

EVAP Ep. 16: Beatriz Borges

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SPEAKERS

Elisabeth Pramendorfer, Jaclyn Streitfeld-Hall, Beatriz Borges

J Jaclyn Streitfeld-Hall 00:12

Welcome to Expert Voices on Atrocity Prevention by the Global Centre for the Responsibility to Protect. I'm Jaclyn Streitfeld-Hall, Research Director at the Global Centre. This podcast features one-on-one conversations with practitioners from the fields of human rights, conflict prevention and atrocity prevention. These conversations will give us a glimpse of the personal and professional side of how practitioners approach human rights protection and atrocity prevention, allowing us to explore challenges, identify best practices, and share lessons learned on how we can protect populations more effectively. Ahead of today's episode, I sat down with Elisabeth Pramendorfer, the Global Centre's, Venezuela expert to discuss the situation. Thank you for joining us, Elisabeth.

E Elisabeth Pramendorfer 00:58

Thank you, Jackie. I'm so happy to be here.

J Jaclyn Streitfeld-Hall 01:00

Can you give us your assessment of the situation in Venezuela?

E Elisabeth Pramendorfer 01:05

Absolutely. Before that, I do want to say that I'm so excited that our listeners will get to listen to Beatriz Borges from CEPAZ in this podcast who is not only an inspirational human rights defender, but she's also a dear friend of the Global Centre. And I hope that this podcast is going to be really informative for everyone that's tuning in. We are in the eighth year of what we refer to as the multi-dimensional crisis or complex emergency that has affected Venezuelans across the country. And before I go into the current situation, or how we got there, it may be useful for

listeners to know that the Global Centre has been officially covering the crisis since 2018. This is when a Panel of Experts designated by the Secretary General of the Organization of American States first warned that since at least 2014, state agents and government-aligned groups may have committed crimes against humanity in an attempt to silence dissent. And so this is where we at the Global Centre began our extensive research and advocacy program to mobilize international action in response to the crisis, including through ensuring independent investigations, judicial proceedings, political dialogue, and of course, most importantly, preventing further crimes. And it's probably obvious to those listeners who are familiar with the situation that in some areas, there has been some success, and in others not so much. And this brings me to the current situation in Venezuela. International attention on the crisis has decreased in recent months. This is, I would say, a common phenomenon in our work and in our field. It's not unique to Venezuela. Usually, the longer a crisis goes on, the more fatigue sets in on how to deal with it. We see that in Afghanistan, in Myanmar, Yemen, Syria, and many, many other situations. But what they all have in common, and what is very much the case for Venezuela, is that suffering continues, and the multi-dimensional crisis continues to affect all areas of life. Only recently in September this year, a UN Human Rights Council-mandated Fact Finding Mission on Venezuela, warned that possible crimes against humanity continue to take place in Venezuela, in a context of almost total impunity, in particular for the government leadership orchestrating, ordering and overseeing these crimes. We know that systematic repression against actual or perceived opponents includes policies of arbitrary detention, often followed by torture and ill treatment, sexual and gender based violence and possible short term enforced disappearances. Independent UN investigations have found that at times, it is President Nicolás Maduro himself, or members of his inner circle, who are actually involved in identifying targets, who will later end up in one of the infamous and often covert detention centers. There are actually hundreds of pages by the Fact-Finding Mission, as well as extensive reporting by Venezuelan civil society organizations, which detail unimaginable acts of torture and violence that victims have to endure and continue to endure as we speak. These are perpetrated by intelligence agencies which reward brutality and punish disobedience by its own members. We also know that over the past years, security forces have perpetrated tens of thousands of alleged extrajudicial executions in an apparent attempt to combat crime. Venezuelan human rights project Lupa Por la Vida documented at least 485 alleged extrajudicial killings only in the first quarter of 2022 alone. These are 485 people who have families, who have loved ones, who have kids, or are themselves still children. And although it doesn't make the headlines as often as it should, communities along Venezuela's border with Colombia, and other areas of the country, are also at heightened risk of egregious abuses by non state armed groups or criminal gangs, which oftentimes act with the consent and direct involvement of the same Venezuelan state agents that have been identified as perpetrators of possible crimes against humanity. We know that regular clashes between armed groups along the border have resulted in mass displacement, civilian fatalities, disappearances and the forced recruitment of children. In Venezuela's gold mining region, Arco Minero del Orimoco, state agents and armed criminal groups are committing killings, sexual and gender-based violence, torture, corporal punishment and disappearances, including against indigenous populations, to ensure control over profitable territory and in the context of widespread impunity. And what enables and emboldens all of this is a deeply malfunctioning judicial system, which is actually complicit in ongoing violence. This has resulted in the Office of the Prosecutor of the International Criminal Court to open an investigation into possible atrocity crimes in the country. But it's really important for me to stress that the crisis is so much more complex than that. At the same time, as we see state agents committing abuses against populations across the country, Venezuela has been experiencing an unprecedented humanitarian catastrophe. And its sheer scale and impact is difficult to imagine, unless you have experienced it yourself. Millions and millions of people are in need of humanitarian

