

**“DEEPENING POLITICAL AND ECONOMIC CRISIS IN VENEZUELA:  
IMPLICATIONS FOR U.S. INTERESTS AND THE WESTERN HEMISPHERE”**

**TESTIMONY OF  
EDWARD ALEXANDER LEE  
DEPUTY ASSISTANT SECRETARY OF STATE  
BUREAU OF WESTERN HEMISPHERE AFFAIRS  
U.S. DEPARTMENT OF STATE  
BEFORE THE  
SENATE FOREIGN RELATIONS COMMITTEE  
SUBCOMMITTEE ON WESTERN HEMISPHERE, TRANSNATIONAL  
CRIME, CIVILIAN SECURITY, DEMOCRACY, HUMAN RIGHTS AND  
GLOBAL WOMEN’S ISSUES  
UNITED STATES SENATE  
MARCH 17, 2015**

Chairman Rubio, Ranking Member Boxer, Members of the Committee, thank you for inviting me to speak with you about Venezuela. I appreciate your interest in Venezuela and your support for U.S. assistance and our policies there.

We are deeply concerned about the situation in Venezuela where last year legitimate political, economic, and social grievances and a lack of adequate democratic space brought protests and, unfortunately, violence. Tensions within Venezuela continue to build and the government has intensified its actions to repress dissent. 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 called on the Venezuelan government to release Mayor Antonio Ledezma, opposition leader Leopoldo Lopez, Mayor Daniel Ceballos, and others it has unjustly jailed, including dozens of students. We have encouraged the government to improve the climate of respect for human rights and fundamental freedoms, including respect for the freedoms of peaceful assembly and association. I know this committee shares our concerns, and we welcome your strong support for democracy in Venezuela.

Venezuela’s problems cannot be solved by criminalizing legitimate, democratic dissent. These actions appear to be a clear attempt by the Venezuelan government to divert attention from that country’s economic and political problems. Rather than imprisoning and intimidating its critics, we believe the Venezuelan government should focus on finding real solutions through democratic

dialogue. As I have mentioned, we will not refrain from speaking out about human rights abuses. We are joined in this by dozens of individuals and entities, including the UN High Commissioner on Human Rights, Organization of American States (OAS) Secretary General Insulza, the Peruvian, Costa Rican, and Colombian governments, and the Inter American Commission on Human Rights, among others.

Advancing human rights and democratic processes are a key U.S. foreign policy objective. The President's March 9 Executive Order "Blocking Property and Suspending Entry of Certain Persons Contributing to the Situation in Venezuela," which implements the Venezuela Defense of Human Rights and Civil Society Act of 2014, is a manifestation of our commitment to advancing respect for human rights, safeguarding democratic institutions, and protecting the U.S. financial system from the illicit financial flows from public corruption in Venezuela.

Executive Order 13692 is aimed at persons involved in or responsible for certain conduct in Venezuela, including actions that undermine democratic processes or institutions, the use of violence or conduct that constitutes human rights violations and abuses, including in response to anti-government protests, actions that prohibit, limit, or penalize the exercise of freedom of expression or peaceful assembly, as well as public corruption by senior government officials in Venezuela. The Executive Order does not target the people or the economy of Venezuela.

I want to be clear: it is not our policy or intent to promote instability in Venezuela or to endorse solutions to Venezuela's political problems that are inconsistent with its own legal system. The United States is not seeking the downfall of the Venezuelan government nor trying to sabotage the Venezuelan economy. We remain Venezuela's largest trading partner. President Maduro publicly expresses a desire to improve our bilateral relationship, and we are open to direct communication with the Venezuelan government. We maintain diplomatic relations and welcome conversations and debate. We remain committed to maintaining our strong and lasting ties with the people of Venezuela. We will not, however, refrain from calling out human rights abuses and other actions and policies that undermine democracy.

We hope the Venezuelan government will focus its energy on finding real solutions for the country's mounting economic and political problems through democratic dialogue with the political opposition, civil society, and the private

sector. This year's National Assembly elections present an opportunity for Venezuelans to engage in legitimate, democratic discourse. And, credible election results could reduce tensions in Venezuela. We have urged regional partners to encourage Venezuela to accept a robust international electoral observation mission, using accepted international standards, for those elections. Now is the time for the region to work together to help Venezuela to work toward a democratic solution to the challenges the country faces.

We will also continue to work closely with Congress and others in the region to support greater political expression in Venezuela, and to encourage the Venezuelan government to live up to its required commitments to democracy and human rights, as articulated in the OAS Charter, the Inter American Democratic Charter, and other relevant instruments.

Mr. Chairman, I would like to end by saying that we sincerely appreciate the Senate Foreign Relations Committee's contributions to the promotion of human rights in Venezuela. The strong, bipartisan cooperation among this Committee's Members and staff to support the State Department's championing of democracy, human rights and freedom of expression throughout the hemisphere is a credit to our great country.

Thank you and I look forward to answering your questions.