

Venezuela in Maduro's Grasp: Assessing the Deteriorating Security and Humanitarian Situation

TESTIMONY OF  
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BEFORE  
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Chairman Risch, Ranking Member Menendez, and Members of the Committee:

Thank you for the opportunity to testify on our efforts in support of the Venezuelan people. The ongoing crisis and the defense of democracy in Venezuela remain key U.S. strategic priorities. This policy has, with broad bipartisan support, been successful in supporting the democratic opposition, maintaining a broad international coalition, and denying revenue to Maduro's brutal regime, but we have yet to see the convoking of free and fair presidential elections, nor do we see the conditions that would permit such elections.

In January 2019, the United States was the first country to recognize interim President Juan Guaidó, and since then we have secured the support of nearly 60 countries, the OAS, and the Inter-American Development Bank in recognizing him as the constitutional president of Venezuela. The United States also joined other countries to invoke the Rio Treaty, a collective security agreement, which resulted in a resolution mandating travel restrictions for 29 regime collaborators. This is the first time in more than 50 years the Rio Treaty has been used to impose such measures. U.S. sanctions continue to deny the regime access to spoils, and we have implemented visa restrictions and revoked visas for over one thousand regime officials and their family members. These measures are intended to increase pressure on the Maduro regime and its affiliates to agree to a broadly acceptable political transition.

Criminal dictatorships like Maduro's are hard to defeat. The Maduro regime's relentless attacks on dissidents and against Venezuela's last remaining democratic institution, the National Assembly, demonstrate its obsession with retaining power regardless of the cost to the nation and its people.

In July, the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights Michelle Bachelet released two updated reports on human rights violations in Venezuela. She reported that Maduro and his thugs continue committing the most serious violations and abuses of human rights through systemic intimidation, repression, arbitrary detentions, torture, and murder. This includes 1,324 extrajudicial killings from January through May of this year. The reports also focused on how the regime is twisting the rule of law and presiding over a violent campaign of repression in the Arco Minero, Venezuela's mining belt. This region is increasingly a source of revenue for the regime as U.S. sanctions effectively limit income from more traditional sources, and Maduro's mafias are using violence to grab every last ounce of gold.

The regime also continues to detain nearly 400 political prisoners, including military officers, medical professionals, journalists, and dissident Chavista Nicmer Evans, Guaidó's Chief of Staff Roberto Marrero, and National Assembly deputies Juan Requesens, Gilber Caro, Ismael Leon, Renzo Prieto, and Antonio Geara. Even after a series of health crises during detention, the regime continues to detain labor rights activist Rubén González.

For more than two and a half years, the regime has unlawfully detained six U.S. oil executives – Tomeu Vadell, Alirio Zambrano, Jose Luis Zambrano, Gustavo Cardenas, Jorge Toledo, and Jose Angel Pereira. We were relieved to hear July 30 that Gustavo Cárdenas and Jorge Toledo were released from prison and granted house arrest in Venezuela. This is a positive first step and of course we hope for more.

The regime's repressive practices also have directly worsened the COVID-19 pandemic in Venezuela. We have countless examples of ongoing regime intimidation of doctors and medical workers fighting to counter the spread of COVID-19. The regime has arrested nearly a dozen independent journalists and respected medical providers who have attempted to report suppression and manipulation of COVID-19 case data or who voiced concern with the regime's negligent response to the pandemic. We are concerned by the regime's criminalization of returning refugees and the reports of the shameful conditions of their quarantine.

Venezuela's Maduro-made crisis has led to serious humanitarian consequences which are well-known and documented; and, along with Congress, we are deeply concerned about the human cost of his regime's mismanagement, corruption, and deliberate abuse of the population. Venezuela's health system, infrastructure, and social services are collapsing. Decades-long economic mismanagement and neglect of infrastructure while looting state resources have led to the collapse of nearly every sector of the economy. Crude production has fallen to the lowest point in nearly eight decades to under 400,000 barrels per day. The World Food Program (WFP) reported this year that 9.3 million Venezuelans are moderately or severely malnourished. The recent National Survey of Living Conditions (ENCOVI) in Venezuela stated children born in Venezuela since 2015 are likely to have a 3.7 year shorter life span than official projections, and infant mortality rates have regressed 30-35 years. All of these factors have forced more than 5 million Venezuelans to flee in search of a better life outside of Venezuela and away from Maduro's man-made disaster.

