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Committee on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights Fifty-fifth session

Summary record of the 24th meeting

Held at the Palais Wilson, Geneva, on Tuesday, 2 June 2015, at 3 p.m.

Chairperson: Mr. Sadi

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The meeting was called to order at 3 p.m.

Consideration of reports

(a) Reports submitted by States parties in accordance with articles 16 and 17 of the Covenant

Third periodic report of the Bolivarian Republic of Venezuela (E/C.12/VEN/3; E/C.12/VEN/Q/3 and Add.1)

1. *At the invitation of the Chairperson, the delegation of the Bolivarian Republic of Venezuela took places at the Committee table.*

2. **Mr. Menéndez** (Bolivarian Republic of Venezuela) said that, when his country had last presented a report to the committee, in 1998, it had been in the grip of a profound social and political crisis. That state of affairs had been caused by adherence to a neoliberal economic model which had prevented the vast majority of Venezuelans from exercising their economic, social and cultural rights. Over 3,000 people had been killed in the brutal repression of the *Caracazo* uprising of 1989, and the Government that was then in office had frozen salaries and privatized basic services, little caring that the poverty rate had reached over 75 per cent. In 1998, the harmful consequences of those policies had led the people to choose Hugo Chavez as President. For the first time, the Government had introduced a Constitution based on democratic values and on human rights, environmental rights and the rights of indigenous peoples, women and children. The Constitution recognized economic, political and social rights, including the right to nationality and citizenship, civil rights with promoted full participation in the democratic process, family rights and the right to education.

3. The right of self-determination of the Bolivarian Republic of Venezuela encompassed its independent and sovereign use of its resources, including the Orinoco oil belt and its iron ore, gold and bauxite deposits. Social investment in the country had increased from 36 per cent of national income in 1984–1988 to 61.9 per cent in 1999–2014. The enjoyment of social rights and access to goods and services had been democratized, and household consumption levels had doubled in the space of 15 years. There had been a marked increase in fixed and mobile telephone subscriptions and in energy consumption.

4. The Government had worked to eliminate discrimination and had passed laws that upheld labour rights, provided access to land, fostered the growth of a communal economy, raised the amounts covered by pre-paid food cards, prohibited trawler fishing, and afforded social protection for older adults, women and children. The equal entitlement of men and women to the enjoyment of economic, social and cultural rights had improved the status of women. Legislation was in place to protect families and maternity and paternity rights and to promote breastfeeding; maternity leave had been extended. A law on the right of women to a life free from violence had been passed in 2007, and specialized courts had been established to hear domestic violence cases.

5. Progress made in the implementation of article 6 of the Covenant was reflected in the fact that unemployment had decreased from 15.3 per cent in 1999 to 5.5 per cent in 2014 and that some 4.6 million jobs had been created. Employment in the formal sector had risen from 45 per cent of total employment in the 1990s to 60 per cent in 2014. The number of workers with professional qualifications had risen from 1 million in 2001 to 2.8 million in 2015.

6. The State party had introduced a number of measures to uphold the right to just and favourable conditions of work: thanks to the amendment of the Social Security Act, self-employed workers were now eligible for pension benefits; despite economic difficulties, structural poverty had been reduced to a record low of 5.4 per cent; the legal minimum

wage had exceeded the cost of the basic food basket since 1999; the Gini coefficient had declined from 0.49 in 1999 to 0.38 in 2014. The primary school attendance rate for those from the poorest 10 per cent of households had risen from 38.8 per cent in 1998 to 65.6 per cent in 2014. The wealthiest 20 per cent of households' share of total national income had decreased by 9.4 percentage points between 1998 and 2014. Unemployment had fallen from 12 per cent to 5.1 per cent in the manufacturing sector and from 25 per cent to 12.4 per cent in the construction industry during that same period.

