



Embassy of the Bolivarian Republic of Venezuela to the UK and Ireland

Fact Sheet:

El Caracazo - The Revolutionary Turning Point

"The Caracazo" or "Sacudón" (heavy riot) has entered history books as **"by far the most massive and severely repressed riot in the history of Latin America"**¹, mobilizing an estimated one million people in Venezuela (and especially the urban poor) to revolt against the established bipartisan regime and the neo-liberal economic shock-policies implemented by the government under the flagship of President Carlos Andres Pérez.² As one of the first major upheavals against a regressive economic policy, scholars have come to see the Caracazo as the **"origin of the global rebellion against neo-liberalism"**.³

We know today that the Caracazo marked "the beginning of the end of the ancient regime"⁴ in Venezuela and contributed to the unraveling of the country's elite democracy. In fact, the immense protests - that started out and were most severe in Caracas (therefore "Caracazo") but quickly spread to other cities all over the country - presented a turning point and strengthened the Bolivarian Movement which would come to transform the course of the nation's history in the years to follow.

Protests Start

It was on February 27, 1989, early in the morning in the Caracas suburb Guarenas, where the popular protests started out, as students and commuters joined to demonstrate against a one-hundred percent increase in transport fares. Demonstrators fervently argued with bus drivers and tossed stones at the vehicles, as the drivers were not prepared to accept a cheaper price, since they themselves were affected by a huge boost in petrol prices. The high prices were an unbearable burden for millions of poor people who relied on buses to get to work. Demonstrations quickly spread to other parts of the city as motorcycle couriers joined in the protests, travelling from one place to

the other and carrying the latest news of demonstrations.⁵ Similar riots occurred since early in the morning in nineteen other cities in Venezuela, including Barquisimeto, San Cristobal, Merida, Maracay, Barcelona, etc.⁶

By early afternoon students gathered in Caracas in front of The Central University of Venezuela. Already days before they had protested against President Pérez's newly introduced economic austerity programme, the famous "paquete" (package) as foreseen by multilateral institutions such as the International Monetary Fund (IMF). This programme consisted of measures that included the elimination of basic food subsidies, the end of price controls, the lifting of tariffs, the liberalization of imports, an increase in the price of government services, or the decrease of welfare measures. President Pérez was confident that with this "shock-package" he would convince the international banking world to provide the republic with "fresh money", help it over its pressing financial situation and forgive a significant part of its outstanding debt.⁷ All this however, at the price of millions of poor people, who were the most affected by this policy as they could no longer afford basic food and services, the prices of which had skyrocketed over night.

Looting Shops and Markets

By late afternoon, public transport came to a standstill in Caracas and hundreds of thousands of people were walking home, while buses were burning in the streets. Caracas descended into "a state of almost complete anarchy"⁸. Protestors started to loot shops, supermarkets, bodegas and stores for the most critical needs – food and clothes. The looting became more massive and organized towards the night hours and is remembered today as "the day the poor came down from the hills".⁹ For years they had watched the elites become richer and wealthier, while the



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majority struggled to eat and survive. To many in the *barrios* – the poor parts of the city – the upheaval represented an act of social justice. In many instances they were joined by the police themselves, as they received very low wages and had not been paid in weeks due to a labor dispute.¹⁰

Repression & Massive Human Rights Violations

It was not until the next day shortly after midday - when nearly two days of heavy rioting and massive upheavals had passed - that the incumbent Minister of the Interior addressed the nation in a television broadcast, only to fall ill during the speech and increasing in this way the political uncertainty. A few hours later President Pérez declared the suspension of a raft of constitutional guarantees and the imposition of martial law from 6pm to 6am for the following days.¹¹

With the beginning of the curfew a brutal wave of repression was unleashed on the population. Soldiers were sent to the barrios to “reestablish order”. One of them remembers their order was simply to “shoot anything that moved, and shoot to kill.” Another citizen recalls that “they [soldiers] didn’t say raise your arms or anything ... but everything that appeared, they killed ... like they were in a war”.¹² The nights of March 1 and 2 were dreadful for the working class districts. Testimonies tell of buildings set on fire and dead bodies lying in the streets at the end of the curfew, March 3, 1989. The repressive overreaction by the armed forces with substantial human rights violations led to hundreds of deaths, numbers ranging somewhere in between 396¹³ and 10,000¹⁴. By today, none of those responsible for the violations have been held accountable for their actions before the adequate international human rights courts¹⁵, while the victims have been indemnified by the current government under the leadership of President Chavez Frias.

Where was Hugo Chavez?

