

U.S.-VENEZUELA RELATIONS AND THE PATH TO A DEMOCRATIC
TRANSITION

TESTIMONY OF
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SUBCOMMITTEE ON WESTERN HEMISPHERE
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Chairman Rubio, Ranking Member Cardin, and Members of the Committee:

Thank you for the opportunity to testify on the Administration's approach to Venezuela. I thank all of you for your interest in one of the most pressing foreign policy issues before us. We are witnessing one of the worst humanitarian disasters ever in our hemisphere. And it is all man-made, by a small and venal group acting without the slightest concern for the people of Venezuela.

On February 23, the world witnessed disgraced former president of Venezuela Nicolás Maduro and his wife joyfully dance after his criminal gangs murdered more than 25 people, injured more than 80 others, and set fire to and destroyed humanitarian assistance that could have fed hungry children, provided medicines to the sick, and saved lives. His henchmen, like Freddy Bernal, released prisoners from jail and paid them—along with terrorists groups like the ELN—to shoot, harass, and intimidate indigenous people and aid workers who only wanted to bring long-awaited relief to Venezuelans. And the effects of Venezuela's crisis are not limited to its own borders. We are witnessing the largest displacement of people in Latin American history. Well over three million Venezuelans have fled to neighboring countries.

In short, while his own people starve and bleed, the Maduro regime celebrates.

Every day that goes by, the suffering of the Venezuelan people grows. But every day, we also see Maduro grow weaker and that's why the Venezuelan people should not lose hope. We now know Maduro can no longer depend on the loyalty of those around him. He may dress up his thugs in military and National Guard uniforms to make it appear he has support, but his use of armed gangs suggests his real doubts about the loyalty of the Venezuelan military. Maduro's back is up

against the wall. Surrounding him on all sides, he has people who despise him—people just waiting for the right moment to show him the door.

It's becoming clearer that the vast majority of the Armed Forces and National Guard do not want to carry out Maduro's shameful orders. For those members of the armed forces who are still on the fence, fearing retaliation by Maduro's Cuban accomplices, we have told them that now is the time to take a stand because Maduro is waging war against his own people. We are asking them to show their pride and patriotism by lifting their own people out of this crisis. Their people need them now more than ever and they have a key role to play in rebuilding their homeland. Interim President Juan Guaidó, his representative in the United States Ambassador Carlos Vecchio, political parties in Venezuela's legitimate National Assembly, and the National Assembly's economic recovery planners have all stated that the transition to a new, post-Maduro Venezuela will be a multi-party, inclusive process. It will also include chavistas and others of every socio-economic background who see a democratic future for Venezuela, led by the Venezuelan people—not a Venezuelan dictator and a small, corrupt crew.

In the meantime, Mr. Chairman, the Venezuelan people have the commitment of the United States government to work with them as they restore their democracy, restore a proper respect for human rights, and rebuild the prosperity of their nation.

First, we will keep building the pressure on Nicolás Maduro. We are putting an end to his regime's pillaging of PDVSA, once called the "crown jewel of the people," as a source of vast corruption. We have implemented sanctions that are cutting off vital sources of cash to this corrupt regime's pockets. Customers for Venezuela's oil are dwindling, reducing the regime's ability to sustain itself and enrich insiders. We are also working with the international community to freeze the regime's bank accounts across the globe. We are revoking their own and their families' visas and we are applying the full weight of individual sanctions on Maduro's supporters.

We are also making it clear that it is never too late to change. Off-ramps are available to those who concretely support democratic change in Venezuela and do what is right for the Venezuelan people.

At the same time, we have answered interim President Guaidó's call for humanitarian help. Vice President Pence's February 25 announcement of nearly \$56 million in additional humanitarian assistance to support the regional response to the Venezuela crisis brings the total United States government response to more

than \$195 million, including more than \$152 million in humanitarian assistance and approximately \$43 million in development and economic assistance. On January 24, Secretary Pompeo announced the United States is ready to provide more than \$20 million in initial humanitarian assistance to the people inside Venezuela. We have stocked warehouses full of food and basic medicine at the border crossing of Cucuta, Colombia, and are seeking ways to bring these supplies into Venezuela and have them distributed to people in need.

Maduro and his cronies, and some of his cheerleaders abroad, claim that delivering humanitarian assistance is a political show—a cover for a military intervention and a violation of Venezuela’s sovereignty. But let me be very clear: only the Maduro regime is using violence. Only the regime is shooting at and killing unarmed protestors and aid workers. Only the regime has betrayed Venezuelan independence and sovereignty by submitting to Cuban influence in Venezuela’s military, security, and intelligence. Only the regime uses food and medicines as political tools for social control. Their repeated mention of U.S. military intervention is simply a ploy designed to divide the broad, unified international coalition of 54 countries supporting democracy in Venezuela.

We are grateful for the leadership of our partners in supporting humanitarian assistance for the people of Venezuela and supporting their demand for democracy. The European Union, Argentina, Brazil, Canada, Chile, Colombia, Guatemala, Honduras, Panama, and Peru, all swiftly condemned the use of violence and called for the delivery of much-needed humanitarian assistance. Their words, and their actions, are making a real difference in this crisis. As a result, we are witnessing a historic shift in our hemisphere toward solidarity and shared interests – recognizing we are stronger together. With 54 countries that have now recognized Guaidó as interim president, we can be proud that we have helped galvanize a global effort to restore democracy and liberty in Venezuela.

Although Maduro’s dictatorial actions have cost lives and inflicted great pain and suffering, we are witnessing a massive outpouring of hope, courage, and tenacity by the Venezuelan people. They are openly condemning a regime that has brought them nothing but sadness, anger, and misery. The protests of 2017 were significant. What we are seeing today should humble and inspire us all: Venezuelans from all walks of life united in an enduring struggle to end this nightmare. Each day, courageous Venezuelan patriots struggle to make Venezuela free, often at their own peril. They are bringing change to Venezuela through their bravery. And over the last few weeks, they have been heard. Interim President Juan Guaidó has injected new energy into the collective hope of those who want to

return to a Venezuela that benefits all Venezuelan citizens, not just Maduro and his inner circle.

The United States stands behind Interim President Guaidó 100 percent. More importantly, Mr. Chairman, we stand united behind the Venezuelan people. We will not abandon them in this difficult moment. Like the vast majority of Venezuelans, we believe that the time to end Maduro's wholesale destruction of Venezuela is now. And when Venezuelans succeed in ending the dictatorship and restoring liberty, it will show despots and dictators not only in our hemisphere, but in the rest of the world, that the people's desire for freedom cannot be extinguished.

Thank you Mr. Chairman, Ranking Member, and Members of the Committee. I look forward to answering any questions you have.