



**Convention on the
Rights of the Child**

Distr.
GENERAL

CRC/C/SR.1275
10 October 2007

Original: ENGLISH

COMMITTEE ON THE RIGHTS OF THE CHILD

Forty-sixth session

SUMMARY RECORD OF THE 1275th MEETING

Held at the Palais Wilson, Geneva,
on Friday, 28 September 2007, at 3 p.m.

Chairperson: Ms. LEE

CONTENTS

CONSIDERATION OF REPORTS OF STATES PARTIES (continued)

Second periodic report of the Bolivarian Republic of Venezuela (continued)

This record is subject to correction.

Corrections should be submitted in one of the working languages. They should be set forth in a memorandum and also incorporated in a copy of the record. They should be sent within one week of the date of this document to the Editing Unit, room E.4108, Palais des Nations, Geneva.

Any corrections to the records of the public meetings of the Committee at this session will be consolidated in a single corrigendum, to be issued shortly after the end of the session.

The meeting was called to order at 3.05 p.m.

CONSIDERATION OF REPORTS OF STATES PARTIES (agenda item 4) (continued)

Second periodic report of the Bolivarian Republic of Venezuela (continued)
(CRC/C/VEN/2; CRC/C/VEN/Q/2; CRC/C/VEN/Q/2/Add.1)

1. At the invitation of the Chairperson, the members of the delegation of the Bolivarian Republic of Venezuela resumed places at the Committee table.
2. Mr. KRAPPMANN said that, although the Venezuelan Government had made efforts to prioritize the improvement of the education system, many problems persisted. Many children dropped out of primary school after the seventh grade, and only 30 per cent of children of secondary school age were in full-time education. He asked how children who did not attend school occupied their time, and whether dropouts were given the opportunity to return to school if they so wished. He wondered whether any alternative education options were provided for children who did not attend school, such as vocational training, and what further plans the Government had made to address all those issues. Although the delegation had not provided any statistics on the educational participation of indigenous children and children from rural areas, he had been informed that the school enrolment rate for those children was 20 per cent lower than that for children from urban areas. He wished to know why there was such a remarkable disparity, and what efforts were being made to redress the balance.
3. Overcrowding of classrooms, inadequate teacher training, mixed level of capacity in the classroom, social inequality and gender stereotyping all led to poor quality of education. Teaching and learning methods did not stimulate enthusiasm and self-efficacy among pupils. He requested further information on revised structures of learning methods. He also requested further information on the reformed school curriculum that was currently under discussion in Venezuela. He wondered whether human rights education was included as a mandatory element of the school curriculum, and whether children learned about their rights at all education levels. He asked whether vocational training was provided in school, whether there were any separate vocational training institutions and whether children who had dropped out of school could embark on vocational education. He asked how the progress made by the “missions” mentioned in paragraph 94 of the State party report (CRC/C/VEN/2) could be institutionalized. He had been informed that many teachers were concerned that they would lose their authority in the classroom by inviting children to participate actively in learning. He wished to know what was being done to dispel the myth that children’s rights undermined discipline, and to encourage active learning methods.
4. Ms. SMITH, noting that the child’s right to rest and leisure, as enshrined in article 31 of the Convention, was often overlooked, asked whether the Venezuelan Government had a policy on extra-curricular recreation for children, and what facilities were provided.
5. Mr. SIDDIQUI said that although there had been an overall decrease in poverty, that trend had not been sustained, and poverty rates had increased in 2003. He asked how the Government proposed to handle such fluctuations in the reduction of poverty. He wished to know what trends had been observed in respect of relative poverty, and whether the extent of child poverty was measured, and if so, what patterns had been recorded.

6. Ms. HERCZOG said that the rates of suicide, violence and early pregnancy were high among adolescents in Venezuela, and she wished to know whether there were any comprehensive programmes for adolescents that included health issues. She asked whether there were any parenting programmes to provide support for families with regard to child-rearing, particularly for young single mothers. She requested further information on programmes for the prevention of domestic violence and child abuse. She wondered what measures were being taken to raise public awareness of the ban on corporal punishment, and in particular how children were made aware of the ban. Consideration should be given to establishing a free telephone hotline for children and for parents.