One would ask itself though, how was the current President, Hugo Chavez Frias, involved in the protests of February 1989. The short answer is simply, he was not involved at all. While he did serve in the army at that time, namely at the national security office at the Palacio Blanco across the presidential palace, he was confined to bed these very days with the chicken pox. However, the Caracazo marked a turning point in the Bolivarian movement as it reinforced the need to bring down a system that was corrupt, exclusionary and maintained the luxurious life of a few which “has become an insult to the misery of the masses”¹⁶. By way of example, only a few weeks before introducing the austerity programme, President Pérez’s inauguration was reported as “one of the grandest celebrations Latin America has ever known”, with a total of ten thousand invited guests drinking twelve hundred bottles of scotch and consuming 650,000 hors d’oeuvres, accompanied by immense quantities of champagne.¹⁷

President Chavez recalled later that “*People protesting in the streets against neo-liberalism, the shock programmes of the IMF, ... unemployment, hunger. ...and the political leaders, the supposed democrats, talking about justice and democracy. That was no democracy. It was a dictatorship of the parties and the elite...the members of the MBR-200*¹⁸ realized we had passed the point of no return ... we could not continue to defend a genocidal regime...the massacre was the catalyst for the MBR-200. We began to accelerate our organizing, our search for civilian contacts and popular movements.”¹⁹

The Beginning of the End of an Old Regime

It took the Bolivarian Movement ten more years and a military rebellion in 1992, until they were able to take power in 1999. The Caracazo was an important event that spurred the struggle that lasted throughout the nineties. Venezuela’s façade democracy had died the very day of the 27th of February 1989.



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Since President Chavez was elected in 1998, this day is remembered with marches and state discourses as the foundation of a peaceful revolution based on *participatory* democracy and aiming for social justice, equality and a social economy. Apart from its importance as a historical turning point **the Caracazo certainly deserves to be commemorated as a milestone and a sample of how far people can go when channels for participation are absent and people's demands are unheard.**

February 17, 2009

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¹ Coronil, Fernando, Skurski, Julie, *State of Violence*, (US: University of Michigan Press, 2005), 86.

² Ibid.

³ Ciccariello-Maher, George, "The Fourth World War Started in Venezuela", March 5, 2007, retrieved Feb. 13, 2009,

< <http://www.venezuelanalysis.com/analysis/2253>>

⁴ Jones, Bart, Hugo: *The Hugo Chavez Story From Mud Hut To Perpetual Revolution*, (New Hampshire: Steerforth Press LLC, 2007), 125.

⁵ Lopez Maya, Margarita, "The Venezuelan Caracazo of 1989: Popular Protest and Institutional Weakness", *Journal of Latin American Studies*, Vol. 35, No. 1 (Feb., 2003), pp. 117-137.

⁶ Jones, Bart, Hugo: *The Hugo Chavez Story From Mud Hut To Perpetual Revolution*, (New Hampshire: Steerforth Press LLC, 2007), 116.

⁷ Coronil, Fernando, Skurski, Julie, *State of Violence*, (US: University of Michigan Press, 2005), 89.

⁸ Jones, Bart, Hugo: *The Hugo Chavez Story From Mud Hut To Perpetual Revolution*, (New Hampshire: Steerforth Press LLC, 2007), 117.

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹ Lopez Maya, Margarita, "The Venezuelan Caracazo of 1989: Popular Protest and Institutional Weakness", *Journal of Latin American Studies*, Vol. 35, No. 1 (Feb., 2003), p. 128.

¹² Jones, Bart, Hugo: *The Hugo Chavez Story From Mud Hut To Perpetual Revolution*, (New Hampshire: Steerforth Press LLC, 2007), 121.

¹³ Lopez Maya, Margarita, "The Venezuelan Caracazo of 1989: Popular Protest and Institutional Weakness", *Journal of Latin American Studies*, Vol. 35, No. 1 (Feb., 2003), p. 130.

¹⁴ Hands Off Venezuela, "Anniversary of the Caracazo", Feb. 22, 2007 retrieved Feb. 13, 2009, <http://www.handsoffvenezuela.org/anniversary_caracazo_london.htm>.

¹⁵ Ciccariello-Maher, George, "The Fourth World War Started in Venezuela", March 5, 2007, retrieved Feb. 13, 2009,

< <http://www.venezuelanalysis.com/analysis/2253>>

¹⁶ Jones, Bart, Hugo: *The Hugo Chavez Story From Mud Hut To Perpetual Revolution*, (New Hampshire: Steerforth Press LLC, 2007), 125.

¹⁷ Ibid. 113.

¹⁸ MBR-200 stands for Bolivarian Revolutionary Movement – 200, founded in 1982 and named after the 200th anniversary of the birth of the liberator, Simon Bolivar.

¹⁹ Ibid. 126.