

Estudiantes Venezolanos en el Exterior - Washington, D. C.

Venezuelan Students Abroad - Washington, D. C.

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July 2, 2007

Mr. Jerry Zremski, President
Board of Governors
National Press Club
529 14th Street NW
Washington, DC 20045

Dear Mr. Zremski, and Members of the Board of Governors:

We write on behalf of the Washington, DC chapter of Venezuelan Students Abroad. We are a non-partisan group made up entirely of current students studying outside of our country, Venezuela. We exist to echo the concerns of our brothers and sisters in Venezuela. We would like to express our indignation to your organization for the 11th hour removal of the sponsorship for the Newsmaker event on Venezuelan Students defending freedom of expression that was planned for Friday, June 29th.

Pulling your sponsorship, which you had kindly granted, and then requesting the approximate sum of \$3,700 one day before the event was disgraceful. Unlike the Venezuelan Embassy, Venezuelan Students Abroad does not count with a multi-million dollar public relations budget. Further, unlike the Embassy, we do not interfere to quash other organizations' rights to express their views.

It is our understanding that the National Press Club terminated the sponsorship after receiving calls from the Embassy. Venezuelan Students Abroad would like to remind the NPC that the Embassy has held several one-sided events on your premises. Further, they have been previously invited by the NPC to have their own Newsmaker event, an invitation which they have declined. Not only have the Embassy events been one-sided, but they have also excluded critical Question and Answer periods.

After the capricious decision of President Hugo Chavez to shutdown RCTV, the only nationwide independent media entity in Venezuela, a student protest movement began. More than one hundred marches have occurred and the latest march, just five days ago, counted in excess of one million people. These students march for freedom of expression, for freedom of the press. It is exceptionally ironic—pitiful even—that the National Press Club, an organization founded on the principle that a free press is necessary for genuine liberal democracy, would cancel a panel of speakers that would have included leaders of the student movement and an expert on freedom of speech and student rights.

The government of Venezuela has used water cannons, rubber bullets, and live ammunition against peaceful student protestors, hundreds have been arrested (most of them minors in high school). The situation is of remarkable historical significance. The Chavez

government has been condemned for its actions by a wide cross-section of world opinion including Senators Kennedy, Clinton, Obama, Lugar, and Biden. The Socialist Party of France, Human Rights Foundation, Le Monde, National Review, Amnesty International, the European Parliament, Chilean Senate, Reporters Without Borders, Mexican Congress among hundreds of other groups, have roundly condemned the RCTV shutdown.

There are dozens of journalists in Venezuela who live under a Damocles Sword for having criticized the government. Rather than sending them to jail the government of Venezuela opens investigations (in some cases they are "ongoing" for several years) and files charges that never go to trial. One man who gave an opinion on a television talk show is currently serving five years in prison for uttering a single sentence.

The Newsmaker event that you so blithely cancelled was to highlight students who are protesting in the streets of Caracas in favor of free speech. These students risk their lives and their careers for a value without which the members of the NPC could not pursue their careers.

Venezuelan Students Abroad is profoundly saddened that your calendar entry for last Friday morning illustrates that the NPC unwittingly became an instrument of the Venezuelan Government to silence student critics. Considering the NPC's apolitical nature and its mission statement, which includes the promotion of free expression, Venezuelan Students Abroad can only hope that you will reconsider your decision and provide us with a forum so that your members can learn more about the month-long student protests that continue to stun a government that has intimidated and persecuted every other sector of society.

Sincerely,



Cristina Hernandez

President

Venezuelan Students Abroad –Washington DC
American University Class of 2007