7. Turning to health issues, she noted a high rate of neonatal mortality owing to the low standard of perinatal care, and asked how the Government planned to rectify that situation. The maternal mortality rate was also relatively high, and there was a considerable disparity between urban and rural areas. She welcomed the increase in immunization, and asked whether any measures were being taken to overcome inequalities in immunization coverage between different regions. She wondered what was being done to overcome the problems of water contamination and air pollution from chemicals used in agriculture, which were causing illness and respiratory disorders. She wished to know what HIV/AIDS prevention information was given to groups at risk of contracting the infection and to the general public, and why government statistics on HIV were incomplete.

8. Mr. POLLAR asked what the minimum age was for military service, and for recruitment into the armed forces. Given the conflict situation in neighbouring Colombia, he asked whether any measures were in place to ensure that small arms and light weapons were not smuggled across the border into Venezuela, and did not end up in the hands of children. Under a bilateral agreement, Venezuela supplied helicopters and military equipment, including small arms and light weapons, to Bolivia. He wished to know what safeguards were in place to ensure that children did not come into possession of any of those weapons. He also wished to know what measures had been taken to prevent refugee children from being smuggled out of Venezuela and recruited into foreign armed forces.

9. Mr. FILALI asked whether, under the flagrante delicto procedure, minors could be brought before the court without an investigation, and if so whether the minor had the right to legal counsel from the moment he or she was brought before a prosecutor. He wished to know where children were detained, and under what conditions. He wondered how juvenile detention conditions were monitored, and how long a minor could be held in remand before being brought before a judge. He asked what protection measures were in place for juvenile offenders before they were tried, and after they had been sentenced, and what rehabilitation measures were taken to ensure that they were reintegrated appropriately back into society. He asked how police, judges and prison staff were trained to deal with minors.

10. The CHAIRPERSON expressed concern that immunization coverage had declined between 2004 and 2006, and that there had been a measles outbreak in 2006. She asked why malnutrition and infant mortality rates were so high in the region of Bolivar. She wished to know how legislation on the provisions on the International Code of Marketing of Breast-milk Substitutes had evolved, and why only nine hospitals in the State party had been classified "baby-friendly". According to information provided in the State party report and written replies to the Committee's list of issues (CRC/C/VEN/Q/2; CRC/C/VEN/Q/2/Add.1) there were four

categories of disability in Venezuela: visual and hearing impairments, mental disability, upper limb paralysis and lower limb paralysis. She asked how learning and behaviour disorders and other physical impairments were dealt with. She asked for information on inclusive education and access to schools and public buildings for children with disabilities. She wished to know what measures were being taken to prevent discrimination against children living with HIV/AIDS in respect of access to education.

11. Ms. AIDOO, raising the issue of child labour and economic exploitation of children, said that although the State party report contained information on legislation in force, no practical information had been included on the number of children who were working, where they came from, what programmes were in place to assist them, and what measures were taken to protect them. Noting that the minimum age of employment, according to the relevant legislation, was 14 years, she asked what kinds of work could be undertaken by children of that age. Further information should be provided on the situation of working children.

12. The CHAIRPERSON said that, according to the State party report, 80 per cent of children deprived of their liberty were detained legally. She wished to know why the remaining 20 per cent were being held illegally.

13. Ms. HIDALGO (Bolivarian Republic of Venezuela) said that missions were part of the State policy to respond to marginalization, which targeted several areas, including reducing illiteracy through primary level education and offering high school diplomas. A similar system was in place for health care, in order to ensure coverage of more remote areas. The Barrio Adentro mission, which was a shanty towns project, had been established in cooperation with Cuba to provide health care in very remote areas, with assistance from Cuban doctors. The missions were funded by oil company royalties which, under the Government's new hydrocarbons policy, had risen from 1 per cent to 30 per cent. Venezuela was a peaceful country, which was affected by the armed conflict in neighbouring Colombia. Venezuela assisted the victims of that conflict. A national council had been established to protect the rights of persons with disabilities.