assistance and relief. There are official numbers, which state that over 7 million people remain in need of humanitarian assistance owing to the ongoing political and economic crisis. But actual numbers, including those documented by Venezuelan civil society organizations, are estimated to be significantly higher. More than 7.1 million people have left the country since 2014. Many of them, looking for safety, have actually found themselves even more vulnerable, subjected to trafficking, violence, sexual abuse, and exploitation. But this crisis, in all of its complexity, did not erupt out of nowhere. It was preceded by years of gradual erosion of the rule of law and democratic space, endemic corruption, economic mismanagement and collapse. We simply failed to address these warning signs at an early stage. And I would say that, in fact, at least to some extent, we failed to address the crisis, even at its very peak. Over the past years, largely as a result of the political crisis and deadlock between the government and the very diverse opposition, the international community has experienced times of deep polarization, often leading to paralyzation. We have not yet understood that the solution to the crisis is not found in Washington, in Brussels or anywhere else. It's found by listening and taking on board the action that Venezuelans themselves want their government and the wider international community to take. And we are also at a really key moment in Venezuela today. The country is heading into an electoral period, and we know that repression and crackdown on civic space will likely intensify. We have been here before. We ignored the warning signs, and we failed to respond in a way that puts Venezuelans at the forefront of the crisis. So whoever is listening, and in whatever capacity you do so, I hope we can all ask ourselves; what are we going to do differently this time? And, there really is no quick solution to the crisis. It will take years, probably decades, system wide reform, building democratic space, accountability which includes justice, but also an accurate record of what has happened, the truth, healing. This does not happen overnight. It requires long term engagement by the wider international community through pressure, but also through dialogue. And the good news is, we really don't need to come up with solutions. We have all the analysis, necessary action, paths to take, decisions to make that so many of our civil society colleagues in Venezuela continuously share with us, and they tell us what to do. And so this is what I will do right now. I'll sit back, and I'll actually listen to Beatriz and I hope you all do too. Thank you.

J Jaclyn Streitfeld-Hall 10:02

Today I'm joined by Beatriz Borges, the Executive Director of Centro de Justicia y Paz or CEPAZ. Thank you for joining us today, Beatriz.

B Beatriz Borges 10:11

Thank you for having me, and thank you for that this opportunity to share about our work in CEPAZ and in Venezuela.

J Jaclyn Streitfeld-Hall 10:18

Your organization, CEPAZ, is one of the most well known Venezuelan civil society organizations working on cross-cutting issues in the country over the past few years. Could you tell us how the organization started and what led you to establish it?



