

Inside a raid in Maduro's crackdown on critics in Venezuela slums

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CARACAS (Reuters) - After Venezuelan police officers clad in black military uniforms and masks stopped 27-year-old Yohendry Fernandez at gunpoint in the Caracas slum of Jose Felix Ribas, they asked him if he had a criminal record. He replied yes.

The officers then dragged him into an alley and shot him twice in the chest, killing him, according to his family and a witness.

It was the afternoon of Jan. 24, the day after tens of thousands of slum residents left their hillside homes to join mass protests against President Nicolas Maduro, who they blame for an economic crisis that has left them without water, power, medicines and food.

Several dozen officers from the National Police's Special Action Force (FAES) drove into the slum in armored vehicles and on motorcycles.

As they roared down the dusty streets, some opened fire as residents fled before them shouting "They're here," according to witnesses. Police snipers clambered atop tin rooftops and locals hid under beds as the gunshots rang out, the witnesses said.

By dawn, the FAES unit had killed as many as 10 people, leaving with their bodies and about a dozen hooded detainees, according to four local community leaders.

Venezuela's Information Ministry, which handles all media inquiries, including on behalf of the national police, did not respond to requests for comment on the operation. Diosdado Cabello, the ruling Socialist Party's deputy head, accused the opposition of fabricating death tolls from police raids.

The FAES said reports of abuses were "fake news" spread by right-wing opponents. "Our struggle is against all criminals that ravage our communities. If you fear the FAES it's because you're a criminal," the unit said on Thursday on Instagram.

Residents said the FAES officers returned to Jose Felix Ribas for the next three afternoons, spreading terror in a poor community that used to be a bastion of support for Maduro and his predecessor, the late Hugo Chavez. Five years of economic recession have turned many into Maduro's most fervent opponents.

The raids, the deadliest of several in Caracas last month, show how the government has used the FAES to target critics since opposition leader Juan Guaido proclaimed himself interim president and won the support of Western powers who say Maduro is illegitimate.

Reuters spoke with a dozen witnesses, local politicians, and lawyers, along with experts who study the FAES, to provide the first detailed look at the operation. Reuters also pieced together footage of the raid posted on social media, which witnesses verified.

For a map of where police shot Fernandez, click: tmsnrt.rs/2HlnzML

A man walks by graffiti of South American revolutionary hero Simon Bolivar, Venezuela's late President Hugo Chavez and Venezuela's President Nicolas Maduro at the Jose Felix Ribas neighborhood in Caracas, Venezuela January 30, 2019. REUTERS/Carlos Barria

FEAR THE FAES

The reporting reveals a pattern of street justice employed by FAES, set up in 2017 as an elite force to combat terrorism and organized crime, and an atmosphere of impunity.

The Venezuelan Observatory of Violence, a local crime monitoring group, attributes 43 deaths to security forces during protests and raids since Jan. 22, and says it is processing reports of more.

Keymer Avila, a criminology professor at the Central University of Venezuela, said he had not yet verified all the deaths in Jose Felix Ribas but that 10 seemed reasonable based on his understanding of the events.

Rights groups accuse the government of using the FAES to raid Venezuelans' homes after they return from protests, with the help of tip-offs from supporters. Authorities have arrested more than 900 protesters since Jan. 21, the rights groups say.

Jose Pinto, head of the Revolutionary Tupamaro Movement, a militant group that backs Maduro, told Reuters he and other so-called "colectivos" were expanding their networks of informants.

They alerted police to "suspicious activity" before the Jan. 23 protests, Pino said, sending them images and addresses of suspected "right-wing conspirators," which he said led to raids.

"CONSEQUENCES"

On Jan. 22, according to residents, an unmarked pickup truck mounted with speakers drove through Jose Felix Ribas, a district within Caracas' sprawling Petare shantytown, broadcasting a message: "If you protest tomorrow, there will be consequences."

Most said they took little heed. But six locals said the consequences became clear on Jan. 24 when FAES officers pulled a 23-year-old mother, the cousin of an alleged gang leader, from her house and shot her dead. A church was sprayed with bullets. One man was executed after being handcuffed inside a vehicle, residents said.

Local politicians said authorities justified the raid as an operation against a criminal group. The government has yet to show any evidence against those killed.

Paula Navas, a local political organizer, said the authorities sought to silence her community.

“They traumatized children. What was the objective of this?” Navas asked.

Yohendry Fernandez had been fixing motorcycles in a parking lot on the slum’s main road, some 200 meters (yards) from his family home.

Motorcycles were his obsession, relatives said, and videos on his Facebook page show him racing down Caracas avenues performing wheelies. He sometimes repaired motorcycles for the local police, they said.

At 3 p.m., just as Fernandez was about to head home, FAES officers arrived and split into groups that advanced into the barrio’s upper reaches. One group set up a blockade on a plaza where the road divided. Fernandez’s home, where his wife and two children were waiting, was on the other side.

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“DON’T HURT HIM”

After family members told his mother, Isabel Pino, that he had been arrested at the plaza, she raced to the scene and begged an officer: “Please don’t hurt him, he’s special.”

The officer ordered her to go back inside, Pino, 49, told Reuters. Then, she said, she heard two shots.

The next time Pino saw her son was when she viewed his body at the hospital, a gunshot wound to his heart and another in his sternum. She said she has received no official explanation for his death, and that all his personal belongings were taken.

The family buried Fernandez last week at a cemetery outside the city, the only place they could afford. She says she tells his 4-year-old son, Andres, that his father is asleep.

Fernandez’s wife, Wendys, along with Navas and Aviud Morales, a local teacher, confirmed the details of his death.

When FAES officers returned to Jose Felix Ribas in the days after the raid, they questioned the family about alleged criminal connections, which Pino denied. A night-time curfew was imposed across the whole sector.

“Just to hear the name, FAES, leaves me terrified. I was just told they are back around here and I can feel the pain in my stomach,” Pino said, her voice shaking.

Editing by Daniel Flynn and Daniel Wallis