14. Ms. LORA (Bolivarian Republic of Venezuela) said that, under the Protection of Children and Adolescents (Organization) Act, adolescents could be deprived of their liberty only if they perpetrated serious offences such as murder, aggravated theft and drug trafficking. An adolescent arrested in flagrante delicto was required to appear immediately before the public prosecutor who had 24 hours to present him to the judge. The juvenile justice system made effective use of the adolescent criminal liability system whereby the adolescent in question had to answer for any offences committed against an individual, regardless of his/her age group. When accused, the adolescent would be heard by a judge appointed by law and advised throughout the trial by a defence attorney. In Venezuela, adolescents could not be limited in the exercise of their constitutional rights and guarantees. Punitive measures were mainly of an educational nature, and adolescents could rely on the support of family and experts, such as social workers and psychologists, to help them reintegrate into society. Where deprivation of liberty occurred, children were not detained in the same facilities as adolescents and were subject to protective, rather than punitive, measures.

15. Upon reaching the age of majority at 18, adolescent detainees were transferred to penitentiaries where they were held in separate facilities from adults. There were perhaps

isolated cases of acts of police brutality against children in Venezuela, but it was not a common practice. Between 2004 and 2006, 130 cases of punishable acts committed by police against children, adolescents and adults had been reported.

16. Mr. ZERMATTEN said that it was his understanding that, in Venezuela, children were defined as persons between 12 and 14 years of age, and could not be deprived of their liberty. He wished to know whether specialized judges handled cases involving acts of delinquency or whether those cases were handled by the ordinary courts.

17. Ms. LORA (Bolivarian Republic of Venezuela) said that adolescents were heard by specialized examining judges, trial judges and enforcement judges.

18. Mr. ZERMATTEN, reiterating his previous question, asked whether 12 to 14-year-olds could be deprived of their liberty.

19. Ms. LORA (Bolivarian Republic of Venezuela) explained that that was possible only under certain circumstances, as previously mentioned.

20. Ms. SMITH asked whether legal aid for children was free. She pointed out that under the Convention on the Rights of the Child, children were persons under the age of 18.

21. The CHAIRPERSON requested clarification of figure 4 in Venezuela's second periodic report, which indicated that 20 per cent of adolescents had been deprived of their liberty illegally.

22. Ms. LORA (Bolivarian Republic of Venezuela) said that she was not aware of the statistics referred to in the figure; no more than 500 adolescents deprived of their liberty legally - not illegally - had been placed in Venezuelan institutions.

23. Mr. FILALI enquired about the maximum sentence for adolescents aged 12 to 18 who had committed serious offences. Were they treated as adults or were they subject to special treatment?

24. Ms. LORA (Bolivarian Republic of Venezuela) said that the maximum sentence was five years. Adolescents did not receive the same treatment as adults who had committed the same offence. The sentence could be re-examined at the request of the adolescent or his/her defence counsel every six months. Adolescents benefited from the services of expert legal counsel free of charge.

25. Ms. Luisa RODRÍGUEZ (Bolivarian Republic of Venezuela) said that civil society and the executive branch took part in setting children's rights policy in Venezuela. More than 664 community organizations throughout the country had been financed by the National Child and Adolescent Protection Fund between 2002 and 2006 to carry out projects aimed at restoring and protecting children's and adolescents' rights. Between 2001 and 2006, the National Autonomous Service for the Comprehensive Care of Children and the Family had transferred funds to 918 social organizations to finance early childhood projects under the Comprehensive Care Centre Programme. Those organizations had acquired experience and knowledge in providing support to children and adolescents in line with the practices outlined in the Convention on the Rights of the Child. The National Council for Children's and Adolescents'

Rights had established a policy aimed at encouraging children to participate in civil society, and a national commission had been set up to that effect. The Government's children's programme included many innovative experiments conducted by children, such as efforts to set up a constituent assembly aimed at re-examining the Venezuelan Constitution and the Protection of Children and Adolescents (Organization) Act, and to redraft legal instruments in a language that children could understand. Child councils were being promoted as a national policy through a child protection network in all Venezuelan states. The authorities were working with the educational system to promote student organizations in educational centres as of the seventh grade, and a children's and adolescents' assembly had been established in the school districts of the Caracas metropolitan area. Action was being taken to increase the visibility of children and adolescents within community councils, and a national child protection day had been observed. Children from all parts of the country, including indigenous areas, could obtain from the Children's Ombudsman Offices information relating to any accusation brought against them and they had access to community facilities aimed at promoting, disseminating and protecting their rights when so accused. Six ombudsman offices for indigenous children had been set up, as well, which would help reduce violence in indigenous areas.

