

**Remarks as prepared to the Senate Foreign Relations Committee,
Testimony**

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Chairman Menendez, Ranking Member Corker, Members of the Committee, thank you for this opportunity to speak with you about Venezuela. I appreciate your interest in Venezuela and your support for U.S. assistance and our policies and engagement there.

We continue to be preoccupied by the situation in Venezuela, where legitimate political, economic, and social grievances and a lack of adequate democratic space and respect for human rights have brought protests and, unfortunately, violence. The United States has called on the Venezuelan government to respect human rights, uphold the rule of law, and engage in a peaceful, inclusive dialogue with Venezuelans across the political spectrum to alleviate the current tension. We have consistently called on the Venezuelan government to release those it unjustly jailed, lift restrictions on freedom of the press, and respect freedoms of assembly and association. Assistant Secretary Malinowski will discuss the human rights situation in greater depth, while I will focus on what we are doing diplomatically to bring an end to the violence and respect for democratic processes and human rights. I know this committee shares our concerns, and we welcome your strong support for democracy in Venezuela.

This is not a U.S. – Venezuela issue, it is an internal Venezuelan issue. We've been clear all along that the future of Venezuela is for the Venezuelan people to decide. We have strongly resisted attempts to be used as a distraction from Venezuela's real problems. Our focus has been to encourage an end to the violence and authentically inclusive dialogue to address the Venezuelan people's legitimate grievances. We have been actively engaging international partners to find a peaceful solution. We are encouraged by the Union of South American Nations (UNASUR)-led initiative with Vatican participation involving meetings between the government and many parties within the political opposition.

While we are encouraged by the efforts of UNASUR and the Vatican, we must have realistic expectations. The Venezuelan government has so far resisted two obvious demonstrations of good will: the release of political prisoners and disarming the government-supported vigilante groups. Nevertheless, those opposition elements engaged in the dialogue are, for the first time in a long time, able to speak truth to power in a setting where the government must listen. That of course is not a panacea, but it could be a beginning. We also need to recognize the Venezuelan opposition is not monolithic. Important elements of the opposition, and student leaders, remain outside the dialogue, and are deeply skeptical of it. Protestors remain on the streets. They too all need to be heard. We should respect the diversity of opinion within the Venezuelan opposition – meaning both those who have declined to enter the dialogue and those who believe that by doing so they can achieve some progress regarding human rights, democracy, and Venezuela’s economic and social problems. This may be a slow process; it may fail, but for now significant elements of the opposition consider the effort worthwhile.

Brazil, Colombia, Ecuador, and the Vatican are expending significant time and effort to facilitate this dialogue. It behooves us to respect and to support, as we have been doing, this effort. If this dialogue does not begin to solve Venezuela’s chronic problems, both democratic and economic, then the country’s long-term outlook for stability is extremely poor. Leaving aside the ongoing political turmoil, Venezuela’s economy is stalling, the government is struggling to meet its financial obligations, and massive fiscal adjustments are urgently needed. The failure of the current dialogue process will result in an even more troubled Venezuela, and will redouble its need for honest brokers from the international community to help Venezuela find its way.

We share the concern of many in the region that current dynamics, especially economic, raise doubts about Venezuela’s long-term stability. However, I want to emphasize the following: while we regard the dialogue currently underway with cautious optimism, one thing we will not do is remain silent in the face of Venezuelan government assaults on fundamental freedoms.

Freedoms of expression and peaceful assembly are universal human rights. They are essential to a functioning democracy, and the Venezuelan government has an obligation to protect fundamental freedoms and the safety of its citizens, including those who engage in peaceful protest.

Venezuela's problems cannot be solved by criminalizing dissent; there must be space in Venezuelan society for those who do not agree with the government to express their views.

We are not alone –the UN Secretary General, the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights and six UN special rapporteurs, the EU High Representative for Foreign Affairs, and others -- have called on the Venezuelan government to respect the universal human rights and fundamental freedoms of its citizens.

We have strong historic and cultural ties with the Venezuelan people, and we remain committed to our relationship with them. But the future of Venezuela is for the Venezuelan people to decide. They have real concerns that deserve to be addressed. Venezuela's serious and worsening economic and social problems require democratic solutions.

We defend human rights activists and fundamental freedoms around the world, including in Venezuela. Our commitment to democracy and human rights is unwavering and remains the center of gravity for our strategy in the region.

We remain committed to working with member states to utilize the OAS, in conjunction with other regional and sub-regional efforts, to advance real dialogue in Venezuela. The OAS, as the region's premier multilateral institution, can and should assume a greater role to find a peaceful resolution to the crisis in Venezuela, consistent with its mandate to promote peace, democracy, and respect for human rights in member states, as expressed in its Charter and in the Inter-American Democratic Charter.

Mr. Chairman, I would like to end by saying that I sincerely appreciate the support that the Senate Foreign Relations Committee has provided to our core foreign policy interests in Venezuela and the hemisphere. We are united in our core strategic goals. We all seek to advance democracy, human rights, social development, security, and economic prosperity in the region. There is strong, bipartisan cooperation where it matters most between the State Department and this committee, as well as among this Committee's Members and staff, to the great benefit of our country.

Thank you and I look forward to answering your questions.