

Is Biden Using a Trump Card to Pressure Maduro Regime Change in Venezuela?

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Six years of punishing economic sanctions have had a “devastating” humanitarian impact on Venezuela, the United Nations Special Rapporteur writes in a scathing [report](#) made public last month. It calls on the United States, the United Kingdom, and the European Union to lift the economic sanctions that have strangled Venezuela’s economy in violation of international law.

The “Venezuelan government’s revenue shrunk by 99 percent, with the country currently living on 1 percent of its pre-sanctions income,” the [report](#) says, impeding “the ability of Venezuela to respond to the COVID-19 emergency.”

Moreover, the sanctions are “violations of international law” that have exacerbated Venezuela’s economic crisis with “ineffective and insufficient” carve-outs for humanitarian issues, said Alina Douhan, the U.N.’s Special Rapporteur. The report urges “the governments of the United Kingdom, Portugal and the United States and corresponding banks to unfreeze assets of the Venezuela Central Bank to purchase medicine, vaccines, food, medical and other equipment.” This would free up about \$6 billion in frozen Venezuelan foreign assets so that Maduro’s government could purchase needed supplies to combat the pandemic.

On March 2, Secretary of State Antony Blinken spoke with Venezuelan opposition leader Juan Guaido on the phone. The United States has recognized Guaido [as the rightful leader of Venezuela](#) since January 2019 when he invoked the constitution to assume an interim presidency, arguing President Nicolas Maduro’s 2018 re-election was fraudulent.

On this phone call, Blinken emphasized the need to “increase multilateral pressure and press for a peaceful, democratic transition,” according to the State Department [readout](#), suggesting that Washington will continue Trump-era pressure on Maduro to step aside — a move that is unlikely to happen, considering that Guaido has not yet coalesced an opposition on the ground strong enough to make him go.

Nevertheless, Guaido told an Argentine television channel [March 2](#) that he had spoken with Blinken and Canadian Foreign Minister Marc Garneau “as part of the agenda of international

alliances to rescue democracy in Venezuela.”

Meanwhile, a White House official [told](#) Reuters that the Biden administration is in “no rush” to lift U.S. sanctions on Venezuela. If Maduro takes confidence-building steps and shows he is ready to negotiate seriously with the opposition, the Biden administration “would consider” easing them, said the official.

As though playing right into official Washington’s hands, English-language media frequently portrays Venezuela’s grinding poverty as the direct result of Maduro’s corrupt leadership. Although an increasingly punishing campaign of economic sanctions have been in place, imposed by the United States, UK and EU since 2015, American and British news reports almost never mention them, or the crippling effect they have had on Venezuela’s ability to purchase desperately needed food and medical supplies.

John McEvoy with the media watchdog group FAIR [recently highlighted](#) that several mainstream media outlets completely ignored the U.N. report. With the sole exception of [CNN](#), none of the major media outlets, including the New York Times, the Washington Post, BBC, the Guardian, CNBC, CBS, or the AP, covered the damning report on the humanitarian crisis currently unfolding in Venezuela.

Since the United States began its economic warfare campaign against oil-rich Venezuela in 2015, Venezuela has suffered from one of the world’s biggest displacement crises. An estimated 4 to 5 million Venezuelans have left in search of a better life, with its overall population estimated to fall to 27 million by 2021. Some 3.2 million children in Venezuela — or one in three — are in need of humanitarian assistance, [according](#) to the U.N. Children’s Fund. Since sanctions began six years ago, malnutrition has steadily risen, with now over 2.5 million Venezuelans classified as severely food insecure. As a consequence, the country has seen an increase in family crises, violence and separations, child labor, drug and human trafficking, forced labor, and migration.

The U.N. report describes a dystopia difficult for the average American to imagine: electricity lines that work at less than 20 percent of their capacity; public service agencies staffed at less than 30 to 50 percent their pre-crisis levels; even professional positions like doctors, nurses, engineers, teachers, professors, judges, and police officers go mostly unfilled, resulting in internal disorganization in the country, and increased workloads for those employees who do remain in their posts.

The campaign to overthrow the Venezuelan government, the report adds, “violates the principle of sovereign equality of states and constitutes an intervention in domestic affairs of Venezuela that also affects its regional relations.”

The ever-increasing rounds of sanctions imposed on Venezuela have only increased the suffering on the poorest of the poor, at the worst possible time, while a global pandemic rages and the need for medical supplies is critical.