26. Intercountry adoptions were governed by articles 443 and 449 of the Protection of Children and Adolescents (Organization) Act and were handled by the International Adoption Agency of the National Council for Children's and Adolescents' Rights. Each State Council for Children's and Adolescents' Rights had a national adoption unit. Venezuela was a party to the Convention on Protection of Children and Cooperation in Respect of Intercountry Adoption. Programmes for children and adolescents deprived of their family environment - including measures whereby children were placed in foster families or care institutions - and awareness programmes, had also been launched, with over 500 people taking part.

27. Ms. ORTIZ wished to know what would become of the State adoption units when the State Councils for Children's and Adolescents' Rights disappeared under the reform of the Protection of Children and Adolescents (Organization) Act. She requested statistics relating to the number of adoptions carried out and the number of children who would need to be adopted in Venezuela. She also wished to know who was in charge of the adoption process and who monitored decisions left pending by judges in adoption cases.

28. Ms. Luisa RODRÍGUEZ (Bolivarian Republic of Venezuela) said that, under the reform of the above-mentioned Act, the National Council for Children's and Adolescents' Rights would be transformed into regional management centres, but that a regional adoption office would be maintained in each state. Training for future adoptive parents and staff working in children's centres was provided by that Council. The courts, via decisions handed down by the judges, were responsible for issuing adoption decrees. Recent national adoption statistics showed that 101 boys and 118 girls had been adopted in 2004, 92 boys and 128 girls in 2005, and 61 boys and 70 girls in 2006. Between 2004 and 2006, 2,093 adoption cases had been pending, 1,852 of which had resulted in adoption decrees. In 2005, out of 907 pending adoption cases, 697 cases had resulted in adoption decrees. In 2006, 249 out of 983 pending adoption cases had resulted in adoption decrees. In the area of intercountry adoption, the figures were: 1 boy and 1 girl in 2004; 1 boy and 3 girls in 2005.

29. Ms. ORTIZ asked how it was possible that 1,852 children had been adopted in 2004, whereas only 249 children had been adopted in 2006.

30. Ms. Luisa RODRÍGUEZ (Bolivarian Republic of Venezuela) said that the National Council for Children's and Adolescents' Rights had inherited a series of cases from the National Children's Institute under the previous Government, regarding children who had been institutionalized for many years, and emergency measures had been required to resolve the problem.
31. School curricula provided instruction for children on the principles enshrined in the Convention on the Rights of the Child and human rights.
32. Mr. PERDOMO (Bolivarian Republic of Venezuela) said that military service in Venezuela was voluntary and that a person had to be 18 years of age to join the armed forces. He explained that the 20 per cent of cases in which children had been detained illegally were cases that had been overturned by a court of second instance owing to some irregularity. Judges were monitored by the community and by competent judicial bodies, and they received special training courses. New legislation to be introduced would deal with delays in the administration of justice by instituting a preliminary hearing procedure, comprising stages of conciliation, mediation and substantiation of the facts in a child-friendly, respectful environment, where a single judge could generally reach a decision in a very short time. The philosophy underlying the new legislation in relation to adoption cases was that, if children could not be returned to their family of origin, the adoption process should be made as simple and expeditious as possible.
33. Ms. Lia RODRÍGUEZ (Bolivarian Republic of Venezuela) said that Misión Barrio Adentro provided rehabilitation facilities for children with disabilities. Children suffering from attention deficit disorder and mental disabilities were treated under programmes run by the Ministry of Health and the Special Education Office of the Ministry of Education.
34. Mr. ZERMATTEN said that, according to the State party's written replies to the list of issues, only 51 of the 145,000 children with disabilities in Venezuela had been institutionalized. Those figures were highly disproportionate and he wished to know what was done with children suffering from serious mental disabilities for whom home care was not an option.
35. The CHAIRPERSON added that Venezuela did not appear to have any inclusive education programmes for vulnerable children with special needs. Did they attend specialized schools?
36. Ms. Luisa RODRÍGUEZ (Bolivarian Republic of Venezuela) said that one of the chief aims of the Government's policy for children was to strengthen, follow up and support the family in order to address the problems faced by children deprived of a family environment. Current efforts focused on locating the families of the approximately 30,000 children who had been subjected to inhumane conditions in institutions managed by the National Children's Institute, which the Government was in the process of closing down in keeping with the recommendations of the Committee. The families of the de-institutionalized children were able to benefit from integrated social programmes, or "missions", that provided financial assistance for children to attend school, as well as for parents to attend literacy courses, basic education or higher education, thereby linking the Government's policy for children with its structural policies.
37. Government policies aimed at strengthening the family and including all children in the national education system also applied to children and adolescents with disabilities,