7. The Government recognized the right of everyone to social security, including social insurance. The number of pensioners in the country had climbed from 234,300 in 1990 to 2,565,725 in 2014. Women were entitled to receive a pension starting from the age of 55 and men from the age of 60; the coverage of the population entitled to pension benefits had increased from 19.6 per cent in 1998 to 72.6 per cent in 2014.

8. Protection of the family as provided for under article 10 had included the establishment of what was known as the neighbourhood mothers mission (*Misión Madres del Barrio*) to promote social inclusion and to empower women living in poverty, while another mission programme provided protection for single mothers living in extreme poverty.

9. The right to an adequate standard of living was one of the chief objectives of the revolution. Within the space of four years, a presidential housing programme had built 10 per cent of the existing housing stock in the Bolivarian Republic of Venezuela and, by 2019, 40 per cent of the population would be living in new urban housing clusters associated with the country's mission programmes. In addition, the number of persons suffering from hunger and malnutrition had fallen; energy availability had improved; food consumption had risen; and infant malnutrition had fallen from 7.66 per cent to 2.91 per cent. More than 4 million children received school meals, and the average height of children had risen by more than 3 centimetres. Some 96 per cent of Venezuelans now ate three or more meals a day.

10. Enjoyment of the right to physical and mental health was promoted by the national public health system, which had an 82 per cent coverage rate. The percentage of extremely poor households had fallen to 5.4 per cent by 2014. Life expectancy at birth had risen from 72 years in 1998 to 75 years in 2014, and infant mortality had fallen. More than 16,000 students had graduated from the community medical programme and over 20,000 additional doctors were being trained. With 6,200 students enrolled, the country had the largest postgraduate health programme in Latin America. With the assistance of Cuba, the free community health programme *Barrio Adentro* had saved 1.7 million lives, while *Misión Milagro* had restored sight to 3 million people living in extreme poverty.

11. Progress made with respect to the right to education was reflected in the fact that between 1998 and 2014, enrolment in primary education had increased from 86 per cent to 93 per cent and enrolment in secondary education from 48 per cent to 76 per cent. The number of students at university had risen from 862,862 in 2000 to 2,629,312 in 2013. School attendance for pupils aged 3 to 16 years had climbed from 84.4 per cent in 1997 to 91.3 per cent in 1998. Furthermore, 1,756,250 people had learned to read thanks to the *Misión Robinson* programme, and the literacy rate among young people was 99 per cent. New technologies were widely available, and 3.7 million students had access to a portable computer provided by the Government.

12. The people of the Bolivarian Republic of Venezuela were aware of the difficulties that lay ahead and stood ready to overcome them, never losing their firm belief in the right enshrined in the first article of the Covenant: the right of self-determination.

13. **Mr. Mancisidor** (Country Rapporteur) said the size, stature and gender balance of the delegation attested to the interest taken by the State party in the work of the Committee.

Recognition was also due to the emphasis that the Constitution of the Bolivarian Republic of Venezuela placed on economic, social and cultural rights. Although the third periodic report covered the years 2000 to 2010, the current meeting offered an opportunity for the Committee to gain an understanding of present-day realities in the country. According to the statement by the head of delegation, the State party had made significant social progress in areas directly related to Covenant rights, with one example being the right to education and health. The Committee would also, however, seek to explore areas in which progress had been less certain, such as the impact of social conflict on the enjoyment of political rights and freedoms.

14. The Committee had been concerned to learn that the State party had withdrawn from the American Convention on Human Rights in 2013 and would like to encourage the State party to ratify the Optional Protocol to the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights and thereby recognize the competence of the Committee to receive and consider communications.

15. He welcomed the fact that the delegation's opening remarks had placed so much importance on equality, non-discrimination and the role of women. However, the State party's report had not presented sufficient gender-disaggregated statistics to enable the Committee to fully evaluate the advances made in implementing economic, social and cultural rights.

