



Press Release

WOLA WASHINGTON OFFICE ON LATIN AMERICA
Promoting Human Rights, Democracy, and Social and Economic Justice in Latin America

For More Information Contact:

John Walsh, WOLA
jwalsh@wola.org
(202) 797-2171

WOLA Criticizes as Arbitrary and as a Violation of Due Process the Venezuelan Government's Handling of RCTV License Non-Renewal

Washington, D.C., May 30, 2007 – The Washington Office on Latin America (WOLA) criticizes the Venezuelan government for the arbitrariness and violation of the right to due process that marked its decision not to renew the broadcast license that was held by Radio Caracas Television (RCTV). In addition, WOLA is concerned that if the public-service station that will now broadcast over the frequencies that had been licensed to RCTV proves to be nothing more than an outlet for government positions, with little or no room for dissenting views or for critical reporting about the government, then the non-renewal of the RCTV license could also constitute a threat to the right to freedom of expression.

WOLA recognizes that the decision to renew or deny a broadcast license lies with the Venezuelan government, and that the license to broadcast over the airwaves is neither open-ended nor unlimited. Moreover, the government's decision was legal, under current Venezuelan law governing the administration of the airwaves.

WOLA also recognizes that the right to freedom of expression includes the public's right to receive information and the media's obligation to report the news as comprehensively and as fairly as possible. In WOLA's view, RCTV and other private media outlets blatantly violated this obligation during the short-lived coup d'état against democratically-elected President Hugo Chávez in April 2002.

Venezuelan officials have pointed to RCTV's complicity in the April 2002 coup as ample justification for the decision to not renew the station's license. But other private media outlets that have also been accused by the government of supporting the coup have not been subjected to the same treatment as RCTV. Venevisión, for example, has also been criticized for its role in the coup, but its license was renewed even as RCTV's expired.

This suggests that RCTV was singled out for punishment not only for its role in the coup, but for the highly critical stance it has maintained toward the government since then. The decision not to renew the RCTV license thus appeared intended to send a message to other Venezuelan media outlets to be wary about criticizing the government too sharply.

Having thus chosen to sanction RCTV outside the judicial process, the government has violated the right to due process, imposing punishment for crimes for which RCTV has been neither tried nor convicted. If RCTV has engaged in criminal conduct, as the government maintains (and as much publicly available evidence suggests), then the government should have brought formal charges and been prepared to substantiate the allegations in a court of law.

To be clear, WOLA's criticism of the government in no way constitutes an endorsement of RCTV's brand of reporting, much less approval of any role in the coup attempt. WOLA's view is that RCTV's leaders put the station at the service of subverting democracy and the rule of law during the coup; ironically, they are now in the position of appealing precisely to the principles of democracy and the rule of the law. It is a measure of the government's troubling handling of the matter that RCTV's leaders can now plausibly cast themselves in the victims' role.

For More Information Contact:

John Walsh, WOLA

jwalsh@wola.org

(202) 797-2171