



OVERALL SITUATION OF HUMAN RIGHTS IN THE STATE OF ZULIA SEPTEMBER 2021 SUMMARY

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Commission for Human Rights of the state of Zulia (Codhez)

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GENERAL OVERVIEW

The *September 2021 Bulletin* on the general situation of human rights in Zulia focuses on documentation on freedom of expression and environmental rights in the region during the period comprised between January and August. For this, relevant aspects published in regional and national media are taken into consideration, as well as national and international regulations on both topics.

Considerations regarding freedom of expression in the region are problematic. Despite it being a human right, classified as a civil right, it is seriously limited, especially as far as journalism is concerned. It is noteworthy that freedom of communication is free and plural, restricted only by the duties and responsibilities indicated by law, which is why the impediments of the Venezuelan State to freedom of expression or access to information are inadmissible. This newsletter pays special attention to the freedom of expression and access to information that must be carried out, without any setback, by journalists and media of the Zulia region.

On the other hand, a focus is presented on the growing pollution that Zulia experiences in its land and lake spaces. Environmental rights imply a commitment of each generation for their maintenance and protection, becoming a fundamental obligation of the State, with the active participation of society, so that every person, individually and collectively, can enjoy a safe, healthy, and ecologically balanced life and environment. However, the environmental reality in the state of Zulia points to a different direction.

As usual, we report incidents in terms of Covid-19 cases in the Zulia region and the development of vaccination sessions during August. It is highlighted that the numbers of infections are maintained, the deaths of people belonging to the health sector due to consequences associated with the pandemic continue, with Zulia being the entity with the highest number of deaths in this sector. The appalling realities of hospitals and the poor conditions that people with medical conditions must endure in the region are ratified.

1. GENERAL CONSIDERATIONS ON FREEDOM OF EXPRESSION

Freedom of expression implies the right to seek, receive, formulate and share ideas, information, and opinions without obstacles and limitations, with conviction regarding the responsibilities and rights of others.

In the Venezuelan context, freedom of expression finds primary regulation in article 57 of the Constitution, which recognizes that people have the right to freely express their thoughts, ideas, opinions, either out loud, in writing, or through any other form of expression, even making use of the media, without censorship. It is emphasized that whoever “...*makes use of this right assumes full responsibility for everything that is expressed. Anonymity is not allowed, nor is war propaganda, nor discriminatory messages, nor those that promote religious intolerance*”.¹ The constitutional norm stipulates in advance the restrictions to this right; therefore, the State should not establish conditions of a different nature.

Along with this constitutional provision, the precept established in article 58 regarding free and plural communication and the responsibilities and duties that it entails, raises the right that every person has “...*to timely, truthful and impartial information, without censorship, in accordance with the principles of this Constitution, as well as the reply and correction when they are directly affected by inaccurate or offensive information. Children and adolescents have the right to receive adequate information for their integral development*”.²

Meanwhile, article 19 of the *Universal Declaration of Human Rights*³ as well as article 19 of the *International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights*⁴, establish that everyone has the right to freedom of opinion and expression, and no one may be harassed because of their opinions.

Recently, the *UN Special Rapporteur on the promotion and protection of the right to freedom of opinion and expression* presented her report on disinformation and freedom of opinion and expression. Among several aspects, she stated that disinformation “...is politically polarizing, it prevents people from truly exercising their human rights and destroys their trust in governments and institutions... There is increasing evidence that disinformation tends to thrive where human rights are limited, where the public information regime is not solid and where the level of quality, diversity, and independence of the media is low”⁵.

In this sense, in the *Report of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights on the situation of human rights in the Bolivarian Republic of Venezuela* dated June 16, 2021, it is stated that media professionals, Human rights defenders and members of civil society organizations informed the OHCHR about situations of intimidation and self-censorship, and also that cases of journalists who had to hide or leave the country for fear of reprisals were known. This document also states that restrictions on the freedoms of the media affect the “...right of the media to access information on public affairs and the right of the public to receive a wide range of information. Administrative closures, equipment seizures, fear of retaliation, and lack of advertising revenue have contributed to the closure of independent media outlets over the years. Traditional newspapers have also been hit by a shortage of paper for printing and forced to migrate to online platforms or discontinue operations. This situation was especially serious outside the capital”⁶.

