

The Power of Illicit Wealth: How Billions Shape Advocacy
www.360geopolitica.org

International human-rights advocacy faces a fundamental test: can it protect victims without allowing political narratives to obscure other victims?

In Nicolás Maduro's Venezuela and Gustavo Petro's Colombia, authorities have pursued negotiations, political arrangements, or forms of engagement involving armed groups and organized crime. Such engagement may serve legitimate purposes—peace negotiations, demobilization, humanitarian access, or conflict reduction. But engagement cannot become a substitute for accountability.

The central question is whether international institutions apply consistent standards to states, armed groups, criminal organizations, political actors, and their victims.

When civilians are displaced, extorted, threatened, recruited, sexually abused, or killed by illegal armed groups and organized crime, their victimhood cannot disappear because perpetrators are described through humanitarian or political narratives. Individuals associated with armed organizations may themselves be victims of unlawful abuse. Both realities can—and must—be recognized simultaneously.

This matters because international recognition has consequences. It shapes political pressure, diplomatic legitimacy, institutional priorities, resources, and public understanding.

In Venezuela, UN Human Rights Rapporteur engagement with a government whose political legitimacy remains contested requires particular precision. Engagement is necessary; political legitimization is a separate matter. Institutional language should clearly distinguish established facts, allegations, evidence, and political judgments. The greater an institution's authority, the greater its responsibility for methodological clarity.

When a human-rights rapporteur uses a mandate to legitimize Maduro, this raises serious questions about the proper use of that mandate. Likewise, presenting narcotraffickers as victims without adequately addressing the harm they have inflicted on civilians and other victims' raises serious questions of responsibility and methodology.

Colombia under Gustavo Petro (2022-2026) presents the same challenge. Armed organizations and criminal networks combine territorial control, illegal economies, recruitment, extortion, political influence, and violence. Governments may legitimately negotiate with such actors, and international institutions may legitimately support peace processes. But negotiation does not erase individual responsibility, as the Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights has itself emphasized.

The assassination of Senator and presidential candidate Miguel Uribe Turbay illustrates the principle. Whatever broader political context surrounds an attack, accountability requires concrete questions: Who ordered it? Who financed it? Who facilitated it? Who carried it out? What networks were involved? Political context matters. It cannot replace criminal accountability or the rights of victims and their families to truth, justice, and reparation.

However, Colombian Senator Iván Cepeda, along with segments of the international community, has framed the assassination primarily within the broader context of Colombia's armed conflict. In media statements, Cepeda has emphasized this interpretation in unequivocal terms: "Simply put, he was a victim of the conflict."

Cepeda, who has received international recognition for his work related to international humanitarian law, has nonetheless faced criticism from opponents who argue that his prominence and international recognition are disproportionate and influenced by his political alignment with Colombia's radical left. These claims remain part of a broader political dispute over how his advocacy and public role should be understood.

Whatever one's political position, such distinctions should not substitute for an objective examination of the facts, the victims, the perpetrators, and the applicable legal standards.

The same principle applies beyond Venezuela and Colombia. Poverty, marginalization, coercion, or recruitment may explain why individuals enter criminal organizations. They do not erase the rights of those harmed by those organizations. Recognizing the vulnerability of individuals associated

with criminal groups does not require minimizing the suffering of civilians and human-rights defenders.

Nor should this principle depend on political affiliation. Hamas, Hezbollah, insurgent organizations, criminal networks, governments, and security forces must all be assessed against the applicable evidence and legal standards. Human-rights advocacy loses credibility when victimhood becomes selective, particularly when international human-rights officials appear to apply different standards depending on the political identity of the actors involved.

UN experts, special rapporteurs, treaty bodies, and other international mechanisms possess substantial authority. Their findings can influence governments, courts, donors, journalists, and public opinion. That authority creates a corresponding obligation to disclose evidence, methodology, limitations, relevant counterevidence, and the standards used to distinguish victims from alleged perpetrators.

The answer is not to weaken international human-rights institutions. It is to make their authority more transparent, evidence-based, and accountable. States must be accountable for abuses. Armed groups must be accountable for abuses. Criminal organizations must be accountable for abuses. International institutions must be accountable for the standards they apply.

The principle is simple: a person does not cease to be a victim because of who harmed them, and a perpetrator does not cease to be accountable because of the political narrative surrounding them. International human-rights advocacy is strongest when recognition is not selective, standards are not political, and every victim is visible.

Illegal armed groups and organized crime have spent billions of American dollars portraying human-rights values in ways that serve their interests. The Gulf Clan, one of the most powerful criminal organizations in the Americas, has succeeded in being portrayed in some narratives as "poor fishing people" in the Caribbean.

Hamas, one of the organizations responsible for some of the most serious attacks and abuses affecting Palestinians, has at times been presented as a Palestinian defender. Similarly, Maduro was previously presented by a human-rights rapporteur as the legitimate president of Venezuela despite the continuing international dispute over the legitimacy of his government.

Much of this advocacy has been associated with the same human-rights rapporteur, under the protection or institutional authority of the High Commissioner for Human Rights. It is defended as freedom of expression. But freedom of expression does not eliminate the responsibility that comes with exercising an international mandate.

A human-rights rapporteur is entitled to express political and legal views. But when those views appear to favor or legitimize actors such as Nicolás Maduro, Hamas, Hezbollah, narcotrafficking organizations, or individuals accused of grave crimes—including sexual violence and kidnapping—the analysis must also account for those harmed by their actions.

Their experiences cannot be treated as incidental. People have been killed, abducted, sexually exploited, displaced, threatened, and otherwise subjected to serious abuse. A credible assessment must therefore consider both the claims advanced in defense of these actors and the rights and experiences of those affected by their conduct.

This is not merely a matter of rhetoric. It goes to a fundamental question of whether the international human-rights system recognizes victims consistently and applies the same standards regardless of who the alleged perpetrator is. The credibility of human-rights advocacy ultimately depends on that consistency.

Yet today, those with the greatest financial and coercive power—including illegal armed groups and organized criminal networks—can exert disproportionate influence over the very environments in which these issues are addressed.

This concern was echoed by numerous UN member states during the UN General Assembly in New York only weeks ago, underscoring a broader challenge: ensuring that international human-rights mechanisms remain grounded in universal standards rather than shaped by power, resources, or political influence.