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COMMITTEE ON FOREIGN RELATIONS  
SUBCOMMITTEE ON WESTERN HEMISPHERE, PEACE CORPS AND  
NARCOTICS AFFAIRS  
UNITED STATES SENATE

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Mr. Chairman, Members of the Subcommittee:

Thank you for the opportunity this afternoon to discuss with you the vital role the Organization of American States (OAS) has played, is playing and will continue to play in facilitating resolution of the political impasse in Venezuela, as well as the OAS role in promoting democracy throughout the Western Hemisphere.

The OAS Role in Venezuela

OAS Resolution 833, of December 16, 2002, which calls for a “constitutional, democratic, peaceful and electoral” solution, remains the cornerstone of the Administration’s multilateral approach to resolving the current situation in Venezuela. We are actively working with our international partners – led by the OAS, the Friends of the OAS Secretary General’s Mission for Venezuela (Brazil, Chile, Mexico, Spain, Portugal and, of course, the United States), and the Carter Center – to support the efforts of the Venezuelan people to find a solution, in accordance with OAS Resolution 833.

During the OAS General Assembly held two weeks ago in Quito, Ecuador, Secretary Powell commended the “decisive role” of the OAS and the Carter Center in Venezuela, most recently in the process of signature verification that has led to the referendum, now scheduled for August 15.

While OAS involvement began immediately after the events of April 11, 2002, it was in May 2003, after months of tenacious diplomacy in Venezuela by OAS Secretary General César Gaviria, that a political accord between the Government of Venezuela and the Opposition Democratic Coordinator was reached, setting the framework for the recall referendum process outlined in Article 72 of the 1999 Venezuelan Constitution.

I must underscore, however, that the Joint Mission of the OAS and the Carter Center has not had an easy go of it in Venezuela. Secretary General Gaviria, his Chief of Staff, and the OAS Mission have been the object of all sorts of unfounded allegations of bias.

In addition to bearing the brunt of attacks from the Venezuelan Government and its supporters in Caracas, the OAS and the Carter Center have had to work with consummate diplomatic skill and political savvy to surmount the obstacles placed in the path of the recall referendum process.

Late last year, the democratic opposition set out to fulfill the constitutional requirement for convoking a presidential recall referendum. In what international observers characterized as a generally peaceful, fair process, the opposition asserted it had collected over 3 million signatures – 600,000 more than the 2.4 million required to trigger a referendum on the mandate of President Chávez.

Amid charges claiming the tally was a result of “megafraud,” the Joint OAS-Carter Center Mission rejected that notion and concluded “that the process was completed peacefully and without major obstacles that would have impeded the free exercise of constitutional rights.”

President Carter later declared that the “sovereign expression of the citizen must be privileged over excessive technicalities” in resolving issues surrounding the tabulation of signatures.

Nevertheless, Venezuela’s National Electoral Council (CNE) validated only 1.9 million signatures, essentially obliging the democratic opposition to undergo a signature appeals process to reconfirm the 1.2 million signatures questioned by the CNE.

This follow-on appeals process, known as the *reparos* and conducted from May 27-31 of this year, allowed Venezuelans the option of reaffirming or excluding their signatures from the recall petition. Over 120 international observers participated in the Joint OAS and Carter Center Mission to help ensure a transparent, credible and fair process.

Of particular significance for the transparency of the process, was the visit paid to CNE headquarters by President Carter and Secretary General Gaviria after the process had concluded and before the results were tabulated.

On June 3, the CNE announced that the democratic opposition had confirmed enough signatures during the *reparos* to trigger a presidential recall referendum. That evening President Chávez said he accepted the results and the referendum would go forward, now scheduled, as I noted earlier, for August 15.

The coming weeks and months will bring defining moments for the future of democracy in Venezuela. As during the recall petition drives and the *reparos* process, international observation, led by the OAS and the Carter Center, will be indispensable to ensuring a credible, fair and transparent recall election. This is a view that is widely held, not only in the United States, as we have seen in editorial comment in so many U.S. newspapers and by interested NGOs, but also throughout the multilateral community and many governments throughout the hemisphere and beyond.

We remain in close contact with our international partners to support the efforts of the OAS and the Carter Center, to increase participation in the observer missions, and to draw international attention to the referendum. Our overriding objective in Venezuela is free and fair elections conducted on a level playing field, free from fear and intimidation, so that the will of the people can be determined and respected.

Venezuelan citizens' groups, such as *Súmate* and other democratic organizations, have played an important role in contributing to the credibility and transparency of the process underway.