some 182,000 of whom were enrolled in special education programmes taught by teachers who had received specialized university training. Ongoing efforts to train more special education teachers illustrated the Government's commitment to ensuring an inclusive education system for all children and adolescents in Venezuela.

38. Mr. PERDOMO (Bolivarian Republic of Venezuela) said that Venezuela had developed and implemented an extraordinary music education programme that extended to every municipality in the country, each of which had its own children's orchestra. Innovative ways were found to include children with disabilities in such orchestras, which had been so successful that Venezuelan children's orchestras had played in a number of major cities throughout Europe.

39. Mr. PARFITT asked what type of care was provided to the 2,000 children still remaining in the care of the National Children's Institute who had not been reunited with their families. He wished to know what kind of training had been given to the persons who looked after those children.

40. Ms. Luisa RODRÍGUEZ (Bolivarian Republic of Venezuela) said that children who had not yet been reunited with their families were placed in government and civil society institutions, which continued trying to locate their families. Various types of care were provided based on the child's age: children under 6 years old were given comprehensive care; children 7 years and older could be placed in foster homes and attend local schools, while children over 12 could attend local schools and/or vocational training programmes. Even children and adolescents who were required to remain in institutions could benefit from the full range of educational and job training opportunities available in Venezuela.

The meeting was suspended at 4.40 p.m. and resumed at 4.50 p.m.

41. Mr. SALTRÓN (Bolivarian Republic of Venezuela) said that Venezuela had been subjected to an international campaign of media manipulation, misinformation and false accusations of human rights violations, all of which were aimed at undermining the Chavez Administration. One newspaper article had been critical of the Government's efforts to reintegrate into their families children who had been placed in institutions of the National Children's Institute, when such efforts were clearly in the best interests of the children involved, as had been mentioned previously. Another had accused the Government of violating freedom of expression by failing to renew the broadcast licence of the RCTV television station, when that station's concession had merely expired in keeping with normal business practices. Media attempts to portray the Venezuelan Government as an enemy of NGOs had no basis in fact; on the contrary, the Government funded a number of NGOs that were involved in providing protection for children and welcomed the efforts of many others. What it objected to was the use of NGOs to manipulate information for political purposes. Certain media, in fact, bore some responsibility for the temporary increase in poverty registered between 2002 and 2003, owing to their involvement in an attempted coup d'état and the devastating effects that had had on the Venezuelan economy. Those had included a 63-day lock-out in the petroleum industry, which had led to the loss of more than 600,000 jobs, and an enormous flight of capital resulting in losses to the State of more than US\$ 10 billion.

42. The Government's denouncement of that situation did not mean that it was not cognizant of its own weaknesses. On the contrary, it recognized the need for improvement, inter alia, in the

areas of public administration, the coordination of public programmes and the provision of reliable statistics on the situation of children's rights in Venezuela. The Government's general philosophy was that more resources should be used to combat poverty and fewer to fund defence programmes. All countries should join together in meeting the United Nations Millennium Development Goals and in eliminating poverty. To do otherwise was to court disaster on a global scale.