16. The independence of the judiciary and of the Ombudsman were cornerstones for the protection of human rights, and he would be interested to hear the views of the State party about the fact that the International Coordinating Committee (ICC) of National Institutions for the Promotion and Protection of Human Rights was reportedly considering the possibility of downgrading the accreditation status of the Ombudsman's Office as a result of concerns with respect to its independence. He would like to know what progress had been made in tackling corruption in the State party and, in particular, how many judgements, guilty verdicts and custodial sentences had been handed down in corruption cases. In closing he would like to assure the delegation that he was confident that the State party shared the Committee's understanding of the interdependence and indivisibility of economic, social and cultural rights and freedoms.

17. **Mr. Uprimny Yepes** said that, while the Committee welcomed the examples that had been provided of cases in which international instruments had been cited by the courts, upholding those instruments also entailed taking the treaty bodies' jurisprudence into consideration and acting upon their recommendations. It was regrettable that the report did not provide examples of economic development projects in which indigenous peoples' right to prior consultation had been exercised, especially amid reports that mining operations had gone ahead without such consultations having taken place. He was concerned about the independence of the judiciary and disturbed by reports that human rights organizations were being prevented from carrying out their work. He wished to know whether social policies incorporated human rights as a cross-cutting issue and included mechanisms for ensuring transparency and accountability. He would also like to know whether there was a comprehensive non-discrimination law and whether any progress had been made towards including sexual orientation as a prohibited ground for discrimination and awarding equal rights to same-sex couples.

18. **Ms. Shin** asked to what extent women were aware of the Covenant and actively asserted their rights. She wished to know whether women could bring complaints to the Ombudsman's Office and the National Gender Justice Commission and what the relationship between the two institutions was. It was disappointing that the report did not contain any information regarding article 3 of the Covenant. She would like to know whether the gender impact of government policies was assessed, whether the Government practised gender-sensitive budgeting and how much funding was allocated to the Ministry of

People's Power for Women and Gender Equality and to women's empowerment in general. She suggested that the Government should adopt a national strategy or action plan on gender equality.

19. **Mr. Ribeiro Leão** asked whether the provisions of the Covenant could be directly invoked by the national courts. He also asked how many officially recognized refugees and asylum seekers there were and what rights they had in the State party.

20. **Mr. Kerdoun** asked how the National Commission on the Demarcation of the Habitat and Lands of Indigenous Peoples and Communities carried out its mandate, how many land titles had been awarded and when the process would be completed. He wished to know what projects had been set up since the establishment of the Ministry of People's Power for Indigenous Peoples. He would appreciate information on the extent of corruption and the impact of the Anti-Corruption Act.

21. **Ms. Bras Gomes**, referring to a 2004 Supreme Court decision whereby the right to health had been deemed of lesser importance than some other rights, asked what measures had been adopted to uphold the principle of the indivisibility of rights. She wished to know whether the Government had considered enacting a law on access to public information and how it planned to make government websites more accessible, up-to-date and user-friendly. Pointing out discrepancies between the report and the replies to the list of issues, she also asked whether the demarcation of indigenous lands would be completed in 2015 as planned and, if not, what obstacles were impeding progress in that respect.

22. **Mr. Atangana** requested additional information on the decisions of the Social Court of Cassation of the Supreme Court. He asked whether any senior officials had been prosecuted and convicted for corruption.

23. **Mr. Kedzia** said that, in the light of the decision of the Supreme Court in which it appeared to introduce a hierarchy of rights, he would be interested to learn more about the views of the Government and Venezuelan courts regarding the nature of economic, social and cultural rights. He also asked what the State party's justification was for not accepting recommendations made at the universal periodic review regarding the independence of the judiciary and the protection of human rights defenders. He wished to know whether there were plans to establish an independent anti-corruption body and what steps were being taken to protect people who reported corruption. Referring to "I paid a bribe", an innovative Indian website set up to encourage individuals to report incidents of corruption, he asked what additional initiatives the Government was considering in order to foster an anti-corruption culture.