FREEDOM OF EXPRESSION IN EL ZULIA

According to the *Report of the UN Special Rapporteur on the promotion and protection of the right to freedom of opinion and expression*, the right to freedom of expression is “...broad and inclusive, and encompasses the freedom to seek, receive and impart information and ideas of all kinds, regardless of borders and by any means of expression, both on and off the Internet”⁷. Criminalizing the task of seeking, receiving and disseminating information constitutes one of the most obvious human rights violations, since it represents, in graphic form, a gag, especially in States that fail to comply with their duty to guarantee and protect and, on the contrary, go after those who communicate and report, which implies that publicizing human rights violations represent an imminent risk of violation of the human rights of journalists.

The permissible restrictions on the exercise of this right are indicated in the aforementioned article 19 of the *International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights*⁸, related to ensuring respect for the rights or reputation of others, and the protection of national security, public order, public health, or morals. Such restrictions must be expressly established by law clearly and precisely to avoid any type of arbitrariness.

However, in the country, particularly in our region, there are other limitations not framed in any of the previous conditions. Situations such as digital blockades, scheduled or unplanned power outages, null or poor internet coverage, persecution and intimidation by the State, threats, among others, constitute arbitrary limitations imposed by State actions or omissions, which are intended to silence those who show the reality of the economic, political and social crisis that the country is going through. Even in the report above issued by the Special Rapporteur, it is mentioned that one of the

countries whose governments have imposed the closure of the internet during the context of demonstrations or protests or to silence dissent is the current government of Venezuela⁹.

Access to information

The right to timely, truthful, impartial, and uncensored information represents a universal prerogative that the State must guarantee. The protection of journalists, access to information, and non-persecution of the media are essential elements for the configuration of this right.

Unfortunately, the state of Zulia has witnessed various acts of abuse against access to information, attacks against the national and regional press, and censorship of freedom of expression. At the beginning of this year, the *Inter-American Press Association (IAPA)* raised its voice to protest the “systematic violation of press freedom by the government.” According to this organization, it is about aggressions and attacks by the government to silence independent media and journalists, since during the first days of January, several media outlets, both national and regional, were victims of discrediting campaigns, such as the case of *Efecto Cocuyo*, which the government accused of receiving foreign funds to overthrow it. Another emblematic case was the closure of the newspaper *Panorama* for five days for alleged non-compliance with tax regulations; also the confiscation of all the equipment of the digital channel *Venezolanos Por la Información (VPI)* that was forced to cease its operations in the country¹⁰.

According to data managed by *Espacio Público* organization, between January and December 2020 there were 390 cases of severe violations of freedom of expression throughout the country, and 965 complaints of violations by State officials or security forces were counted: intimidation, censorship, administrative restraint, threat, verbal harassment, judicial harassment, aggression, assault, and three cases of deaths¹¹. Specifically, in the case of arbitrary detentions, at least 110 people were detained for seeking or disseminating information, including 33 journalists or reporters, ten photojournalists, and three camera operators or technicians. In general, in 2020, 18 radio stations, 4 print media and 2 digital media were closed, in procedures carried out mainly by the *National Telecommunications Commission (Conatel)* in the company of State security forces¹².

According to *Espacio Público*, in the first four months of 2021, 150 violations of freedom of expression were registered in the country. Once again, behaviors ranging from censorship, intimidation, administrative restrictions, verbal harassment, judicial harassment, threats, to attacks and assaults were repeated. Likewise, 3 radio stations and one digital communication medium were closed¹³. One case that stands out was that of the *Radio Selecta 102.7 FM* station in Machiques de Perijá. After an alleged inspection visit by Conatel officials, they decided to confiscate the transmission equipment, leaving the station off the air. This situation occurred days after the station's headquarters were attacked by a group of Yukpa protesters, allegedly under orders of the municipality mayor, when an interview with representatives of the opposition to the national government was held¹⁴.