43. Mr. MONTIEL (Bolivarian Republic of Venezuela) said that statistics in Venezuela were compiled on the basis of administrative records that were contained in databases or were estimates based on surveys. Statistics on the number of persons vaccinated against a particular disease, for example, were measured from information contained in databases, whereas the size of the population living in poverty was measured in terms of estimates of unmet needs based on household surveys.

44. The shortcomings in the gathering and compilation of statistics on health and education in Venezuela could be explained by the fact that the systems used to measure those variables were not adapted to the rights-based approach prescribed by the Constitution. For example, as a social right, health should be measured on the basis of the principles of equity, universality and freedom of choice. Those principles, in turn, were related to such criteria as quality of life and standard of living, themselves dependent on cultural, ethnic and linguistic variables. Hence, when evaluating statistics, it was important to consider them in relation to other pertinent factors, and not as isolated figures.

45. Mr. ZERMATTEN asked whether, due to time constraints, Venezuela could answer the specific questions raised on education.

46. Mr. MONTIEL (Bolivarian Republic of Venezuela) said that Venezuela had undertaken to rectify any deficiencies in its report and, more importantly, had risen to the challenge of looking at the issue of social inclusion from a human rights point of view.

47. Ms. RAMIREZ (Bolivarian Republic of Venezuela) said that progress had been made with regard to drug-dependent adolescents, who in the past had been placed in costly private, closed institutions. As drug-dependent children were intrinsically linked to street children, the Government had established the "Negra Hipólita" mission to subsidize the provision of flexible drop-in centres for both drug-dependent and street children throughout Venezuela. The centres, which had proved very successful, offered food, bathing facilities, shelter, and drug rehabilitation treatment, and children were free to come and go at will.

48. Turning to the question of reform and how local councils were linked to the Rights Council, she said that the adoption of the Protection of Children and Adolescents (Organization) Act (LOPNA) had paved the way for the creation of a forum for specialists on children's rights. All local councils were given the opportunity to nominate candidates to become children's rights councillors, thus establishing a more extensive network of local participation in national policies. Certain aspects of children's rights could not be delegated and had to be centralized for the sake of coherence but the State continued to encourage the highest possible participation at all levels of civil society.

49. Ms. AIDOO asked whether additional data were available on action being taken by Venezuela in the areas of adolescent health care, preventive measures and counselling, given the many problems faced by adolescents, such as the high number of teenage pregnancies.

50. Ms. RAMIREZ (Bolivarian Republic of Venezuela) said that there were a number of programmes to reduce infant mortality, including the work of missions on social inclusion, the adoption of a recent law and campaign to promote breastfeeding and the “Simoncito” project under the Ministry of Education, which provided funds for a neighbour child-minding scheme for women in poor areas who needed to work. However, the scheme was gradually being phased out in favour of a project to develop a national educational infrastructure for young children. With regard to improving school enrolment rates, she said that the Government had invested heavily in a programme of building and equipping new schools in isolated areas to cater for the rural indigenous population and further investment was planned to extend the programme to the remotest areas. Turning to the minimum age for marriage, she said that draft legislation to be submitted to the National Assembly would deal with the existing discrimination under the Civil Code. With regard to the institutionalization of the missions, they would have constitutional status under the new reforms. The missions had removed a layer of bureaucracy and offered the opportunity to deal more directly with social inclusion. The Convention and other treaties and instruments to which Venezuela was party were being incorporated into the new reforms, which would strengthen social rights; for example, the working day was being reduced and provision was being made for pensions for self-employed workers.

51. Mr. ZERMATTEN asked why the missions had not been included in the LOPNA, which would be a logical step since they were also currently under reform and shared the same goal.