24. **Mr. Abdel-Moneim** said that he would like to commend the State party on its detailed report. While it was true that it was more than three times the page limit, he understood that it was impossible to give a comprehensive picture of the status of economic, social and cultural rights in an abbreviated report. He would like to encourage the State party to incorporate the human rights indicators developed by the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR) into its national statistical system. In view of the fact that the State party appeared to have a well-defined conceptual approach to the implementation of human rights instruments, he would have liked to have been able to read the delegation's opening statement in English.

25. **Mr. Uprimny Yepes** asked what steps had been taken to implement the recommendation made by the Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women regarding gender equality in access to civil service positions. He also asked what the restrictions on the right to strike were, in what circumstances they were imposed and whether there was a link between them and what the State party had referred to as the "economic war" being waged by opponents of the Government.

26. **Mr. Ribeiro Leão** asked how the Government was tackling unemployment, what the inflation rate was and what measures were in place to maintain the purchasing power of wages in the face of inflation. He wished to know whether the Working Safeguards, Conditions and Environment Act had entered into force and, if so, whether there was any information on the impact it was having.

27. **Ms. Bras Gomes** said that, although the Bolivarian Republic of Venezuela had one of the lowest unemployment rates in the region, there were still more than 1 million people out of work. Job creation in the private sector had been accomplished at the expense of the public sector, where working conditions had deteriorated and workers were not covered by collective agreements. What action was the Government taking to boost the number of jobs and improve conditions in the public sector? Given that employment in the informal economy still accounted for some 40 per cent of total employment, she wished to know how the State party ensured that the protection afforded by labour laws and social benefits was enjoyed by people working in the informal sector. Information on the procedure used to set the annual increase in the minimum wage and on the extent to which it covered the basic cost of living would also be appreciated.

28. Although the State party had reported that it was one of the few remaining countries in Latin America that had not privatized its social security system, it still had an obligation to guarantee universal coverage and access to adequate social benefits. She therefore wished to know whether general comment No. 19 on the right to social security was being fully implemented. She had been apprised that the *Misiones* social programmes, which had been so effective in reducing poverty, had recently been rolled back and possibly even discontinued owing to public spending cutbacks. It was difficult to understand why such successful programmes would have been brought to an untimely end. She wondered whether the delegation could provide further information on the subject. The State party was to be commended on having brought about a ten-fold increase in the number of pensioners. She wondered whether there was a minimum basic pension as well as a non-contributions-based pension for people who had not paid into the social security system.

29. **Mr. Mancisidor** said that, according to the Inter-American Commission on Human Rights, there had been as many as 28 killings of trade unionists in the first quarter of 2014 alone. While that did not necessarily indicate that their deaths had been a direct result of their trade union ties, the State party had an obligation to protect the lives of trade union leaders and investigate any and all assaults on them. Information as to whether those cases were being investigated and on the steps being taken to protect trade union leaders would therefore be appreciated.

The meeting was suspended at 4.30 p.m. and resumed at 4.45 p.m.

30. **Mr. Menéndez** (Bolivarian Republic of Venezuela) said that the State party was making every effort to rectify the wrongs of the past in terms of the treatment of indigenous peoples, who had, to all intents and purposes, been erased from the history books. However, statistics on those sectors of the population had now been fully integrated into the country's official statistics. Indigenous people now played an active role in policymaking and were represented at the highest levels of government. The Ministry of People's Power for Indigenous Peoples championed their rights and interests, and 44 indigenous communities had taken part in electing the members of the recently established Indigenous Peoples' Presidential Council. As for the issue of gender mainstreaming, it was important to note that the promotion of women's rights, issues and equality was considered to be a cross-cutting issue. For that reason, it had been incorporated into the goals and agendas of a wide range of government agencies, ministries and policies.