Another limitation to the access to information is related to the lack of public services such as electricity and the internet. Unquestionably, the discontinuous provision of these services affects the development of activities associated with freedom of expression such as the search, compilation and dissemination of it, since journalists and media must interrupt editing tasks that undermine its timely broadcast, which translates into a form of recurrent violation of the right of access to information by the State by silencing complaints and preventing news coverage. In this regard, on July 16, the newspaper *La Verdad*, suffered failures that left its website off the air without knowing the reasons for this incident¹⁵.

The situation of journalists and the media

The work carried out by social communicators in the region can be described as titanic and admirable. It is a duty that overcomes various obstacles that range from lousy work environments, government disrespect, harassment and intimidation, and poor accessibility conditions to services such as electricity, internet, and transportation.

An example of this was an incident that occurred on April 27 when two Zulian journalists from *Televen* and *Todos Ahora_Ve*, were detained, undressed, and stripped of their work material by officials from *Detachment 114 of the Bolivarian National Guard (GNB)*, on the road between the municipalities Machiques and Rosario de Perijá in Zulia. The journalists were gathering information on a situation between cattle ranchers in the area and the indigenous Yukpas. On their return to Maracaibo, they found that the military was blocking the passage of a group of Yukpas from the Sierra de Perijá who were walking, along with another group of people who were in trucks, to the residence of the governor of Zulia to hold a protest against unfulfilled promise¹⁶s.

Faced with these events, the journalists began to record what happened and collect testimonies, which was prevented by military officials. After two and a half hours, when the vehicles began circulating, the GNB officials stripped them of their identity cards and asked them to stop the vehicle on the side of the road, and they were transferred to an area to be searched, they even made them undress and asked them how many days they had been in Machiques, what they were filming, and who paid for their lodging, food and gasoline. Likewise, they took away their cell phones and erased all the information they had recorded, and threatened to arrest them for the alleged commission of a punishable act. Later, they were released, but without the journalistic material they had collected. This experience represents a form of arbitrary detention, abuse of authority, and harassment against journalistic work in the Zulia region¹⁷.

A similar situation was reported a month later when in the middle of a student protest demanding COVID vaccines, GNB officials threatened to take the equipment from Zulian journalists from the *EVTV Miami* and *Todos Ahora_Ve* media when they covered the protest¹⁸.

According to the general secretary of the National Association of Journalists, the government intends to impose an informative silence by trying “...to criminalize freedom of expression and information, intimidating journalists and forcing the media to censorship.” In addition, he denounces the impunity that exists in cases of attacks against the union of journalists, the constant persecution of journalists, fake trials, imprisonment, or the imposition of humiliating measures of appearances before courts without causes or convictions¹⁹.

As mentioned, one of the Zulian media that was taken off the air this year was *Selecta 102.7 FM* in the Machiques de Perijá municipality. This station was subject to seizure, at night, of all its equipment by Conatel officials, and the reason given by this State body is that their documentation was not in order. After this closure, on March 7, Conatel ordered the airing of the radio program *Entérate* broadcast on *Oye 90.9 FM* radio station in the Rosario de Perijá municipality, which focused on reporting community complaints and opinions. According to the radio program host, the reason for leaving the air is related to political pressure on the board of directors of the station, especially from the mayor of this municipality²⁰.

2. GENERAL CONSIDERATIONS ON ENVIRONMENTAL RIGHTS

Life demands a safe, clean, healthy, and sustainable environment; conditions set out by the *Special Rapporteur on the issue of human rights obligations relating to the enjoyment of the environment* in his report of January 24, 2018²¹. In other words, the human right to a healthy environment implies a recognition that environmental damage interferes with the enjoyment of human rights, which is why it is the State that has the fundamental obligation to guarantee and protect it, as stated in the Framework Principles on Human Rights and the environment²².

