



KIDNAPPINGS IN VENEZUELA

By Vanessa Neumann

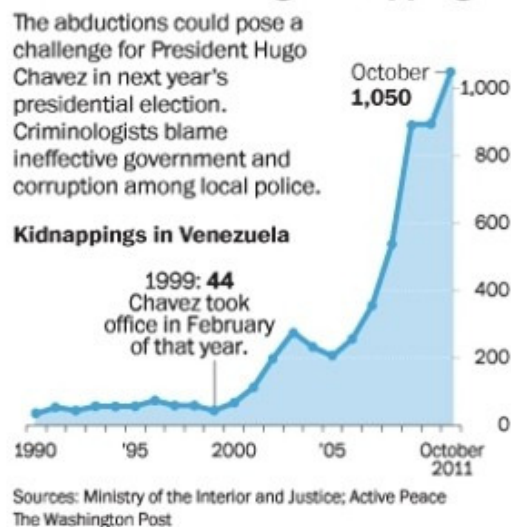
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The November 9 kidnapping and subsequent rescue of Major League Baseball player Wilson Ramos, a catcher for the Washington Nationals, has shone a spotlight on Venezuelan crime rates. Unfortunately, his kidnapping was commonplace; only his swift and successful rescue is a rarity.

Taken from the porch of his family home near the Venezuelan industrial town of Valencia, Ramos was liberated just over 51 hours later in a massive operation that included operatives from the Scientific, Criminal and Penal Scientific Investigations Body (CICPC is its Spanish acronym), the Anti-Extortion and Kidnapping Group of the Bolivarian National Guard, the Bolivarian National Intelligence Service (SEBIN) and the Military Intelligence Directorate, amongst others. After a shootout at the house where Ramos was being kept -- a farm called "My Refuge" about three hours down the road -- the kidnapers fled, leaving Ramos alone in the house to be rescued. Nevertheless, the kidnapers have since been apprehended, identified and indicted.

Such judicial efficiency is extraordinary in Venezuela, a country of 28 million inhabitants, of which at least five are kidnapped every day. Even the government's official statistics show that 1,050 kidnappings were reported this year through October -- which is 23 times more than number recorded when Hugo Chávez was elected 13 years ago, and double the figure of 2008.¹ That's what's actually reported by the government; some estimates place last year's kidnappings as high as 17,000, on the basis that most Venezuelans do not report crimes to the police, whom they suspect will be at best powerless, and at worst, complicit.

Venezuela's rising kidnappings



To be sure, there have always been kidnappings in Venezuela, but they used to be either mostly along the lawless border with Colombia or highly-organized with high-net-worth targets in Caracas and other industrial centers -- such as that of Wilson Ramos. Yet the Ramos case is indicative of another rising trend in kidnapping: the taking of Major League Baseball players and their families.

¹ http://www.washingtonpost.com/world/americas/nationals-catchers-kidnapping-just-one-of-thousands-in-venezuela/2011/11/15/gIQADiKoON_story.html

Whereas the rest of South America is better known for its contributions to soccer, Venezuelans, in rather more Caribbean style, are better at baseball. Indeed over 270 Major League Baseball players have been Venezuelan, and while Ramos is the first MLB player to have been abducted while playing in his home country's winter season (for the Tigres de Aragua), other MLB players have had relatives abducted back home in Venezuela – parents, siblings and children. The reason is obvious: in a country that is as mad for baseball as Venezuela, native sons who make it to the MLB are well-publicized national heroes, with their salaries, schedules and home addresses well known to all. So they make easy targets.

The skyrocketing kidnapping rates, however, are mainly due to the proliferation of a different kind of kidnapping: the *secuestro express*, or express kidnapping, which now represents 80 percent of all kidnappings, 25 percent of which happen in the capital city Caracas. Grittily depicted in the eponymous 2004 film, the *secuestro express* is an ad hoc, yet highly profitable, crime of opportunity that, while originating in Colombia and Mexico, has been perfected in Venezuela's cities.

A paradigmatic example happened to a friend's elderly aunt a decade ago, when the genre was still fairly new. Upon leaving her hairdresser in the tony neighborhood of Las Mercedes (a bit like Manhattan's Upper East Side), she put her key in her expensive car, when suddenly a jeep pulled up behind her, containing four young men with guns. "Get in," they said, "and call your husband and tell him you won't be coming home tonight." The husband paid the requested ransom, in the vicinity of \$15,000, and she was released unharmed within 24 hours. I was told that after that, his aunt switched hairdressers to one with valet parking. Venezuelans are nothing if not adaptable and resilient.