31. **Mr. Devoe** (Bolivarian Republic of Venezuela) said that the right of indigenous peoples to their ancestral lands was enshrined in the Constitution and in both the

Indigenous Peoples Habitat and Lands Demarcation and Protection Act and the Indigenous Peoples and Communities Act, which also established comprehensive procedures for the identification and transferral of indigenous lands and habitats. The demarcation process itself involved various State agencies, including, in the first instance, the regional demarcation commissions, which were tasked with substantiating claims and carrying out all associated administrative procedures. Their findings were then referred to the National Commission on the Demarcation of the Habitat and Lands of Indigenous Peoples and Communities, which, in cooperation with indigenous representatives, issued a final decision as to whether a land title transfer was warranted. The Counsel-General's Office completed the process by registering the requisite title deeds. In all, some 93 collective title deeds corresponding to almost 3 million hectares of land had been transferred as of 2014 to some 545 indigenous communities. So far, all the applications submitted by the Yucpa peoples had been accepted, and the various commissions were currently assessing 43 different land claims.

32. As for the issue of the right to prior consultation, that practice was part and parcel of the duties to be discharged by all government agencies, particularly the Ministry of People's Power for Indigenous Peoples. For instance, consultations had been carried out with indigenous groups concerning the design and location of a housing project, and they had been involved in deciding which families would benefit from that initiative. To give the Committee an idea of the extent of consultation taking place in the State party, he could cite the fact that more than 1,500 separate consultations in some 2,000 communities had been carried out as part of the process involved in the establishment of the Indigenous Peoples' Presidential Council alone.

33. The Ombudsman's Office was an independent body that was not attached to the executive branch. Its autonomy was provided for in the Constitution. The Committee might therefore wish to seek further information from the Ombudsman's Office itself in order to learn more about its work.

34. **Mr. Menéndez** (Bolivarian Republic of Venezuela) added that progress in upholding the rights of indigenous peoples had by no means been restricted to territorial questions. Data collection methods had been improved to ensure that information could be disaggregated by indigenous tribe, for example, whereas before no distinction between one tribe and another had been made. There had also been sharp increase in the number of indigenous children enrolled in school. The schools provided them with a bilingual education, and the curriculum was designed in such a way as to respect their indigenous traditions and cultural history.

35. **Mr. Darío Molina** (Bolivarian Republic of Venezuela) said that all of the State party's reports to human rights organizations were posted on the Government's website. Its response to the complaint that had been filed with the Inter-American Commission on Human Rights was posted on that website as well, along with a detailed treatise on the reasons why the Bolivarian Republic of Venezuela had withdrawn from the American Convention on Human Rights. The State party would consider the Committee's recommendation that it should ratify the Optional Protocol to the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights. Work was under way on the incorporation of human rights indicators in the country's statistical systems and on the development of a comprehensive follow-up and reporting system for all the various human rights instruments that the State party had ratified. That process would also ultimately entail the provision of training to all stakeholders and activities to raise awareness of human rights among the general public.

36. Turning to the question that had been raised about refugees, he said that, since 2003, the National Refugee Commission had processed some 9,600 applications, with one sixth of those applications being accepted in the first instance. Provisional documentation was

issued so that applicants could fully exercise their rights while they were awaiting a decision on their status.

37. **Ms. del Valle Requena** (Bolivarian Republic of Venezuela) said that there were a range of State agencies and community organizations that worked to promote women's rights and gender equality. There were also 50 courts nationwide and 108 prosecutors dealing specifically with cases of violence against women. The Council of State for Gender Equality had been set up earlier in 2015 to ensure that gender issues were mainstreamed in all sectors of public policy. A national plan for gender equality had been established, and details on the plan had been widely distributed among the population in order to foster the participation of all sectors of society in its implementation. Some 11,000 gender equality committees had been established throughout the country to provide training and raise awareness of issues such as violence and discrimination against women. The National Office for the Defence of Women's Rights was responsible for organizing activities designed to empower women, raise awareness of women's issues and ensure that women were familiar with the various agencies to which they could have recourse in order to claim their rights under the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights and the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women.