In this regard, Article 127 of the Constitution of the Republic stipulates that environmental rights represent a “...a right and a duty of each generation to protect and maintain the environment for the benefit of itself and the future world. Everyone has the right individually and collectively to enjoy a safe, healthy, and ecologically balanced environment and life. The State will protect the environment, biological diversity, genetic resources, ecological processes, national parks, and natural monuments, and other areas of special ecological importance... It is a fundamental obligation of the State, with the active participation of society, to guarantee that the population develops in a pollution-free environment, where the air, water, soils, coasts, climate, ozone layer, living species, are specially protected, following the law”²³.

ENVIRONMENTAL SITUATION IN ZULIA

Environmental rights are not a priority for the government. Despite the tremendous natural wealth, both national and regional, their carelessness and neglect demonstrate the abandonment and ignorance of the authorities in the provision of care to the Zulia ecosystem that endangers life and people's health. Regulations in this regard are numerous, but their implementation is far from being a reality.

The foregoing translates into non-compliance, among others, with two of the aforementioned *Framework Principles on Human Rights and the environment*, such as: “States must guarantee a risk-free, clean, healthy and sustainable environment to respect, protect and fulfill human rights”, and, “States must respect, protect and fulfill human rights to guarantee a safe, clean, healthy and sustainable environment.” As can be seen, the exercise of human rights goes hand in hand with the coexistence of a healthy and ecologically balanced environment²⁴.

Environmental pollution

Government indifference in maintaining optimal environmental conditions in the region persists. The non-collection of solid waste, the incineration of garbage, the overflow of sewage, urban deforestation, among others, are part of the daily life of *Zulianos*.

Precisely, the lack of waste collection by competent bodies means that communities are forced, in fear of the proliferation of animals and diseases, to burn the garbage that accumulates incessantly and constantly, and this is a perennial situation in almost all the municipalities of Zulia. For example, the inhabitants of the Lagunillas municipality on the Eastern Coast of the Lake, in sectors located in the Paraute (formerly Alonso de Ojeda) and Libertad parishes, have denounced the indiscriminate incineration of garbage this year due to the absence of a waste collection system, and this occurs in any corner where it accumulates, near homes and businesses²⁵. This, in addition to generating environmental pollution, directly affects people who suffer from some respiratory complication or allergies.

The lack of garbage collection also forces the inhabitants of the communities to organize themselves to clean up these improvised waste dumps, despite the constant complaints and proceedings before the municipal authorities to provide support in these cleaning sessions. Such is the case of El Milagro in Ciudad Ojeda, where residents have urged not to continue with the incineration of garbage given the proximity to PDVSA oil facilities²⁶.

For its part, the San Francisco municipality is also affected by this reality, where the accumulation of garbage is reported in any corner, vacant lot, squares surroundings, sports or school spaces, shops and avenues, in non-observance of the principle of comprehensive solid waste management. According to a report by *Mediosur*, entire communities have not received garbage collection services for years, since the units destined for this purpose are paralyzed and useless, accounting for more than 35 compactor trucks without tires, batteries, glass or motors. All of this implies a severe health condition for people as they become sources of pests and infections, as well as damage to the soil, air and water, coupled with the incineration of waste that generates gases and chemicals that are harmful to people and the environment²⁷.

This scenario is repeated in every corner of Zulia. In the Arismendi sector of Maracaibo, indolence is experienced in the face of a public health problem that affects thousands of families given the high levels of contamination that emanate from the overflow of the garbage accumulated in the ravine located in the area²⁸. It is a typical panorama in the city of Maracaibo. The excessive amount of garbage around the streets has even blocked roads that have become impassable, to the extent that only one road can be used on two-way streets, especially in the western part of the city since the little garbage collection occurs in the metropolitan area, that is, north and east of the city.