B**Beatriz Borges 10:34**

Well, in 2014, the environment of repression and criminalization when citizens exercise their right, was a moment where I was teaching law and human rights at the university, and working also for the Human Rights Center of Catholic University. And I saw that we need more about how people know about the rights and how they can defend them. And what led me to found CEPAZ, I felt motivated to conduct workshop on human rights and to give persons and citizen the tools. And when they receive this workshop around the country, they told me if I had known this before, this knowledge, my response to this arbitrary harrassment of which the state treat them, and all I was a victim, would have been different. That make me understand importance to give a space for citizens to ask the right and to know as a citizen, how to defend the human rights. And along with CEPAZ was created the network of citizen activists for that with the possibility of citizen empowerment of in favor of human rights. And now they can constantly work and organize themselves and work in a collaborative way with the methodology of the "three Ds" for human rights, that is documentation, denunciation and dissemination. And in that moment, we understand the possibilities, and also the necessity that to work for human rights, peace and democracy - how you have to work with the human rights in the center. And, well, has been a long path, but now that network is not just in Venezuela. Now with the human mobility crisis, we have the national network, but today we are present in 14 countries that all our members that used to live in Venezuela and for other nationalities are connected in this platform to do activism in favor to peace, human rights and democracy.

J**Jaclyn Streitfeld-Hall 13:19**

I know you've been working, as you just mentioned, as a human rights defender and a Professor of Human Rights long before the crisis in Venezuela started. Could you share what your experience was from the time period in 2014, when the situation first began to deteriorate?

B**Beatriz Borges 13:39**

Yeah, at that moment, we start to see, as I said, the criminalization and repression and this, the importance of documenting about what was concerning about civil and political rights, specifically political persecution. And at that time, they talk about political I mean individual cases, but we start to identify patterns of persecution. And with the persecution, the persecution against dissidents was not seen as at that time, like as a human rights issue, but today has been recognized as a state policy by different mechanisms, international mechanism as the Fact-Finding Mission. We start to make reports about cases of persecution. We identify the patterns. We have this and while monitoring of the situation, that is why we understand how this system of repression and persecution exist, and how it has been built to cancel, to disappear, all the person or leaders, or students, or journalists or human rights defender who resigns of the government, or think different or acts for the rights. This system is active to keeping the power and to threat all and criminalized all citizens or leaders who are asking for their rights, or giving information about corruption or organizing themselves to change the political reality. And that situation make us also to look justice in the international path, and open all the cases and the ways to make international community understand what was happening in Venezuela, and also to find different mechanism to help in the international bodies of human rights, to look for this justice for Venezuelan victims, and to show what was happening in Venezuela.

J

Jaclyn Streitfeld-Hall 16:16

You know, in the atrocity prevention space, we often talk about the importance of action upon early warning and prevention of atrocities. A lot of risk factors that we talk about in atrocity prevention are some of the things you've mentioned just now, you know, gradual erosion of rule of law dismantling of democratic institutions to sort of build power in the hands of just particular people, erosion of the judicial system, increasing repression, you know, all of these things sort of should be red flags for all of us and emerge long before a crisis escalates into atrocities. Looking back to eight years ago, what kind of action do you think could have helped mitigate the multi-dimensional crisis in Venezuela?

B

Beatriz Borges 17:16

Well, along with the political persecution that we start to see in Venezuela in the earliest years, since 2015, we find or found how this erosion of the capacity to the state to respond to the necessities to the people, start to produce what they call emergency complex humanitarian, a complex humanitarian emergency, that is a multi level, multi dimensional crisis, who affects all the population. And we gave to the international community, but also we litigate in national courts, our early warning about what happened, and because we saw all the levels of the how the human rights in all their dimension, were affecting not just the food, the rate of food, this health, but all the levels. And we start a journey with, especially with the United Nations, to tell them what was happening in Venezuela, what are the levels. And also, I remember in 2017, telling them, how was the human mobility crisis in a very important component of the crisis. Well, before we have the recognition of the understanding about the crisis, the humanitarian crisis, and the human mobility crisis, but after a long and profound human suffering, and that's why show us the importance of the international mechanism, to have this prevention mechanism, have these actions early in the stage that they can prevent, and avoid human suffering. And when the humanitarian architecture and also with international response about the international mechanism were activated, we lost a lot of people because the humanitarian emergency and also for the repression, but it was like a sweet, sour feeling that all the mechanisms were activated, and we hope that the response about the humanitarian crisis and all the dimensions were effective. This is has been a very challenging path, and also show of the importance of the how they should be coordinated with the war with a complex humanitarian emergency, and all the dimension of the crisis. Because it's complex and have so many dimensions, is important to work in a comprehensive and holistic way. Our work has been very important as a civil society in the international mechanism, because in Venezuela, we lost the capacity to the institutions and authorities to respond correctly to the dignity and to the right of people. And that's why for this year has been so important the role of the civil society, and asking for international mechanism to help Venezuela in the different dimension of the crisis.