I want to thank Congress for its support through legislation and funding. The United States is the single largest donor of humanitarian assistance for the Venezuela regional crisis. From 2017 to today, the United States has provided more than \$856 million in humanitarian and development aid, including nearly \$611 million in humanitarian assistance, to Venezuelans suffering inside Venezuela and across 17 neighboring countries, supported by a recent commitment of \$13.7 million in COVID-19 specific support inside Venezuela. We maintain close cooperation with UN agencies and NGOs that are committed to providing lifesaving resources to Venezuelans. We also recognize the neighboring countries that have welcomed so many Venezuelans, especially Colombia, Peru, and Ecuador, for their continued support as well. The United States will continue to call upon other donors to make or increase contributions to help address the crisis.

We have taken significant steps to address Maduro's use of narcotics as a financial lifeline for his illegitimate regime. On April 1, President Donald Trump launched an historic counternarcotics operation - deploying additional military and law enforcement assets to the Caribbean and Eastern Pacific - to disrupt the flow of dangerous drugs to the United States. The narco-traffickers include the illegitimate regime of Nicolas Maduro. The enhanced operation is a "whole of government" effort that has led to the disruption and seizure of over 100 metric tons of cocaine and marijuana. One thousand traffickers have been arrested over the past several months. This operation has cost the cartels and the Maduro regime over \$3 billion in revenue.

We remain concerned over foreign malign influence in Venezuela and the Maduro regime's collaboration with nefarious non-state armed groups. Cuba treats Venezuela as a colony shipping food, medicine, diesel, and gasoline from Venezuela to Cuba even as the Venezuelan people suffer shortages of every single one of them. Cuban security personnel surround Maduro, and Cuban intelligence officers are embedded in the military. China works with the Maduro regime to refine digital authoritarianism, helping the regime with cyber operations. Russian military aid and loans have helped the regime maintain its security forces and thus its provision of safe haven in Venezuela to FARC dissident and ELN terrorists. And now we are seeing a re-kindling of a relationship with the world's worst State sponsor of terrorism, the Islamic Republic of Iran.

## **Looking Ahead**

Maduro's recent hijacking of the National Electoral Council and of the major independent political parties foreshadow how the regime plans to take control of the National Assembly through fraudulent elections in December. We are supporting the opposition as they consider a concerted response, and we remain steadfast in our support for interim President Guaido and a resolution to Venezuela's crisis via a broadly acceptable transitional government organizing free and fair presidential elections.

Free and fair presidential elections are required for Venezuela to regain its democracy and prosperity peacefully. The United States will recognize the results of a free and fair election, no matter which party wins; what we oppose is the abuse of state power that enables one party to rule indefinitely regardless of the will of the people. We have proposed a Democratic Transition Framework for Venezuela as a path to establish a broadly acceptable transitional government to oversee free and fair presidential and parliamentary elections. We are prepared to work with all Venezuelans and with other nations to achieve this goal, and are prepared to lift sanctions when the necessary conditions are met.

In conclusion, Mr. Chairman and Ranking Member, the Maduro regime has survived by relying on classic autocratic tools coupled with its callousness and criminality. This has only strengthened our resolve, and the resolve of other democratic states, to see Venezuela once again become a free and prosperous nation. Until this objective is achieved, our pressure will continue and will increase. We look forward to the day when free and fair elections are held, a new democratically-elected government is in place, and U.S. sanctions can be lifted. We look forward to restoring once-close Venezuela-U.S. relations, to helping Venezuelan migrants and

refugees return to their beloved country, and to seeing Venezuela's children share in the beauty and bountiful natural wealth of their country.

Mr. Chairman, Ranking Member, thank you for inviting me here today and thank you for the continuing interest and the strong bipartisan support this Committee has shown toward the struggle for freedom in Venezuela. I look forward to answering any questions you may have.