Indeed, Marabinos must dump their waste in the middle of the road as the only option to get rid of it, because the few trucks in the city pass by main roads but do not enter residential areas. Another alternative commonly used by Marabinos are the so-called *burreros*. These people travel the city in a cart pulled by a donkey, collecting garbage from one area but unloading it in other areas, in exchange for cash or food payments²⁹.

Regarding the issue of water pollution in the city of Maracaibo, it is evident that it is a problem of great importance, because according to the opinion of experts, Marabino homes would be receiving raw and non-drinkable water that would generate serious long-term effects on health³⁰. Since May, several municipalities in the region, such as Maracaibo, Mara, Jesús Enrique Lossada, San Francisco and some areas of the Eastern Coast of the Lake have been receiving water with extreme turbidity, which is recurrent when there is a rainy season in this region of the country. On this topic, the president of the Environmental Commission of the Association of Engineers of Zulia attributes this problem, among other reasons, to the deforestation of the basins that feed the *Manuelote*, *Tulé* and *Tres Ríos* reservoirs, which, according to this expert, reaches up to 70% due to the lack of surveillance and control of the competent governmental bodies³¹. In this sense, two serious situations are combined, on the one hand, the cloudy water that reaches homes not suitable for human consumption and, on the other, the accelerated deforestation in strategic areas of the region where it is denounced that, in addition, there is discharge of sewage to reservoirs.

The use and waste of plastic is also another ingredient that contributes to environmental pollution in the region, since 90% of the plastic produced ends up deposited in gullies, in Lake Maracaibo or in garbage piles distributed in corners and different areas of the city, all this as a consequence of the lack of solid waste collection and the absence of policies that encourage recycling

culture. This worrying environment is reflected in the existence of 90 improvised garbage dumps, only in Maracaibo. It is argued that plastic takes up to 500 years to degrade. Still, its decomposition generates elements ingested by marine fauna that transfer to the food chain with the consumption, for example, of fish³².

According to numbers from the Environmental Commission of the Association of Engineers of Zulia, only between Maracaibo and San Francisco 2,400 tons of garbage are generated daily. For its part, *Azul Ambientalista* foundation reports that 3,000 tons of waste are being produced daily in Maracaibo alone. They claim that the majority of these wastes are plastic, especially the so-called single-use plastic in homes, such as soft drink bottles and straws, among others³³.

Oil spills

The state of Zulia is distinctive for its oil deposits. In the past, it represented the region of the country with the highest oil production and its derivatives, but the devastation and destruction of which the national oil industry has been the victim directly and dramatically affected the region's status as a generator of national wealth. The result has been abandoned machinery, dismantled facilities, and uncontrolled oil spills.

In reference to the latter, many are the victims who spend their days between oil spills and the inability of the Venezuelan State to contain these types of natural disasters as a result of the irresponsibility and destruction of a key factor in the national economy. This sad scenario harms people's health, affects the ecosystem, and contravenes economic activities such as fishing and tourism. According to reports, in the state of Zulia “...there are between 15 thousand and 17 thousand active and inactive oil wells, of which more than 5,000 are located in Lake Maracaibo; more than 14 thousand kilometers of buried pipes and 200 flow stations; in addition to pipelines on land. Its continuous leaks have reached the municipalities of Baralt, Valmore Rodríguez, Cabimas and Santa Rita; but also on the other side of the Rafael Urdaneta bridge, the municipality of San Francisco, and the capital, Maracaibo, especially the stilt houses in Santa Rosa”³⁴.

As can be seen, it is a distressing problem that negatively impacts the region. It is common to see stolen, obsolete and corroded pipes that have passed their useful life and, due to lack of timely maintenance, present leaks of various intensities producing oil outbreaks that extend up to 40 kilometers on the shores of the lake and oil slicks up to 30 meters in width³⁵. Also, these spills have reached agricultural areas affecting pastures and pastures for cattle. In regions of Cabimas and Ciudad Ojeda (on the eastern coast) and La Concepción (on the western coast), when the rains fall, floods carry the oil to the streets of the towns, such as the one that occurred between August and September 2020 in Cabimas, where oil also came out of water pipes and impregnated the streets of residential areas³⁶.

