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VENEZUELA: MADURO SOLDIERS ATTACK ELDERLY CHRISTIANS WITH TEAR GAS MID-COMMUNION



Presidency/JHONN ZERPA/AFP HO

by [FRANCES MARTEL](#) | 3 May 2019 | 

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4:03

A bishop in western Táchira, Venezuela, denounced socialist dictator Nicolás Maduro's national guard troops this week, accusing them of interrupting a Catholic Eucharist service by driving their motorcycles into a church and releasing tear gas, injuring several worshippers.

The incident reportedly occurred on Wednesday, a day after Venezuelan President Juan Guaidó announced that, after nearly four months in office, the nation's military had agreed to stop taking orders from Maduro and accept Guaidó as their commander in chief. As of

Friday, Maduro appears to retain control of the military; Guaidó has repeatedly urged civilians to take to the streets and pressure him to leave.

The Bishop of San Cristóbal, the capital of Táchira, Mario Moronta, **published** a statement Wednesday denouncing the attack, asserting that a significant number of those attending the Mass were elderly persons poor equipped to withstand a military ambush. There is no evidence the Christians were assembling to protest Maduro or support Guaidó, though Táchira has **historically** been an opposition stronghold.

“This evening, a horde of National Bolivarian Guard (GNB) [soldiers] attacked the temple of Our Lady of Fátima,” Monsignor Mario Moronta wrote. Several soldiers tried to drive their motorcycles into the church, he alleged, until the rector of the church stopped them. “A general with the last name Ochoa ... began arguing with the rector in disrespectful terms. Not satisfied with the ambush, the guards threw tear gas bombs into the temple.”

Moronta wrote that he managed to evacuate the church, “where there were a good number of believers, and among them plenty of elderly people.” One woman fainted, he noted.

The bishop directly blamed the general who entered the church for the “attack against the Catholic Church” generally, not just his church, and accused the assailants of not having “even the slightest bit of human dignity or showing even fear of God.”

Venezuelan journalists shared footage of the attack on social media that showed tear gas coming out of the church and the building surrounded by soldiers on motorcycles.

Video de ataque de la #GNB en Táchira a la iglesia de Nuestra Sra de Fátima..#1May#1May <https://t.co/2YU5Fr6noF>

— Leonardo León (@leoperiodista) [May 2, 2019](#)

The Christian outlet Aleteia **notes** that Monsignor Moronta has faced repression from Maduro’s socialist regime repeatedly in the past. Maduro’s police have blocked him from two churches where he was scheduled to attend Mass and prevented him from visiting a prison during Holy Week this year and offering religious services to inmates.

Maduro has for years targeted Catholic leaders will repression, as Venezuela’s clergy have repeatedly demanded he stop using violence against peaceful protesters and step down to allow a legitimate government to take hold. In 2017, pro-Maduro gangs (*colectivos*) attacked Caracas’s San Pedro Claver Church, **interrupting** a Mass and forcing those congregated to instead listen to a socialist rant praising Maduro and late dictator Hugo Chávez.

Monsignor Diego Padrón, the head of the Venezuelan Episcopal Conference, condemned Maduro’s government for “premeditated events meant to intimidate the Catholic Church,” noting that the Caracas incident was the latest in a series of similar attacks.

That year, during Holy Week, *colectivos* **shut down** Caracas’ Carmen Church while between 200 and 400 people had gathered for Mass, taking the Archbishop of Caracas and the Christians attending hostage for hours.

Archbishop Jorge Urosa Savino, who has since stepped down from the Caracas post, urged Maduro to step aside once again this week.

“With Nicolás Maduro at the helm of the presidency, there is no solution for Venezuela,” Urosa [wrote](#). “The situation is unsustainable. This is a totally inefficient, incapable government that has sunk the nation into ruin and needs to go.”

Urosa also expressed his belief that Guaidó encouraging soldiers to listen to his command as president of Venezuela did not constitute a coup d’etat, as some on the left have [claimed](#). Instead, he wrote, Venezuelans are demanding that Maduro “step aside and let Venezuela be reborn.”

The Venezuelan Catholic clergy differs in its approach to Maduro from the Vatican, which has repeatedly [offered](#) dialogue between the repressive regime and the opposition and, this year, sent a delegation to Maduro’s inauguration despite the fraudulent nature of the election that he claimed to have won.

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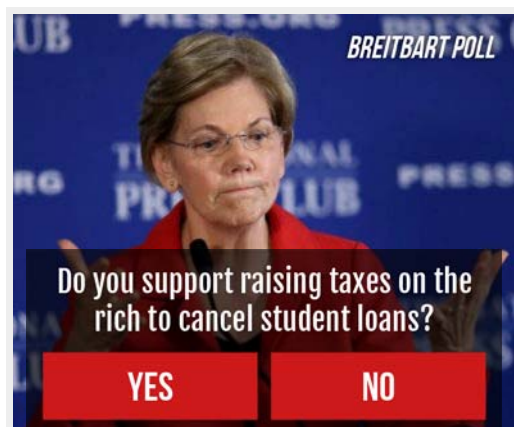
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