

**Statement of Ambassador Brian A. Nichols  
Assistant Secretary of State for  
Bureau of Western Hemisphere Affairs  
Before the  
Senate Committee on Foreign Relations:  
Assessing U.S. Policy Towards Venezuela  
September 15, 2022**

Chairman Menendez, Ranking Member Risch, distinguished members of the Committee, thank you for the opportunity to testify before you today on this important issue.

The situation in Venezuela remains one of the worst crises in our hemisphere's history. A country with a proud democratic tradition, blessed with natural resources and a rich biodiversity, and with a vibrant and resourceful population, has suffered decades of misery.

Venezuela's vital sectors--healthcare, energy, agriculture, manufacturing, and education--have all but collapsed. It holds the world's largest proven oil reserves yet does not even feature among the world's top-20 oil-producing countries. Whole tracts of its rich biodiversity have been destroyed by illegal mining and logging. Its lawless border regions provide shelter to myriad illegal actors, not least narcoterrorists, who threaten its population and neighbors.

Because more than 90 percent of its people live in poverty, Venezuela has lost nearly 20 percent of its population to the largest displacement of people in our hemisphere's history. Six point eight million Venezuelans have fled their homes in the last five years, approaching similar exodus from Ukraine and Syria.

The UN Human Rights Commissioner lists a litany of abuses, illegal detentions, and even killings and torture. In two reports, the Independent International Fact-Finding Mission on Venezuela documented extrajudicial executions, enforced disappearances, arbitrary detentions, torture, and cruel, inhuman or degrading treatment, including sexual and gender-based violence, committed by Venezuelan state actors. Beyond the abuses the regime inflicts on its own population, it also wrongfully jails and abuses U.S. citizens, attempting to use them as bargaining chips with the United States.

As I underscored during my testimony earlier this year before the House Foreign Affairs Committee, the responsibility for the crisis in Venezuela falls squarely on the shoulders of the late Hugo Chavez and Nicolas Maduro.

The U.S. government remains firmly committed to the belief that Venezuelans have a right to democracy and deserve a government of their choosing that protects and defends their human rights and fundamental freedoms. We have a role and a responsibility to empower Venezuelans as they work to resolve the many regime-created crises facing their nation, and to once again choose their government through free and fair elections.

The United States continues to recognize and support the interim Presidency of Juan Guaidó and the 2015 democratically elected National Assembly, the last truly democratic exercise of popular will in Venezuela. We coordinate closely with President Guaidó and his

administration, the Unitary Platform, and those in and outside Venezuela who support the return of democracy to their homeland.

Consistent with the VERDAD Act, we continue supporting a negotiated solution out of Venezuela's crisis. In a call on June 8, President Guaidó and President Biden expressed their support for Venezuelan-led negotiations as the best path toward a peaceful restoration of democratic institutions, free and fair elections, and respect for the human rights and freedoms of all Venezuelans.

The Administration's visits to Venezuela earlier this year resulted in renewed meetings and negotiations between the regime and the opposition, in both Oslo and Caracas. Those visits also achieved the return of two wrongfully detained Americans - the safety and security of U.S. citizens overseas is of the utmost importance and we will always support the efforts of the President's Special Envoy for Hostage Affairs to bring all wrongfully detained Americans in Venezuela home.

U.S. sanctions policy will continue to exert pressure on the Maduro regime, while providing ample room for humanitarian relief, including our own commitment of over \$2 billion since 2017. As we have previously made clear, we will review our sanctions policies in response to constructive steps by the Maduro regime. The U.S. government, in coordination with allies, will also pursue criminals and fugitives, and interdict criminal activity associated with the regime. The seizure of an Iranian – Venezuelan jet in the southern cone, and the extradition of a regime money launderer from Cape Verde, are but two examples of our tireless campaign to seek

accountability and justice wherever criminals may hide. We will continue to relentlessly pursue accountability for all actors that engage in corruption or abuse human rights in Venezuela. We also seek humane treatment and freedom for Venezuelan political prisoners.

The United States maintained relations and friendship with Venezuela for nearly 200 years. Now, the Maduro regime looks to Russia, the Peoples' Republic of China, and Iran for political and economic partnerships that bring few benefits to the Venezuelan people and threaten regional stability.

We will continue working with our international partners to help return Venezuela to the community of democracies and improve the lives of all Venezuelans. And we will continue to work with Congress in advancing these goals.

Thank you for this opportunity to speak to the Committee today and I look forward to your questions.