Precisely, the Cabimas municipality has been one of the most affected. After years of oil exploitation, it is now stagnant in the midst of the economic crisis and environmental pollution, between the emanation of toxic gases and the uncontrolled outbreak of oil that is still in progress in obsolete pipes. The shores of its coasts are invaded by oil, plastic waste, and dead fish, triggering the paralysis of one of its primary sources of economy, fishing. Fishers have to sail up to two hours to get fish, compared to 20 years ago when they could catch up to 100 kilos of fish three meters from the coast. This worsens with the shortage of gasoline necessary to cover this task because when they cannot find the fuel they must row until they reach the fishing point, and sometimes the little fish they manage to collect is full of oil, so it is not suitable for consumption³⁷.

There are complete sectors with black spots on the streets and a constant smell of gas, as is the case in the R1 sector of La Rosa parish. Some of its inhabitants daily collect up to 40 buckets of about 20 liters of crude oil from a makeshift refinery that is used to strain gas that is then used for cooking, an extremely dangerous matter both for health and for any domestic accident, since once the direct gas system to the kitchens is installed, the fire cannot be put out because oil comes out of the pipes³⁸.

These are drills abandoned by the State company that continue to emanate oil. When it is heated, it begins to melt, and its smell is unpleasant, affecting the respiratory tract of the inhabitants who live perennially with these oil outbreaks, in addition to other pathologies that can occur such as hormonal disorders, spontaneous abortions, gingivitis, neurological disorders, kidney and nervous system damage, anemia, paralysis and headaches, skin and eye irritations. In addition to this, the little water that eventually reaches some sectors of the municipality is linked to oil, due to the corrosion of water and oil pipes. In any case, the inhabitants exclaim that *"Cabimas has more oil than water."*³⁹

In February, there were reports of oil spills that reached rural areas of the Miranda municipality on the Eastern Coast of the Lake, due to the leakage of a nearby pipeline, which prevents the circulation of vehicles and the production of some farms located in the area. This is the second time that an incident of this type has occurred, and they had spent at least four months facing this situation, to the extent that the inhabitants were forced to collect oil with plastic containers. After multiple complaints and claims, PDVSA carried out the inspection and corrected the leak⁴⁰.

Pollution of Lake Maracaibo

The largest ecosystem in Zulia is the one that suffers the most from government neglect and non-observance and non-compliance with environmental regulations. Lake Maracaibo, a source of oil, fishing and tourist wealth, is degraded before an indolent public that sees how it slowly dies.

According to the opinion of the president of the *Civil Association for the Conservation of the Lake Maracaibo Basin (Aclama)*, there are three factors that most pollute the Lake Maracaibo basin: first, salinization, to which the navigation channel which is over 60 years old has contributed since it allows the entrance of the saline wedge to the waters of the lake; secondly, eutrophication, which implies increased levels of nitrogen and phosphorus, the accumulation of organic matter and the lack of oxygen in the center of the lake; and, thirdly, the inadequate management of wastewater and agricultural derivatives, the latter being the greatest threat of all⁴¹.

The pollution of Lake Maracaibo is so extreme that it has been pointed out that 90% of its shores are full of garbage, of which 80% is plastic that is dragged by the 40 mouths of streams that reach its basin. It has been reported that at the bottom of the lake, there are all kinds of waste from rubbers, refrigerators, floating televisions, dead fish, pigs, dogs, tables, cars, and even corpses⁴². On its shores, the deforestation of its mangroves is also evident, such as those located in Capitán Chico, full of garbage, plastics and oil residues among their roots⁴³.