J

Jaclyn Streitfeld-Hall 21:08

I really, you know, we're constantly inspired by the way that you approach this crisis. And the way you frame it as being kind of a multi-dimensional crisis that thus requires a comprehensive and holistic approach. Because, you know, in so much of our work, we see these sort of very, we say, siloed, but, you know, kind of fractured approaches to crises where you think of it as a

human rights situation. And so you throw all the human rights mechanisms at it, but often forget that there are people who are starving, because it's also a humanitarian crisis, and that all of these international parts need to work together just as much as all of the kind of domestic parts work together. So, it's always wonderful to hear you talk about how you've approached the situation in Venezuela. As you've mentioned, both in terms of the network that you mentioned in the beginning and what you've just said about civil society working together, you know, Venezuela has an incredibly vibrant civil society with hundreds of CSOs, humanitarian actors and human rights defenders working in partnership across the country. But doing this work leaves many of you at great risk of threats, intimidation, harassment, and persecution, often at the hands of the government itself. In what ways does this complex and dangerous environment affect your ability to do your work?

B

Beatriz Borges 22:50

Well, as you say, it's very challenged to bring this global and comprehensive, and not silo, approach about the situation use of Venezuela. And also, I think the challenge is create the connections and the nexus between then and now this, that vision that is understanding about the nexus and how all the crises are connected, and you cannot work without this approach of peace, develop[ment], and humanitarian, and put the human rights in the centers. I think, this should be an approach. And as a civil society, and so it's inspiring being part of civil society in Venezuela, as you say, for me has been, as Venezuelan citizens, the work of civil society has been the light of what happened in Venezuela right now. Because thanks to civil society, working in this different dimension - this develop[ment], humanitarian, human rights - has been how the what happened in Venezuela has been known around the world, and also in Venezuela, because we don't have any official data about anything. And thank you for this work that civil society do documenting and also raising data and explaining the complexity and the reality of Venezuela is why we could activate this mechanism and international bodies, and also as we bring the information, give the understanding about the solution that has to be also connected with all the dimension of the crisis, and also how democracy, or the fight for the right of democracy, is something important in Venezuela, because the base of the crisis is political. But the consequences are in all the dimensions about human rights. And in this work, civil society has been threat and criminalized also, and has been also a victim of reprisals of persecution. We now have human rights defenders on jail, for when they denounce about the human rights violations. And organization who gave humanitarian help also have been arbitrary detention victims, and it's very risky and is be human rights defenders work with the civil society organization in Venezuela, in the humanitarian field, or the human tights field is dangerous in Venezuela. That's why I think, not just that it's in fire, but it's something that have the crisis in Venezuela than others. For example, Nicaragua, Cuba doesn't have, is an always when I ask or when I talk with international communities, I say this is important to protect civil society in Venezuela. Because this is a way that you know what is happening. And civil society is not just documenting, but also is trying to bring ideas how to fight, and how to build the path for peace and democracy and justice. This is something that we not give up. This is something we're still trying, even is the very complex environment, we are in an authoritarian situation. We try to find a way about how people asking for the rights, organizing themselves, and understanding the possibilities to fight for the rights in this environment can make the difference and lead the country to political transformation, and restore and seeing the rights in the country.

J

Jaclyn Streitfeld-Hall 27:33

And is there anything that the international community or external stakeholders like international civil society organizations can do to actively support Venezuelan civil society in this work?

