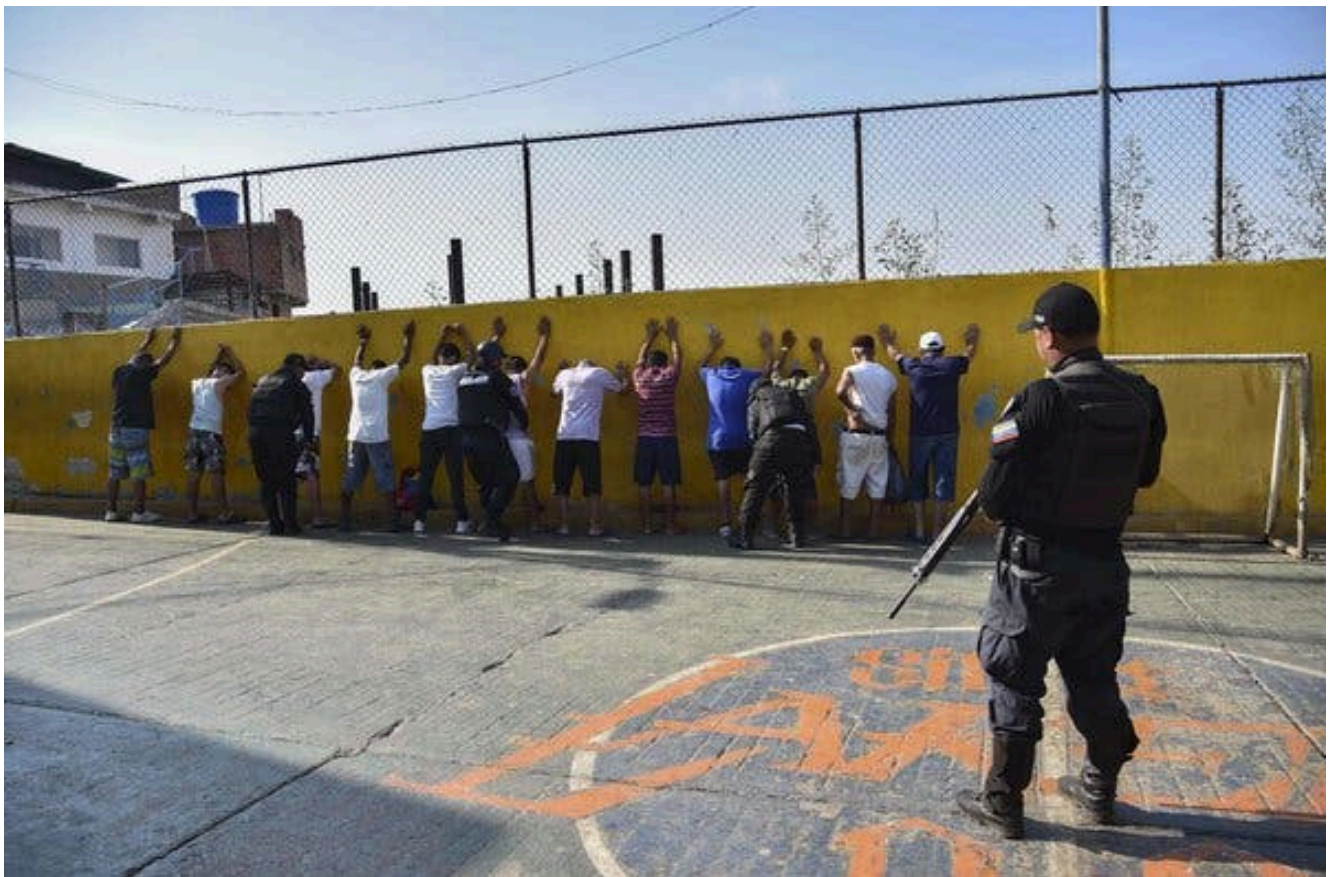
says the actual number of deaths could be much higher. It cites accounts by independent groups who report more than 9,000 killings for “resistance to authority” over the same period.

“There are reasonable grounds to believe that many of these killings constitute extrajudicial executions committed by the security forces,” the investigators said.

The report, which the United Nation human rights chief Michelle Bachelet will present to the Human Rights Council in Geneva on Friday, delivers a scathing critique of President Nicolás Maduro’s embattled government and its handling of Venezuela’s deepening political and economic crisis.