Also, negligence and indolence contribute to the pollution of the lake's waters. Unfortunately, the lake has experienced sewage drift into its waters, increasing its damage rates to its ecosystem. In this regard, it was reported that workers, presumably following order of the Maracaibo Mayor's Office, cleaned the sewers and sewer network on Urdaneta Avenue (formerly Padilla) and proceeded to dump all this waste into the lake's waters⁴⁴.

Oil spills are not only evident on land but with greater force in the waters of the lake. It is said that in the waters of the lake, there are hundreds of pipes, one on top of the other, and facilities that are over 100 years old. They even call it the “*monster with a thousand heads*”⁴⁵. According to the Association of Engineers of Zulia, there are 20,000 linear kilometers of pipelines in its waters, more than 15,000 oil wells, both active and inactive, and some gas stations⁴⁶. For June, according to the president of *Aclama*, there were between 15 and 30 spills of oil tankers per month in the waters of the lake⁴⁷.

For years there has been warning of these spills. This issue continued at the beginning of this year when spills of more than 15 linear kilometers of crude oil were reported, with a width of up to 30 centimeters and a thickness of 70 centimeters, affecting marine fauna such as armadillos, catfish, mullet, lebranches and shore crabs. In addition, it was reported then that fishermen lost more than 5,000 linear meters of nets, clothing, and boats⁴⁸.

To this end, directors of the *Civil Association for the Conservation of Lake Maracaibo and the Vida Verde Foundation (Funvive)* state that these oil overflows in the lake's waters harm all the fauna found in its water column as well as the demersal fauna found at the bottom. Likewise, it affects the vegetation on coastal shores, which acts as a sink effect that reduces greenhouse gases and prevents coastal erosion⁴⁹.

By the beginning of August, the warning voices about the constant oil spills in the lake, and the concern that these would reach the bottom and continue to expand were once again raised. According to reports consulted by the *Sotalia Project*, the currents of the lake are spreading the oil from its middle downwards. In relation to these spills, the biologist Yurasi Briceño explains that “...when these wastes fall into the sea, they sink and pile up at the bottom. One part is carried by currents to the shore, another evaporates, and another part floats and is carried by the winds. It is a chain of contamination that directly or indirectly affects not only fauna but also nearby populations”⁵⁰.

The most conservative numbers indicate that during this year 2021, six new large spills have been originated due to failures in the infrastructure of wells located in the lake, whose source of contamination is very difficult to identify since the oil is spreading and cleaning services are not being done. These failures occur due to the collapse of the underwater pipes due to lack of maintenance; they are pipes that generally measure between 3 and 10 inches, and when they break they let oil flow into the waters⁵¹.

As mentioned, these unfortunate spills directly affect the lake fauna, which is why it is common to see dolphins swimming around these oil slicks, especially on the coasts near Cabimas and Lagunillas. Many of these dolphins have mercury in their body. Also, manatees are affected in their ecosystem. They feed on mangrove leaves, aquatic plants, and some grasses on the banks of rivers contaminated with oil. Dolphins and sea turtles face the same problems⁵².

This also affects the shores of the beach located in places like Puntica de Piedra to the north of the city, where the presence of oil in almost 200 meters of the coast of that area is reported, and many people run the risk and bathe in those polluted waters that in the long run cause severe damage to the skin⁵³. By mid-May, a vast and permanent oil spill located in the central-western area of Lake Maracaibo was reported. According to satellite images, it would be a slick of almost 245 km² in size⁵⁴.

Similar photos were published on August 23 showing oil slicks in the lake, although contamination comes from facilities on the mainland⁵⁵.

3. OVERALL SITUATION OF THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC IN ZULIA

Codhez continues to monitor the context of the pandemic in the Zulia region, which has developed between the increase in positive cases and the activation of vaccination sessions in different spaces, both public and private, in the region. To this end, at the beginning of August, sessions were held in twenty *Centros de Diagnóstico Integral (CDI)* to increase the scope of immunization since, according to the governor, this would increase the daily number of vaccinated people in Zulia, and estimated that by the first week of August some 500,000 people would have been vaccinated⁵⁶. As part of the increase in immunization sites, the state governor also announced the installation of a drive-through vaccination point in *La Marina Park* in Maracaibo⁵⁷.

