United States Senate
WASHINGTON, DC 20510

July 21, 2010

The Honorable Hillary Rodham Clinton
Secretary of State
U.S. Department of State
2201 C Street N.W.
Washington, DC 20520

Dear Secretary Clinton:

We write regarding the deepening deterioration of human rights and democracy in Venezuela. We are concerned that recent events signal the worsening of conditions in Venezuela that could end in dangerous confrontations within Venezuela and have serious consequences for the Venezuelan people, the stability of Venezuela's neighbors and the interests of the United States in the region. Among these events are,

- In December 2009, President Hugo Chávez ordered the arrest of Judge María Lourdes Afiuni after she paroled a prominent business leader who had been incarcerated without trial a year longer than Venezuelan law allows. Venezuelan authorities have kept Judge Afiuni in pre-trial detention with the general inmate population, including several inmates that she condemned for serious crimes, and in extreme danger to her life. The Inter-American Commission on Human Rights (IAHRC) and several nongovernmental human rights organizations have expressed concern about her arrest.

- In February 2010, the Inter-American Commission on Human Rights released a scathing report on the human rights situation in Venezuela. The report cited several ongoing violations of human rights by the government of Venezuela on its own people. The report urged the government of Venezuela to allow a visit by the Commission, but President Chávez has continued to ridicule the Commission and refuse such a visit.

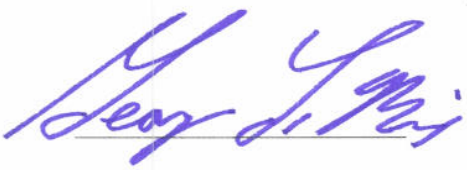
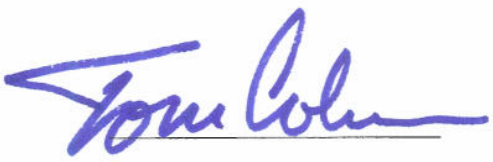
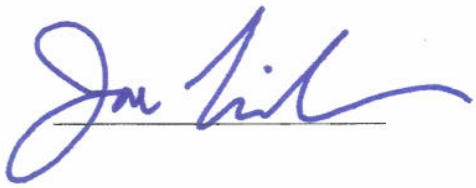
- On March 22, Venezuelan authorities imprisoned a former state governor and congressman, Oswaldo Álvarez Paz, for speaking on television about Venezuela's growing role in international drug trafficking networks.

- On June 11, Venezuelan authorities renewed their judicial harassment of Guillermo Zuloaga, president and principal shareholder of Globovision, and Nelson Mezerhane, a minor shareholder and director of Globovision – the sole remaining independent TV station in Venezuela. As a result, the IAHRC and the IACHR Rapporteurs on Freedom of Expression have urged the Venezuelan government not to silence critical opinions.

These are but a few examples of the determined efforts by President Chávez to gain absolute control of his country's branches of government and Venezuelan civil society. As a result, many critics of President Chávez have gone into exile to avoid jail time. The effort to silence critics comes at a time when the opposition is preparing for National Assembly elections in September. The credibility of these elections is called into question by these attacks and the political persecution of dissenters.

We know of your interest in the Western Hemisphere and commend the State Department's description of the harassment of Mr. Zuloaga as "the continuing assault on the freedom of the press" by the government of Venezuela. Nevertheless, a worsening of the situation in Venezuela should be of concern to all the Member States of the Organization of American States (OAS) as it is a clear violation of Venezuela's obligations under the American Convention on Human Rights and the Inter-American Democratic Charter.

We ask that you work with other democracies in the region to assess the viability of invoking the Democratic Charter at the OAS in regard to the Government of Venezuela's violations. This invocation of the Charter would be consistent with its past application and would signal a broad consensus on the commitment to human rights and democracy throughout the Americas.

Thank you for your attention to this matter. We look forward to a prompt response.

Sincerely,