52. Ms. RAMIREZ (Bolivarian Republic of Venezuela) said that the missions had always been State bodies but under the new reforms they would have constitutional status. They had been established originally as a more flexible, autonomous mechanism to resolve the issues of social inclusion and poverty, which was preferable to rigid ministerial policy. The missions had been very successful in helping to achieve the Government’s aims, for example the strengthening of the family, one aspect of which was the commitment that no child would be separated from their family because of poverty. Another priority for the Venezuelan Government was investment in new school infrastructure and equipment. In addition, the Government was seeking to eliminate discrimination against HIV-infected children and had provided free antiretroviral drugs to 30,000 HIV sufferers. The children who had come to Venezuela as a result of conflict in their country of origin had been repatriated in accordance with the provisions of the Convention on the Rights of the Child and the Optional Protocol on the involvement of children in armed conflict. There remained many challenges for the Government, for example the high number of teenage pregnancies. Several sex education programmes had been developed but the problem was to extend the programmes to as many areas as possible and to overcome cultural resistance, especially in the most socially-excluded sectors of the population. The best way forward was to reform the Civil Code and introduce a national sex education programme that involved parents as well as children. There had been positive developments in promoting education on the rights of the child, with evidence that Venezuelan children were aware of their rights under the LOPNA.

53. Ms. HIDALGO (Bolivarian Republic of Venezuela) said that the Bolivarian educational system took care of the child from birth to 18 years of age. Apart from delivering the curriculum,

it provided lunch and afternoon tea, offered after-school extra-curricular recreational activities and access to well-stocked, free libraries, and millions of children received free uniforms. With regard to religious education, she said that all State schools were secular and full religious freedoms were guaranteed. Parents were free to send their children to the many faith schools in Venezuela, such as Catholic, Jewish and Muslim.

54. Ms. ORTIZ, Alternate Country Rapporteur, thanked Venezuela for its replies to the Committee's innumerable questions. She regretted that it had again submitted its report extremely late and had failed to follow the reporting guidelines, which had left little time for the Committee to interpret the information and formulate questions in order to have a fruitful discussion. She invited Venezuela to submit its two pending reports with respect to the Optional Protocols as soon as possible.

55. She commended Venezuela's strong commitment to protecting children's rights, including its intention to widen civil society participation and to establish national protection agencies. The reform of the LOPNA had brought significant progress, such as criminalizing corporal punishment and improving criminal procedures. However, she regretted that specialized NGOs might lose their role in developing policies related to children's rights. It was important to continue to work together in the best interests of Venezuelan children, beginning with the very youngest.

56. Unlike in the past, working with and for children was now an obligation of the State and the whole population and required a systematic approach. Although Venezuela had adopted an advanced system of protection, it lacked coordination mechanisms at all levels. There was also a need for monitoring mechanisms for national policies affecting children and for improved systematic data collection methods focusing on the rights of children. In particular, information was required on how many children had benefited from social policies, disaggregated by age, region, ethnic background and gender, and on the specific situation of children subject to various types of social exclusion.

57. She commended Venezuela on its national strategy to implement children's rights, including measures against violence, sexual exploitation and trafficking and the development of local government and regional plans. However, she asked whether in future reports Venezuela could focus on explaining the implementation of its overall national plan, including information on how children had benefited, the cost of programmes and whether they were institutional or missions, rather than list actions taken in isolation. The implementation of the Convention would undoubtedly assist Venezuela in building a country based on human rights and on the proactive participation of the whole population, including those sectors that had always been excluded. The creation of a children's ombudsman under the auspices of the parliamentary ombudsman was a significant achievement but must be established nationally and be accessible to all children. The Committee would recommend that all information on local, regional and national State funds should be transparent. Finally, she regretted that time had not allowed a complete discussion of health and education but looked forward to the opportunity to review those areas in the future.

58. Ms. HIDALGO (Bolivarian Republic of Venezuela) thanked the Committee for giving Venezuela the opportunity to explain its national policies on combating poverty and

guaranteeing the rights of children. It would accept the Committee's recommendations and its constructive cooperation, which would help Venezuela to fulfil the fundamental principles of the Convention. Venezuela would rise to the challenge of submitting its reports on time and asked for the Committee's help in achieving that goal.

59. The CHAIRPERSON said that the long but very informative meeting would help guide the Committee when formulating its recommendations and it would assist and cooperate with Venezuela in order to uphold, promote and protect the rights of all of its children.

The meeting rose at 6.05 p.m.