Since 2016, the report says, the government has pursued a strategy “aimed at neutralizing, repressing and criminalizing political opponents and people critical of the government.”

Venezuela’s Foreign Ministry rejected the findings on Thursday, saying the report offered a “distorted vision” that ignored most of the information presented by the government to United Nations researchers.



The officers frisked a group of men during one operation in Caracas. Credit Yuri Cortez/Agence France-Presse — Getty Images

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“The analysis is not objective, nor impartial,” the Foreign Ministry said in a statement, listing what it said were numerous errors. “The negative points are privileged in the extreme and the advances or measures adopted in the area of human rights are ignored or minimized.”

*[Here's a look at how Venezuela has deteriorated into crisis.]*

The Special Action Forces, known locally by their Spanish acronym FAES, are nominally tasked with combating drug trafficking and crime, but United Nations human rights officials said they were concerned the government was using these and other security forces “as an instrument to instill fear in the population and to maintain social control.”

Families of 20 young men who were killed in the last year described a pattern of violence in which the FAES units arrived in pickup trucks without license plates, dressed in black and with their faces covered by balaclavas.

They broke into houses, seized belongings and molested women, forcing some to strip naked. Then “they would separate young men from other family members before shooting them,” the investigators reported.

In every case described to the investigators, attackers manipulated the crime scene. “They would plant arms and drugs and fire their weapons against the walls or in the air to suggest a confrontation and to show the victim had resisted authority,” the report says.

The investigators said they had also documented the execution of six young men carried out during one of the house raids, the killings done as a reprisal for their participation in anti-government demonstrations.

Five special forces members were convicted of attempted murder and other offenses in 2018, and another 388 members were under investigation for abuses, according to the report. But few victims, it says, have access to justice or any redress.

The report also describes routine abuse by security and intelligence services of people detained for political reasons. In most of the cases, men and women were subjected to one or more forms of torture, including electric shock, suffocation



with plastic bags, waterboarding, beating, and sexual violence. Women were dragged by their hair and threatened with rape, the report says.

The detentions often had no legal basis, according to the report, which says that more than 2,000 people were arrested for political reasons in the first five months of the year and more than 720 were still detained at the end of May.



A member of the Special Action Forces taking part in a security operation. Credit Yuri Cortez/Agence France-Presse — Getty Images

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Human rights activists welcomed the spotlight the report is turning onto government repression and abuses. “The government’s reaction shows it hits the right points,” said Tamara Taraciuk Broner, a senior researcher for Human Rights Watch.

But Ms. Taraciuk expressed disappointment that the report stops short of urging the United Nations to set up a commission of inquiry. It calls instead for the government to set up an independent investigation, with some unspecified international participation.

“You cannot ask Venezuelan courts, which have no independence, to investigate the executive,” she said.

The report comes two weeks after Ms. Bachelet visited Venezuela. Its hard-hitting tone was especially eye-opening, given her political background. In her second term as Chile's left-leaning president from 2014 to 2018, she was among the few South American leaders who refused to openly criticize Mr. Maduro's growing authoritarianism.

The Venezuelan government had tried to use Ms. Bachelet's visit to bolster Mr. Maduro's international legitimacy. More than 50 nations, including the United States, have stopped recognizing him as Venezuela's legitimate leader, calling his re-election last year fraudulent.

Ms. Bachelet's team was given unusual access inside Venezuela, unlike that given to her predecessor or to other United Nations agencies. Mr. Maduro heavily publicized his meeting with Ms. Bachelet and promised to consider allowing her to open a full-time office in the country. The government also agreed to allow two United Nations human rights staff members to work in the country and said it would give them full access to detention centers.

But any hopes that her visit paved the way for a government change of course on human rights were quickly dampened by the news days later of the death in custody of a Navy captain, Rafael Acosta, who was detained the day Ms. Bachelet's visit ended. His lawyer said he had been in good health at the time of his arrest, but he died in a military hospital a week later showing visible signs beatings.

Ms. Bachelet expressed her shock at Captain Acosta's death and called for an investigation, but human rights groups said it showed the limited outcome from her visit.

"This case shows that the government of Venezuela is not taking her seriously," Ms. Taraciuk said.

Anatoly Kurmanaev contributed reporting from Caracas, Venezuela.

A version of this article appears in print on July 4, 2019, on Page A5 of the New York edition with the headline: Venezuela Has Killed Thousands, U.N. Reports. [Order Reprints](#) | [Today's Paper](#) | [Subscribe](#)

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