38. On the issue of women's representation in politics and the legal system, she said that women made up 43.8 per cent of the judiciary and that the number of women mayors had increased by more than two thirds. The Ministry of People's Power for Women and Gender Equality was the lead agency for policies relating to women; once such policies were adopted, they were then mainstreamed into the work of other ministries. The establishment of the Subcommittee on Gender Statistics in 2006 had paved the way for the compilation of sex-disaggregated data. For example, the Subcommittee had determined that, between 2009 and 2015, unemployment among women had fallen by 6.4 per cent. The statistics processed by the Subcommittee also furnished information on school dropout rates among girls and employment rates for young women. The data were obtained from various ministries and the National Institute of Statistics.

39. Although no specific law on discrimination on the grounds of sexual orientation existed, the Constitution enshrined the principle of non-discrimination and required the State to ensure its observance. The recently formed National Union of Women, made up of various grass-roots organizations, would shortly be debating the questions of sexual orientation and abortion. A number of laws, including the Social Housing Act, the Civil Registration Act and the Act on the Promotion and Protection of the Right to Equality of Persons with HIV/AIDS and Their Families, as well the National Economic and Social Development Plan for 2013–2019, already contained anti-discrimination provisions. Clearly, challenges remained and, as in every other part of the world, gender stereotypes needed to be overcome. Her country had a tradition of self-criticism and would be grateful for any recommendations that the Committee might make about necessary structural changes.

40. **Mr. Uprimny Yepes** said that there had been a significant reduction in poverty and inequality in the State party over the past 10 years, but studies by the Economic Commission for Latin America and the Caribbean (ECLAC) showed that the pace of improvement had slowed down owing to the country's economic situation. He would like to know how the Government planned to ensure that progress did not falter. On another front, he would like to know what steps the State party was taking to deal with the high rate of teenage pregnancy. He was also concerned about the high rate of maternal mortality, which was probably linked to the criminalization of abortion. He was heartened to hear that a discussion on abortion was under way because the penalization of abortion hindered the empowerment of women. Lastly, he would like to know what specific action the

Government was taking to address the reported lack of essential medicines in the country, especially for persons with HIV/AIDS.

41. **Ms. Shin** said that the country's high maternal and child mortality rates clearly needed to be addressed, as did the inadequacy of the health-care system and, more specifically, the shortages of doctors, nurses and medical supplies. Why, exactly, was the system failing and what was the Government doing to rectify the problem? The State party was to be commended for having passed the 2007 Act on Women's Right to a Life Free from Violence, but the enforcement of that law needed to be strengthened. What systems were in place to provide targeted training on the subject to police and judges, and what kinds of protection were provided for women and child victims of violence?

42. **Ms. Ravenberg** said that she wished to invite the delegation to comment on reports that a health-care law that met the requirements set out in the Constitution had still not been enacted. She understood that the Integrated Health Network was not yet in operation, and she therefore wondered what its current status was. Had the impact of the public health programme that was in place been evaluated? She would be interested in the delegation's comments on the situation in public health-care centres, since there were reports of faulty infrastructure, shortages of water and power, flooding shortages of medical staff.

43. **Mr. Ribeiro Leão** said that the Government appeared to have had significant success in combating poverty. Could the delegation provide poverty statistics that were disaggregated by gender and by rural/urban place of residence?

44. **Mr. Pillay** said that, since poverty and extreme poverty rates had risen in 2012–2013, he would like to know what measures had been taken to reverse that rise. Were data on extreme poverty levels for 2014 available? He would be interested to learn what measures had been taken to deal with the persistent housing deficit in view of the fact that the *Gran Misión Vivienda Venezuela* housing programme had not achieved its targets. He wondered whether the State party would establish a transparent, non-discriminatory system for the distribution of social housing units that would ensure that the beneficiaries enjoyed security of tenure. The State party should increase its domestic production of construction materials in order to avoid delivery failures from undermining the effectiveness of social housing programmes. He would like to know whether the State party observed guidelines on forced evictions set out in the Committee's general comment No. 7. Did the State party ensure that persons who had been evicted were given alternative accommodation?

