

Maduro Fights Back With Targeted Killings and Media Blackout

By Patricia Laya , Alex Vasquez , and Fabiola Zerpa
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Facing mounting pressure to step down as Venezuela's leader, President Nicolas Maduro has begun a ruthless crackdown, terrorizing poor neighborhoods with deadly nighttime raids and blocking rivals' efforts to spread their message on social media.

Since protests against Maduro began last week, the socialist regime has regularly sent the police's elite Special Action Force racing into Caracas slums on personnel carriers and motorcycles. Its masked members, all in black, attack demonstrators with weapons including tear gas, guns and even grenades. They settle long-standing scores and rob residents' homes, eyewitnesses say. At least 35 people have died amid the demonstrations, adding to scores of deaths in two years of unrest.



Photographer: Carlos Becerra/Bloomberg

Inside Venezuela, the violence is hidden. The regime has drowned out forces seeking to topple it, using rolling internet blackouts and gag orders that have largely stopped the free flow of information.

Defensive Action

Though Maduro on Tuesday **prevented** the country's self-proclaimed interim president, Juan Guaido, from leaving Venezuela, he has left him free to make pronouncements, speak with foreign leaders and hold daytime rallies like a massive march planned for Wednesday. Outside the international eye, the information blackouts and killings are a vigorous attempt to extinguish the biggest threat since he took office in 2013, beginning a career of mismanagement that left this once-wealthy nation **sanctioned** and starving.

"Maduro won't let go of power easily," Jesus Gonzalez, a motorcycle taxi driver in the vast Petare slum, said Tuesday. "He doesn't mind pumping anyone who protests against him full of lead."



Children pass a mural of Maduro, at the entrance of the José Félix Ribas neighborhood, in the Petare slum.

Photographer: Ignacio Marin/Bloomberg

Known by the Spanish acronym FAES, the Special Action Force is an "extermination group," said criminologist and lawyer Luis Izquier. It "responds directly to President Nicolas Maduro."

The unit, which operates in several cities, was created two years ago and has killed hundreds of people since then, according to the human-rights group Provea. It's based in Caracas and numbers about 1,000 officers. Izquier said the military is usually responsible for controlling demonstrations, however, "many soldiers no

longer want to be involved in human rights violations, so Maduro has called the FAES.”

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On Wednesday night, the force roared into the Jose Felix Ribas neighborhood, part of Petare, to hunt for Guaido’s supporters. Shooting soon began, said a woman named Leida, who asked that her last name not be used to protect her family’s safety. Her children, aged 5 and 11, lay on the floor for cover and, at the sound of an explosion, the little boy asked her: “Is Maduro dead?”



Photographer: Ignacio Marin/Bloomberg/Bloomberg

“Since Jan. 22, every day they get into the slum,” said Leida, who works as a house cleaner. She said they break into houses in search of their quarry and smash whatever is in their path. “They enter armed, and we have even heard grenades. They cover their faces. They have killed six people.”

A young man who also lives in Jose Felix Ribas, who requested anonymity to ensure his safety, said he saw a man’s body on the street as he was walking home Friday. Officers, he said, stopped everyone who walked by.

“They seize you in a violent way, they treat you like the enemy,” he said. “There is no law.”

Informal Executions

[Rafael Uzcategui](#), director of Provea, said in an interview that his group has verified eight people killed by police in their homes.

“In some cases, they have murdered them in front of their relatives,” he said. “The FAES was created to act in situations of extortion or kidnapping. They are trained for lethal attack.”

The relatives of the dead, says Provea, are pressured not to mention FAES, part of a broad effort to suppress all mention of Maduro’s domestic campaign of reaction and the words and actions of his opponent.

On Sunday, as Guaido addressed the nation, access to Twitter’s live-streaming video app Periscope was blocked for the 12 minutes of his speech. Last week, as Guaido called for anti-Maduro street protests, social media platforms including Facebook and YouTube were largely knocked offline by the state communications provider CANTV, according to internet watchdog group [NetBlocks](#).

Confirmed: Periscope, YouTube, Facebook and Instagram briefly inaccessible in [#Venezuela](#) from 1:02AM to 1:14AM UTC (9:02PM to 9:14PM VET) coinciding with [Juan Guaidó](#) live-streamed speech [#KeepItOnhttps://t.co/nHAY8vznlGpic.twitter.com/nGBJo86DBI](#)

— NetBlocks.org (@netblocks) [January 28, 2019](#)

The internet is crucial to Guaido’s ability to rally his supporters because the Maduro regime controls almost all the television and radio stations.

[Cesar Miguel Rondon](#), one of the country’s best known radio-news anchors, said he would go off the air this week due to restrictions by Venezuela’s telecom regulator Conatel.

“I’ve been victim of pure and harsh censorship, and it shows the fragility of a dictatorship in the face of the truth we are able tell,” Rondon said in a video posted on Instagram.

While his station, Union Radio, declined to comment on instructions it has received from Conatel, the regulator has warned journalists at private radio stations not to mention Guaido, discuss the number of people killed or talk about any matter that could cause “uneasiness,” according to three people with direct information about the situation.

The government, which has long clashed with private media outlets, has increased its effort to suppress news since the rise of Guaido, whose claim to the presidency has the backing of the U.S., Canada, the U.K. and most Latin American countries.

Following a 2002 overthrow attempt that led to the brief ouster of Maduro's mentor, the late Hugo Chavez, dozens of radio stations and a handful of cable channels were closed as Chavez largely blamed the outlets for the botched coup.

One of Venezuela's biggest dailies and few remaining Maduro critics, El Nacional, [stopped running](#) its print version last month, blaming prolonged and ongoing government harassment and a lack of advertisers due to the country's crippled economy. A shell of its former version remains online.

"There's not a lot of media to get informed. I sometimes hear what's happening because I go on the internet and Google for news," said Daysy Serpa, a 38-year-old shopkeeper walking through a shopping center in Eastern Caracas. "There's not even papers to read anymore."

In the Jose Felix Ribas slum, the message of enforced silence has been received. A week after the attack, the black-clad men had left, but the chaotic and vibrant street life was subdued. On Tuesday, passers-by walked quietly, looking suspiciously at visitors. Doors closed on their approach.

— *With assistance by Andrew Rosati*

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