B

Beatriz Borges 27:47

Yes, well, I think there are so many things that they have to do or they do. But, it's really important to remember always, first recognize this work and recognize what is happening there, and what is the role that civil society is playing. And also, something that always happened with the humanitarian and the human rights crisis is, support the work of the organizations. There is an environment, and is one of the pattern of persecution of the government that criminalize the access of international cooperation, and make difficult for the international communities to support civil society in Venezuela. But it's important to keep the support, to give... and when I talk about international cooperation, it's recognition, it's resources, it's all the possibilities to support that the civil society exist, and protect them before reprisals, and criminalization, and attacks. Because this is the way that the government keeping the power to having these voices in silence, and have the space to hear what is doing and what are what is denounced as civil society, I think it's also important because with the censorship and with the restriction of the expression in Venezuela, it's important to have safe channels to communicate constantly with civil society, and also understand that work in different dimensions of the crisis need to have diversity of the actors in civil society who works in different fields, have these approach to different dimensions of the crisis.

J

Jaclyn Streitfeld-Hall 30:09

Absolutely, I support all of that. I think that not enough is done in international advocacy and international work to kind of elevate these voices from within the country and understand the diversity of actors who need to be engaged, and also need to be supported and properly protected through the process of hearing their perspectives.

B

Beatriz Borges 30:38

No, and also happened when it's a crisis like Venezuela, so complex and the long term crisis, that sometimes the international community doesn't know how to, what else to do. That's why we, as I said that, like civil society, we don't give up. And also we are rethinking all the ways that in a peaceful way, we can recover democracy, and we can recover rights in our country. And but we cannot do it alone, we need the support. That's why the vision of the crisis in Venezuela cannot be in a short term, should be in long term. But working for human rights, justice and peace is something we do for future generation, because has been a very long term of deterioration, and recover that you cannot do it in one day. That's why is working with Venezuela, it is not a short term duty. The devastation take place over a long, long period. And this restoration, we require the involvement of many people, and recover institutions and also bet to new generation of defender, who will witness the lesson that at every moment in our history taught us that hope will not happen again. There's something when I feel tired, I tell myself that you are not working for your present, because there are so many things to do. You are working for your future and for change the Venezuela that I knew before, and how to

become better in the future and how new generation of men and women from Venezuela can recover the state, and can recover the country and can recover the rights that what happening in our country won't happen again.

J

Jaclyn Streitfeld-Hall 33:00

That's a beautiful way of looking at it and looking at kind of the potential impact of the work you're doing now, especially at a time when I think many of us feel kind of frustrated with the present. And, I think I'll hold that close to me when I think about Venezuela and other countries moving forward. With that in mind, do you think that the international community is effectively addressing the crisis in its full complexity? And in terms of thinking towards that future that you want to envision? Or is it still very much that kind of short term solutions and siloed approaches?

B

Beatriz Borges 33:45

Well, I think this is a very important to have this question. Because there has been a lot of expectation about what is gonna happening in Venezuela. And I think, first, we need this human rights centered approach, but also has an equilibrium between peace, humanitarian and develop[ment], and understand that are those dimensions or connections are not repelling themselves. Work for humanitarian and work for peace should be worked in the same way. Sometimes an international actor told us: "I cannot ask for justice because Venezuela is in a negotiation and we want that Venezuelan situation get better" - but it's not gonna get better if you don't want work, or you put your efforts in the same way like, we can not think in peace without justice. We cannot think just in humanitarian help without thinking how we recover democracy. That's why this approach between how international community see the solution in Venezuela is important because you cannot normalize what is bad to things or to say that things are getting better, because people still suffering. And also, this is important that they will have this national and international political actor have a step toward dialogue, negotiation, and reestablishment of relations with Venezuela. But understand, because has been insulated in the last years. But this mediation for involved in the dialogue is important for the construction of a piece, and but they cannot forget the human rights violations and the loss of institutionality that we have right now and you cannot... is like, in the same time that you have monitoring and accountability about human rights has as a very important effort in an authoritarian government. And the word that the ICC and the FFM - the International Criminal Court and the Fact-Finding Mission - is very important as a message of the international community that even if they want for Venezuela peaceful exit to the crisis, they cannot allow, they cannot permit, that international crimes and gross human rights violations have not a justice response. And that is important to understand, because to support justice and accountability at the same time of negotiation and peaceful solution are not contradictory. It's imperative to have both. Peacebuilding is not again following the process of monitoring human regulations. Countries like Venezuela, have a strategic of simulation of peace and justice. And a way to not fell into this manipulation or confusion is to focus on human rights indicators, and fulfill of recommendation of human rights bodies. And this is also a very important work that civil society with all the documentation or international human rights bodies are give to Venezuela. We have their recommendation, and we play using the system in a smart way is important. And this is a way, I think should be the approach right now of international

community - understand the importance, see the different dimensions, understand how human rights should be in the center, and how still support justice and accountability and the same time of negotiations and a peaceful solution in Venezuela.