45. **Mr. De Schutter** said that the Government's policy of distributing low-priced foodstuffs had been effective in reducing malnutrition according to the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations (FAO). He would appreciate it if the delegation would clarify, however, whether the country's food programmes were in keeping with the objectives set out in article 305 of the Constitution, which provided for the promotion of sustainable agriculture in the interests of overall rural development. In other words, he wondered whether public programmes that ensured access to foodstuffs sourced their products from local producers. In a similar vein, in view of the fact that 70 per cent of the total supply of rice and cornflour was currently imported, he wondered whether the Government planned to invest more in local food production. He was also interested in learning more about the impact of the agrarian reform plan, under which, he understood, 3.6 million hectares of land had been expropriated. Had that land been put to productive use? He would like to know what action had been taken to implement the FAO Voluntary Guidelines on the Responsible Governance of Tenure of Land, Fisheries and Forests in the Context of National Food Security in such a way as to support small-scale farmers.

46. **Mr. Chen** said that the stature of the delegation that had come before the Committee attested to the State party's commitment to implementing the Covenant. He would like

further details, however, on what measures the Government had taken to combat poverty and extreme poverty.

47. **Mr. Atangana** said that the State party had not provided specific replies to the Committee's question on the impact of the Act on Women's Right to a Life Free from Violence. He would appreciate detailed information on the number of cases that had come before the courts and their outcomes.

48. **Mr. Mancisidor** said that it appeared that the measures that had been adopted to deal with child labour and the plight of street children had improved the lot of such children but, in view of the recent comments of the Committee on the Rights of the Child regarding the situation of street children in the country, he would appreciate further details on the subject.

49. **Mr. Uprimny Yepes** said that the State party had apparently made great strides in providing access to education, but of equal concern to the Committee was freedom in education. He wondered how the Government's stated goal of developing an education system that was geared to the socialist production model and to socialist and patriotic values was compatible with the right to freedom in education.

50. **Mr. Ribeiro Leão** asked what new universities had been established under the programme that had been launched to extend the coverage of higher education.

51. **Mr. Abishidze** asked if the delegation could clarify whether special budgetary allocations were made for the purpose of meeting the cultural needs of indigenous peoples.

52. **Mr. Kedzia** said that the effort to increase Internet access was commendable. Were there any targeted programmes for providing such access to marginalized groups, persons with disabilities, indigenous peoples and the rural population?

53. **Mr. Mancisidor** said that, as stated in article 13 of the Covenant, the purpose of education was not to attain specific goals but rather to enable people to participate effectively in a free society and to promote tolerance and friendship. He wondered whether the promotion of specific political objectives was compatible with that article and how the State party could avoid blurring the line between education and political indoctrination. Free access to the Internet was essential to the enjoyment of cultural life and the acquisition of scientific knowledge. Certain international organizations had stated, however, that freedom of the press had been curtailed and that Internet access was limited. He would like to know whether that was the case.

54. **The Chairperson**, speaking as a member of the Committee, said that sources in the State party had told him that the crime rate was high because the poverty rate was so high, and he would be interested in hearing the delegation's comments on that score. He would also like to know how the drop in oil prices was affecting the State party's efforts to implement the Covenant.

55. **Mr. Menéndez** (Bolivarian Republic of Venezuela) said that, despite the 60 per cent fall in the country's income as a result of lower oil prices, the Government had maintained its social programmes, made sure that pensions were untouched and that the requisite wage adjustments were maintained and was even continuing to distribute free laptops to university students. The social welfare of the population was the Government's highest priority. Despite the current financial situation, great strides had been made over the past 20 years. In 1995–1996, inflation had been running at 103.4 per cent and the poverty rate had been 75 per cent. Today there was a 68 per cent inflation rate and income-based poverty had fallen to 9.5 per cent.

The meeting rose at 6 p.m.