“Although sanctions do not seem to be physical warfare weapons, they are just as deadly, if not more so. Jeopardising the health of populations for political ends is not only illegal but also barbaric,” [notes](#) the Lancet, in a March 18 report about the U.S. “maximum pressure” sanctions on Iran.

The United States and Venezuela have been down this road before with sanctions — sadly,

we already know how this ends.

In 2019, mortality rates in five year-olds in Venezuela had doubled and children were succumbing to diseases like diphtheria and measles. UNICEF [supplied](#) 55 tons of medical supplies to 25 hospitals in Caracas, including midwifery kits, antibiotics, and malaria treatments to make up for shortfalls due to U.S. sanctions imposed that year by President Donald Trump.

By 2019, the medical journal Lancet [reported](#) that the impact of U.S. “sanctions on the Venezuelan population cannot be overstated.” Over 300,000 Venezuelans were at risk due to a shortage of medications and treatment, and an estimated 80,000 HIV-positive patients had no access to antiretroviral therapy since 2017. There were insulin shortages because U.S. banks refused to handle Venezuelan payments.

“Thousands to millions of people have been without access to dialysis, cancer treatment, or therapy for hypertension and diabetes. Particular to children has been the delay of vaccination campaigns or lack of access to antirejection medications after solid organ transplants in Argentina,” [reports](#) The Lancet. “Children with leukemia awaiting bone marrow transplants abroad are now dying. Funds for such health-assistance programmes come from the PDVSA state oil company. Those funds are now frozen.”

According to the U.N. Human Rights Council,

“The use of economic sanctions for political purposes violates human rights and the norms of international behavior. Such actions may precipitate man-made humanitarian catastrophes of unprecedented proportions. Regime change through economic measures likely to lead to the denial of basic human rights and indeed possibly to starvation, has never been an accepted practice of international relations.”

Earlier sanctions imposed between 2017-2018 were responsible for 40,000 deaths in Venezuela, [according](#) to economists Drs. Mark Weisbrot and Jeffrey Sachs from the Center for Economic and Policy Research:

“We find that the sanctions have inflicted, and increasingly inflict, very serious harm to human life and health, including an estimated more than 40,000 deaths from 2017–2018; and that these sanctions would fit the definition of collective punishment of the civilian population as described in both the Geneva and Hague international conventions, to which the US is a signatory. They are also illegal under international law and treaties which the US has signed, and would appear to violate US law as well.”

Occasionally, U.S. officials have admitted the purpose of the sanctions, which is to force hostile governments into submission.

On March 22, 2019, a senior U.S. government official bragged that the “effect of the sanctions” against Venezuela “is continuing and cumulative.”

“It’s sort of like in Star Wars when Darth Vader constricts somebody’s throat, that’s what we are doing to the regime economically,” said the senior official,

[reported](#) Univision.

Though Trump's senior official is off the record, at the same meeting, National Security Director John Bolton put "the entire banking sector on notice and announced that persons operating in Venezuela's financial sector may be subject to sanctions."

U.S. Attorney General William Barr [announced](#) that it was "good timing, actually" to pile additional sanctions on Venezuela and Iran near the end of March 2020.

Although both countries were facing the coronavirus pandemic, in addition to the already daunting problems the countries had, Barr called this a "kick them while they're down" approach, saying the Trump administration could capitalize on the COVID-19 pandemic to potentially spur their populations towards regime change.

Far from bringing about regime change, however, we now know this approach instead caused barbaric suffering in Venezuela among its most vulnerable populations.

Unfortunately, the Biden administration appears remained committed to pursuing the twin policies of economic sanctions and what they call "democratic transition," as it confirmed last week during a State Department press [briefing](#). When asked directly about whether Maduro "must go," Price dodged the question, instead saying:

We believe and we support the democratic aspirations of the people of Venezuela. That is why we are committed to supporting the people through humanitarian measures and also targeting regime officials and their cronies involved in human rights abuses and corruption.

It's time for officials in Washington to leave these failed policies in the past. The Biden administration should let go of any regime change aspirations left over from the Trump administration and lift sanctions, and let humanitarian aid reach Venezuela as quickly as possible.

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Featured image: The US government continues to view Venezuelan opposition leader Juan Guaido (left) as the rightful leader of Venezuela, not Nicolas Maduro (right). (Alexandros Michailidis/StringerAI/Shutterstock)

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