

EL PAÍS

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We Will Rescue Venezuela

In receiving the Sakharov Prize, the Venezuelan opposition reinforces its commitment to democratize the country.

By Lilian Tintori

In Soviet dissident Andrei Sakharov's 1975 Nobel Peace Prize speech, delivered by his wife Yelena Bonner, he wrote "It is unbearable to consider that at this very moment that we are gathered together in this hall on this festive occasion, hundreds and thousands of prisoners of conscience are suffering from undernourishment." As the European Parliament honors the Venezuelan Democratic Opposition, and all of the country's political prisoners, with the 2017 Sakharov Prize for Freedom of Thought, we could say these very same words.

While Venezuelans all over the world celebrate this prestigious honor, our merriment is bittersweet. For while the recognition of our struggle and this show of solidarity heartens us, we know that this award only comes from great tragedy. Today in Venezuela, there are over 300 political prisoners, experiencing what Sakahrov called "the ceaseless struggle for their human dignity." They are subject to cruel acts of degrading treatment and torture; locked in windowless cells, nicknamed 'the Tomb', and threatened with immolation unless they confess to crimes they did not commit. Current 'crimes' of the detained including: sending a tweet critical of the government, using a megaphone to call for freedom, and criticizing the government as a public official. These prisoners, in their fight for dignity, embody the courage of our people; despite knowing the atrocities that the regime is capable of, they have demanded tirelessly the freedom of our people, peacefully and in accordance with our constitutional rights.

This mistreatment of political prisoners is only part of a broader pattern of suppressing basic rights and subjecting the population to deprivation conditions in order to try and weaken dissent. The current humanitarian crisis in Venezuela today is the realization of our worst nightmares. Our hospitals lack 85% of medicines and our grocery stores have no food. Three-fourth of Venezuelans have lost an average weight of 9 kilograms. Currently as many as 300.000 children are at risk of dying from malnutrition and the resurgence of malaria and diphtheria in 2017. And in the last forty days alone, 11 children have died from malnutrition. But the Venezuelan government refuses to accept any humanitarian aid. What kind of government chooses to let its own children starve?

Almost four years ago, my husband Leopoldo López, one of the political prisoners being honored today, began his protest against this injustice. Angered by the arrest of our youth students, and anticipating the coming humanitarian disaster, he asked that Venezuelans peacefully take to the streets to begin a fight. After three years and ten months of unjust imprisonment in a military prison, he continues his arbitrary detention under house arrest. While we can now better protect his physical integrity at home with his family, he has become subject to more censorship than ever before. Even with an ankle monitor to track his every move, he must have his picture taken by security guards four times a day. He is forbidden to speak publicly.

But though the regime tries so desperately to silence us, they cannot hide their disaster anymore. Leaders all over the world have been upfront in their demands for the total restoration of democracy in Venezuela. And Secretary Almagro of the Organization of the American States has initiated a special commission to potentially refer Venezuelans officials to the International Criminal Court for crimes against humanity. Here in Venezuela, we are working to support this effort by hosting public hearings where victims of the government's abuses can properly document these violations. We know that we cannot overcome this dictatorship on our own and so we are grateful for the work of our allies around the world.

But the awarding of the prize today should cause a moment for reflection. Those who deserve most to attend this ceremony, instead, will spend the night in a damp prison cell. The Sakharov Prize is one of the highest distinctions in the fight for human rights; however, we must not take it for granted. 2002 Prize winner, Oswaldo Paya, never did get to see a free Cuba. This award today should encourage all our allies to remain steadfast in supporting our struggle. Specifically, the European Union must ensure that the Venezuelan Government accept the opposition's demand for the release of all political prisoners. Additionally, we need the help of the international community in securing our three other main demands: the restoration of an independent national electoral council, the opening of a United Nations-led humanitarian channel, and the reinstatement of the democratically-elected National Assembly.

Similar to Sakahrov and his 1975 speech, I write these words worlds away from the ceremony in Strasbourg. While the Venezuelan government has robbed me of my ability to leave the country, they will not stop me from being heard. Despite our struggle, I am more inspired than ever before. Eight months into my pregnancy, people ask me how I feel about bringing a child into this world. I fear for my children, like any mother would, but I believe in the future of my country. And as I watch the countless brave Venezuelans taking to the streets daily and waving our flag high, I know that we will rescue Venezuela.

Lilian Tintori is a human-rights activist and the wife of Venezuelan opposition leader Leopoldo López