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**National Lawyers Guild Finds Venezuelan Referendum
Conducted Fairly by the Venezuelan Government**

Boston, December 12, 2007. Three members of the Massachusetts Chapter of the National Lawyers Guild (NLG) served as official international observers of the December 2, 2007 referendum on constitutional reforms in Venezuela. Over 100 observers from 39 countries participated in a four-day intensive program of training, observing, and reporting back of findings to the Venezuelan National Electoral Council.

The observers spent over 15 hours on the day of the referendum watching the opening of the polls, traveling throughout the region in which Caracas is located to visit hundreds of polling stations, and observing the closing of the polling stations, including the electronic transmission of the vote count and the paper audits in the polling centers.

The NLG members found that the Chávez government, which has faced the scrutiny of a well-funded opposition and the hostile US press and government, has developed one of the most advanced electoral system in the region, if not the world.

The voting process seemed simple to administer, yet thorough. After verification of voter identity, voting takes place on electronic machines. The voting machines emit a paper receipt which the voter verifies as accurate before depositing in a sealed box. At the end of the day, the number of voters signed in is compared to the count on the voting machine. Then the actual vote is transmitted electronically, directly to the national telecommunications center. Finally, for roughly half of the voting machines nationwide, an on-the-spot audit is done by tallying the paper ballot receipts and comparing this number to the electronic count.

The electoral observers, many of whom were elected representatives in their countries or directors of electoral commissions uniformly praised the process. Overall, observers thought that the voting process was fair and transparent and suggested minor ways in which it could be improved.

The referendum lost by a slim margin: 51% opposed to 49% in favor. President Chávez spoke immediately after the announcement of the results, stating that the government would respect the vote of the people.

The NLG members were concerned about the role the considerable opposition and its press might have played in the outcome of the vote. Massachusetts Chapter Director Urszula Masny-Latos stated, "We saw copies of opposition newspaper ads that said that if the referendum passed, the government would be able to take away people's children or their property. The government played fair, but did the opposition?"

In addition to the formal observing program, the Guild observers also had seven meetings with people who had a variety of political perspectives to help them understand the political setting in which the referendum was taking place.

Founded in 1937 as an alternative to the American Bar Association, which did not admit people of color, the National Lawyers Guild is the oldest and largest public interest/human rights bar organization in the United States. Its headquarters are in New York and it has chapters in every state.