

# FoRB on the Frontlines: “A rival to the government”

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*In several Latin American countries, religious leaders often take on the roles of community leader and human rights defender. As a result, these leaders often face harassment, intimidation and even violence at the hands of state and non-state actors. Over the next few weeks CSW will be presenting interviews with religious leaders working in the region to highlight their experiences on the frontlines of freedom of religion or belief.*

*David\* is a religious leader working in Venezuela. In his role, he has provided pastoral accompaniment to victims of human rights violations.*

“To do social work in Venezuela – distributing food and other things, the work that I do – you have to be very discreet, you have to be very careful, and even then it’s impossible not to put yourself at risk.

***In theory we have freedom of religion in Venezuela, but some priests and religious leaders are a target for the government, which is a kind of confederation of forces that aims to stay in power by trying to maintain social control over the people.***

Those who offer forms of humanitarian aid are seen as a rival to the government in this regard. Religious organisations generally help people by providing food or medicine without discrimination and not in order to promote a political agenda, although it must be said that some groups do combine this with religious proselytism.

The government intends to be seen as the only benefactor and as an entity on which the population is dependent, so that they can gain political favour through votes or through support for the government’s political acts.

When a religious organisation like a church starts something which the government sees as some form of competition, they hinder it. This can involve sending criminal groups or their own organised gangs against religious leaders, the expropriation of certain spaces, the expulsion of the church or ministry from the place they operate, or any other type of harassment. I can’t say it’s a countrywide problem, but there are certain hot spots where these things have happened.

Towns on the border are the most dangerous, especially those where illegal groups are operating, or where there is simply very strong government activity which impedes social work that religious groups are involved in. And in many cases there is no justice. For example, [a pastor named Marcelo Coronel](https://www.evangelicodigital.com/latinoamerica/3518/la-policia-detiene-al-pastor-venezolano-marcelo-coronel-en-merida) (<https://www.evangelicodigital.com/latinoamerica/3518/la-policia-detiene-al-pastor-venezolano-marcelo-coronel-en-merida>) was imprisoned for a number of months because he was distributing medicine. Although he was released, I don’t believe that justice was served because he was unable to carry out his normal activities and denied his basic freedom for a long time, without any accountability on the part of the state for its unjust actions.

Another type of situation (<https://www.reuters.com/article/us-venezuela-politics-pemon-insight-idUSKCN1SR1L0>), took place on 23 February this year in the form of a massacre following an attempt to enable the delivery of humanitarian aid to indigenous areas on the border with Brazil. Many Christians died there because they were part of the Pemon tribe, who were trying to open the airport and the border. The army turned on them ferociously and savagely, and murdered many people.

In our case, my church has carried out social work with partners such as the Red Cross and other NGOs and organisations, especially those dedicated to food security and to providing assistance to children.

*This obviously puts us at risk because the government assumes that any form of aid given to the general population is in competition with their own social programmes. Their social programmes aren't for the benefit of the citizens but are for the exercise of social control.*

Over the past year I have received anonymous threats over the phone and at my front door. I have faced extensive surveillance, but up until now everything has just been intimidation: there have been a few exceptions, the church's pick-up truck was stolen, one of the church leader's homes was burgled, and my assistant was physically abused. In each of these cases, every time something happened to a member of my team, they sent messages to me claiming responsibility. They have never done anything to me, no one has put me in prison, but they always send messages telling me where I am, where my wife is, and what I am doing.

I can't confirm that those who are targeting me are from the highest levels of government, however it is clear that there are state security entities, at least at the regional level, involved in this.

*The government has made life difficult for Venezuelans. It has impeded the delivery of humanitarian aid, obstructed the work of churches that want to help, been an obstacle to progress, and has produced the most terrible wave of migrants we have seen in the region (<https://www.economist.com/the-americas/2019/09/12/millions-of-refugees-from-venezuela-are-straining-neighbours-hospitality>). All in all it has been a seriously pernicious factor in the lives of Venezuelan citizens.*

For me and for my team, there is a possibility that one of us could be imprisoned or harassed. There is also a possibility that at any point if I try to leave the country they will take my passport and my visa. So there are different actions the government uses against those who they consider to be a 'political target.'"

*\*Name changed for security reasons*

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