Respected human rights groups have documented credible reports of intimidation and harassment of those who signed the original recall petition, as well as limitations on freedom of the press, violent repression of opposition demonstrations, and, most recently, Human Rights Watch stated that "the biggest threat to the country's rule of law comes from the government itself."

Unfortunately, the Government of Venezuela's attacks on democratic civil society organizations have extended to the floor of the OAS Permanent Council, where the Venezuelan Permanent Representative - in addition to attacking the Inter-American Commission on Human Rights, its Special Rapporteur on Freedom of Expression, the OAS Mission in Venezuela and its interim director, and U.S. Government officials - launched a barrage of accusations on March 31 against the National Endowment for Democracy and its support for *Súmate* and other Venezuelan groups.

I immediately, and also on the floor of the Permanent Council, rejected these baseless charges of intervention, pointed out the good work the NED has performed in a number of Latin American countries, and noted that not everyone agrees on the value of NED's work.

I cited the only other criticism of NED ever made by a Latin American leader. And I quote: "Then there is the foreign aggressor that, for purposes of revenge or disinformation, seeks to help those who sell out their homeland by spending millions of dollars on an unacceptable intervention that our people, I am sure, will reject completely."

Mr. Chairman, that was the reaction of Chilean dictator Augusto Pinochet on January 2, 1988, to an announcement that the United States Congress had approved funding to the National Endowment for Democracy to support a transition to democracy in Chile.

On April 20, the Chairmen of NED, IRI and NDI – Vin Weber, John McCain and Madeleine Albright – sent a joint letter to all OAS ambassadors rebutting the outrageous claims made by Venezuela's Permanent Representative.

The international community must remain vigilant to ensure that democratic citizens' organizations in Venezuela are allowed to continue to freely exercise their constitutional rights and participate in the electoral process, in accordance with the May 2003, political agreement.

A peaceful, democratic, constitutional resolution through the ballot box is not just in the interest of the Venezuelan people. It is in the interest of the region as a whole, if our hemispheric neighbors, through their democratic governments, are to preserve regional stability and consolidate the hard-won democratic gains of the last two decades.

### The United States and OAS Democracy Programs

Thus far this year, the U.S. Permanent Mission to the OAS has contributed more than \$500,000 to OAS election observation missions in the Western Hemisphere. The OAS this calendar year alone has fielded missions in the Dominican Republic, El Salvador and Panama, in addition to Venezuela.

We have contributed to these and other such OAS observer missions over the years – and will continue to do so - because “the holding of periodic, free, and fair elections” is one of the essential elements of democracy specifically mentioned in Article 3 of the Inter-American Democratic Charter, to which all OAS member states are bound.

We provide almost \$3 million a year to OAS Democracy programs, including election observation missions, because the United States and all OAS member states have an obligation to promote and defend the right to democracy of the peoples of the Americas, under Article 1 of the Democratic Charter.

This funding goes to OAS programs that teach democratic values and increase public awareness of the Democratic Charter; to programs that strengthen political parties and legislative institutions, promote dialogue and conflict resolution, and foster decentralization and good governance, to name a few.

### The Inter-American Democratic Charter

The Inter-American Democratic Charter was born in the Americas, and thrives in the Americas. No other region of the world has such an explicit commitment to democracy.

With the advent of the Charter, no OAS member state can remain a disinterested spectator to what occurs in our Hemisphere. As an organization and individually, we are bound by the Democratic Charter to assist our neighbors when democracy is threatened or at risk.

The Charter is a living, functioning document, referenced frequently in meetings of the Permanent Council and its committees, and the General Assembly. All OAS ambassadors treat it like that well-known credit card: “Don’t leave home without it.”

It is not a stale document gathering dust on a bookshelf. It is the cornerstone of the Hemisphere's efforts to consolidate democracy and its institutions, and serves as a model to be duplicated elsewhere in the world.

The Charter, signed September 11, 2001 in Lima, is a direct result of the OAS experience in Peru where a democratically elected autocrat, Alberto Fujimori, used every constitutional (as well as many extra-legal) means at his disposal to undermine democracy.

Based on the Peru experience, OAS member states understood that elections alone do not a democracy make. The Inter-American Democratic Charter recognizes a right to democracy and the obligation of governments to promote and defend it. It outlines the essential elements of democracy, and sets forth several tools by which the OAS can serve to help member states strengthen their democratic institutions and practices.

Mr. Chairman, Members of the Subcommittee: Whether it be in Venezuela, where the OAS's patient work is moving the election process along, or in any other member state that seeks OAS support, the United States stands ready to work shoulder to shoulder with our partners in the OAS to promote and safeguard democracy under the Inter-American Democratic Charter.

Thank you again for this opportunity and I'll be pleased to take any questions you may have.