By August 21, the administration of 755,000 vaccines in the state of Zulia was reported, with a daily immunization rate of 35,000 people treated at the thirty immunization points in the region. According to the state governor, it is estimated that the number of vaccinated people will reach 1,000,000, and 50,000 vaccines will be administered per day in the upcoming weeks - without specifying a date⁵⁸. Likewise, after the rumors of the presence in Zulia of the first case of the so-called black fungus or mucormycosis by Covid-19, the governor assured that there are no reports about it, despite the statement of the director of the Maracaibo University Hospital about four people who presented symptoms related to black fungus, although this information was not confirmed⁵⁹.

Deaths of health workers from causes associated with Covid-19 persist. On August 15, a pediatrician died, joining the long list of names of people belonging to this sector who have died during the pandemic in the region. By that date, according to the organization *Médicos Unidos de Venezuela*, the death of 147 people was reported in Zulia: 116 doctors, 23 nurses, and another 8 from diverse health areas, out of a total of 722 deceased health workers⁶⁰. By August 19, the death of 5 more doctors was registered, so the number of fatalities increased to 152⁶¹.

By August 31, 2021, the global number of positive cases stood at 217,174,113 infected people and 4,510,423 deaths⁶². According to reports published by the national government, throughout the country there have been 335,233 positive cases and 4,026 deaths. Meanwhile, in the state of Zulia there have been 28,574 positive cases⁶³.

FINAL THOUGHTS

The Venezuelan State is the main responsible for guaranteeing the enjoyment and exercise of the right of expression without oppression or threats, as well as that of living and enjoying in an ecologically balanced environment, as essential elements both for the development of the personality and for the conservation of the life and health of people.

In this sense, the promotion and protection of the right to freedom of expression allow to question, present varied points of view, and make visible injustices and violations of human rights. Thus, the challenge for journalists and the media is to keep this intention alive and avoid misinformation. For this, it is necessary that the Venezuelan State assume its constitutional obligation as guarantor of this promotion and protection, and to develop normative instruments to safeguard the people who are dedicated to the dissemination of truthful and timely information.

Likewise, government representatives are urged to refrain from promoting or spreading false statements, authorizing media closures, encouraging the persecution or intimidation of communicators, threatening or promoting digital blocking. In general, they should avoid behaviors that lead to misinformation and be aware that diverse and reliable information is the best barrier against misinformation. For this reason, it is the State that must set an example with its own transparency and disclosure of accurate data, opinions, and information, reaffirming the independence of the media and granting sufficient security measures so that journalists, as well as any person, can fully exercise their freedom of expression.

Also, in response to this guarantee of the enjoyment and exercise of rights, the Venezuelan State must promote compliance with international and national standards regarding maintaining a healthy, balanced and sustainable environment. Government actors must understand that the guarantee of environmental rights does not represent a secondary or accessory obligation. In reality, a healthy environment guarantees the full realization of the rest of human rights. In other words, without a healthy environment, the life and health of people are seriously threatened, a situation that extends to every living being.

In the case of Zulia, there is evidence of a profound unconcern and inattention to the environmental measures necessary to prevent the proliferation of pollution in the region's surroundings. We have seen how their spaces, both terrestrial, lake and river, are severely affected by indolence in their maintenance and care, so it is urgent to raise awareness to undertake rescue actions of vital spaces in Zulia, including the continuous and orderly collection of solid waste, regulation of oil activities, implementation of sanitation measures for Lake Maracaibo and the areas that suffer from oil spills and other polluting factors and, in general, activate an orientation plan aimed at communities to learn techniques for the conservation and care of ecosystems that are essential for life.

NOTAS

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