

# President of Venezuela Fires Deputy and Interior Minister

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CARACAS, [Venezuela](#), Jan. 4 — President [Hugo Chávez](#) abruptly fired his vice president and his interior minister on Wednesday night, issuing a rare public acknowledgment that violent crime and prison killings were severe problems.

Mr. Chávez, who announced the dismissals in a telephone call to a talk show on state television, cited grisly prison melees and an inability to prevent a rapid increase in killings as reasons for the removal of Jesse Chacón as the minister of the interior and justice. Mr. Chávez did not give a reason for firing José Vicente Rangel, long one of his closest confidants, as vice president.

“There are failings in internal security and infrastructure,” Mr. Chávez said, referring in particular to the clashes this week between rival gangs at Uribana Prison in western Lara State that left 16 inmates dead. An additional six inmates from Uribana were killed after being transferred to another prison in Portuguesa State. Twenty-five inmates have been killed this week in prisons across Venezuela.

Mr. Chávez also cited “violence in the streets” in dismissing Mr. Chacón, who was presiding over an effort to reform Venezuela’s police forces. Violent crime ranks in polls as the top concern of Venezuelans amid an increase in kidnappings and killings. Homicides are up 67 percent since 1999, when the Chávez presidency began, and the country has one of the highest rates of gun-related deaths in the world, according to [Unesco](#).

Venezuela’s prison system suffers from crowding, corruption and a shortage of trained guards. Violent prison deaths have averaged more than 300 a year for more than a decade. Building prisons has not alleviated the problem.

Security analysts say that part of the difficulty in reducing violent crime levels is related to the frequency with which senior officials

overseeing efforts at improving the justice system are moved out of their posts. Mr. Chacón was replaced by Pedro Carreño, a legislator who led an inquiry last year into a \$1.5 million embezzlement scheme at a state sugar complex built with help from Cuban technicians in Sabaneta, Mr. Chávez's hometown, in Barinas State. He will be Mr. Chávez's ninth interior minister in eight years.

On Thursday, Finance Minister Nelson Merentes said he was stepping down, to be replaced by Rodrigo Cabezas, a leftist legislator and economist.

Mr. Chávez named Jorge Rodríguez, a former medical director at a psychiatric clinic here, as vice president. Mr. Rodríguez, whose father was tortured by the Venezuelan Army in the 1970s, has impeccable credentials in leftist circles. He led the National Electoral Council during a contentious and ultimately unsuccessful effort to recall Mr. Chávez.