The ad hoc strategy and relatively small sum of money of express kidnappings are designed for quick turnover so that they can kidnap someone else the next day. Nine times out of ten, they release the hostage unharmed within twenty-four hours and move on to another victim. Indeed, the average ransom requested is \$8,000, and the victim is largely chosen by the car he or she drives.

But as kidnap rates have exploded (doubling in the past three years), it is no longer just the wealthy who are kidnapped: it is storekeepers, engineers, housewives, students. I know of one story where a woman who lived in the slums was so poor, all she had to ransom her kidnapped eight-year-old daughter was her refrigerator.

Kidnappings are only part of the problem; violent crime is in fact pandemic in Venezuela. Venezuela's murder rate of 48 murders per 100,000 inhabitants makes it the most violent country in the hemisphere – no small feat considering Mexico's Ciudad Juarez. The global average is 9 murders per 100,000 inhabitants. Indeed in 2008, the last year for which the UN has statistics available, respective homicide rates per 100,000 inhabitants were as follow: United States, 5.22; the United Kingdom (England and Wales), 1.19; Mexico, 11.58; Venezuela, 47.21 – and it has risen sharply since.

Human rights group Provea argues that the violence and impunity racking Venezuelan society is the result of corruption in the police force and weak judicial institutions. Indeed, in 2009, a government report stated that a full 15-20 percent of crimes are committed by police officers, and this percentage is higher for the most violent crimes, such as murder and kidnapping.

The estimated 18,000 criminal gangs often comprise Colombian FARC guerrillas – another reason for the skyrocketing rate. As I wrote in my previous E-Note, "The Middle Eastern-Latin American Terrorist Connection,"² the Chávez government has both offered succor and active support to various terrorist organizations operating within Venezuela (including Hezbollah, FARC, Islamic Jihad, Al Qaeda) and armed civilian militias known as Bolivarian Circles with thousands of unregistered weapons. This witch's brew of weak governance, armed and angry poor civilians plus terrorists has spawned an astounding crime rate that might well be the Achilles heel of the Chávez regime.

Data released by the International Crisis Group³ shows that since Chávez's election in 1998, the murder rate has quadrupled from 4,550 in 1998 to more than 17,000 last year. "In 2010, Caracas became the deadliest capital in the world with the highest murder rate in the world, averaging one murder every hour," according to the United States Department of State Bureau of Diplomatic Security.⁴ Indeed, caraqueños, as inhabitants of the capital city of Caracas are known, have long quipped that they would be safer in Baghdad, and now the statistics bear them out: in 2009, there were 4,644 civilian deaths from violence in Iraq, according to Iraq Body Count, while Venezuela had over 16,000 murders.

Indeed, crime, not poverty, is now considered the number one problem by Venezuelans, according to Luís Vicente León, a political analyst and president of Datanálisis, a Venezuelan polling firm. The press conference to celebrate Ramos's rescue reflected the administration's awareness of its weakness in this area. Interior Minister Tareck el-Aissami, took pains to tout the exceptional rescue of Wilson Ramos. "Here is the national government facing up to its responsibilities," he said.

While el-Aissami insisted that the government is committed to resolving "each case of violence, of homicide, or whatever crime that the Venezuelan family suffers," the statistics do not bear this out. Unfortunately for Venezuelans, as I wrote in *The Weekly Standard* last month,⁵ because of the entrenchment of narcoterrorists, the proliferation of weapons in the barrios, and the hatemongering rhetoric of a regime promoting class warfare, rampant crime and violence look set to continue well into Venezuela's future, with or without Chávez.

² <http://www.fpri.org/enotes/201105.neumann.latinamericanterrorist.html>

³ <http://www.crisisgroup.org/en/regions/latin-america-caribbean/andes/venezuela/038-violence-and-politics-in-venezuela.aspx>

⁴ <https://www.osac.gov/pages/ContentReportDetails.aspx?cid=11224>

⁵ http://www.weeklystandard.com/articles/hugo-ch-vez-s-long-shadow_595217.html