J

Jaclyn Streitfeld-Hall 38:45

Since you've touched on the FFM in what you were just saying, you know, I want to recognize that the renewal of the FFM of the Human Rights Council was a huge success. Obviously, largely supported and advocated by civil society, but it's now up to the member states to actually do something with the information that the FFM provides, as they evaluate policies and engagement with Venezuela. So with that said, what should states and other stakeholders do with the information reported by the FFM or other investigative bodies, as well as civil society reporting?

B

Beatriz Borges 39:26

Yeah, well, as I said in the beginning, we don't have in Venezuela independent and impartial courts and institutions that you can go there to protect your rights. And, there is a system, a repressor system, active to criminalize, to persecute for political reasons. That's why this international mechanism helps not just to understand what happened in the past and to understand how that system of repression worked, but also is active of their open work, to monitoring the situation that is occurring right now. Because the persecution and decriminalisation, and the arbitrary detentions and torture, it's still happening in Venezuela. And that's why have this mechanism, not only the Fact-Finding Mission, but also the presence on the ground of the High Commissioner team, from the Office of the High Commissioner of Human Rights, and also have this ICC procedure open is an important response for victims and also for civil society, that they're international community, the international bodies know that in Venezuela these situations are happening, and they are not being ignored. We are, they are monitoring how they evolved. Because also they have an evolution about how the pattern of the system is working. And they also is very sophisticated, because in different moments, functioning in different ways. For example, when protests or when there are elections, or in the moment of the pandemic, the patterns, the ways of persecution change, and this international mechanism not only help to have this historical evolution, and file for all the cases or the cases they have now, but also for the future. Every process of international justice or transitional justice in Venezuela can use all this information what was documented for this mechanism to bring answers to the victims that were impact for the repression and also for the humanitarian situation and for this long, dark period of the story of Venezuela. This work of the Fact-Finding Mission is doing, and all the other mechanism, is not important just for the past, is important just for the future, and also for the present to have. Also, I think it has the contention for victims and also for the government of Maduro to still commit in more human rights violations, because they know that this mechanism are monitoring them. And that's why it's so important, and that's why we work so hard to the renewal of the Fact-Finding Mission. And that's why we have, we know that they have too much work to do in the future, because next, in 2024 and 2025, we are going to have elections that are important moments to monitoring what happen in Venezuela in terms of persecution, and criminalization. And also, there is a lot of information that they can recover. And they can document about what happened in Venezuela. And while it's still happening, that's why, I think, as a civil society, we are very working hard to bring all

the information and help the work of international mechanism in Venezuela. And, also with all the recommendation ask for the possibility to implement them in a way to restore and look for their rights the institutionalization in the country.

J Jaclyn Streitfeld-Hall 44:19

Before we close, I just want to ask, as someone who is so personally impacted by the current crisis in Venezuela, what are your thoughts on the future and the situation?

B Beatriz Borges 44:29

Well, I think when you hear about Venezuela always are bad news. And the situation is so complicated ,and give you the sense like where what is going to happen. And this sense or no hope, but I think I want to finish this interview talking about hope. And how as a civil society, as Venezuelans, I think that this moment, and very painful moment that as a Venezuelan we have lived, is important to became an opportunity to learn as a person what happened when you, or the importance of prevent, the importance of work against this atrocity crimes in the countries, the importance of fight for human rights. The complexities that are in Venezuela, but in the global level we are facing, and how civil society, and how every citizen can organize and can put the center in human rights, and don't stop to asking and don't give up and look the path to find the ways to transform and change the crisis. And think that is possible if we work together to do that.

J Jaclyn Streitfeld-Hall 46:17

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