

Botched Infiltration of Venezuela Leaves Guaidó Tainted Beyond Repair

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Global Research, May 12, 2020

Region: [Latin America & Caribbean, USA](#)

Theme: [US NATO War Agenda](#)

*The latest chapter in the ongoing effort to overthrow the Venezuelan government reads like a bad spy thriller: a group of mercenaries piloted speedboats from Colombia to Venezuela; half of them were killed or captured by Venezuelan security forces immediately upon landing, while the other half – apparently delayed by mechanical issues with their boat – surrendered to local police and militia the next day. [Thirty-nine attackers have been captured so far](#), including two Americans, both former special forces soldiers. Their [plan was to capture or kill high-value targets](#), including Venezuelan **President Nicolás Maduro**. Instead, it failed miserably and raised more concerns about the leadership of opposition figure **Juan Guaidó**.*

Guaidó's Insidious Contract

Information about the attack continues to trickle out, yet there is overwhelming evidence of Guaidó's involvement. According to multiple sources, [Guaidó signed a \\$212 million contract with Jordan Goudreau](#), an ex-Green Beret, for Goudreau's private security firm to overthrow President Maduro, although payments were never made. This corroborates an [accusation made in late March by Clíver Alcalá](#), an opposition-aligned, retired Venezuelan general who surrendered to U.S. Drug Enforcement Agency custody after being indicted for drug trafficking. Copies of a general services agreement with the [signatures of Guaidó and Goudreau have been leaked online](#), and the [Washington Post reported news of a video call](#) in which Guaidó says he is "about to sign" the contract. Furthermore, several of the Venezuelans who took part in the raid have links to Guaidó, including at least two who [participated in](#) the April 30, 2019 [coup attempt](#).

The paramilitary force that would have resulted from the contract has been described as similar to the [death squads that operated in El Salvador, Nicaragua and Guatemala in the 80's](#). This is no exaggeration. The contract explicitly identifies colectivos as a military target, without ever defining the term. The [nebulousness of this term](#) suggests that anyone who runs afoul of the paramilitaries could be categorized as part of a colectivo.

Leopoldo López, the founder and leader of Guaidó's party Voluntad Popular, recently wrote an opinion piece in El País, Spain's most important newspaper, in which he implied that [chavismo is a virus like Covid-19](#). It is not difficult to see how this sort of rhetoric influenced the contract. [Page 11 of the contract's attachment B](#) authorizes the "on scene commander" of an operation to lethally target certain civil servants of institutions – including the Foreign Ministry, Planning Ministry and Youth Ministry – even in cases that could result in high collateral damage. The message is clear; anyone close to a chavista can be considered expendable.

The United States' role

The Venezuelan government, which was apparently able to stop the raid after being tipped off by sources in Colombia, accused the United States of being involved. The Trump administration has denied any involvement, but there is good reason to suspect otherwise. Secretary of State Pompeo left open the possibility that the U.S. knew “who bankrolled” the operation, while refusing to [“share any more information about what we know took place.”](#) Moreover, the Associated Press reported that the [DEA had informed Homeland Security](#) of Goudreau’s plans to smuggle weapons into Colombia. [Goudreau met twice with Keith Schiller](#), a longtime bodyguard and advisor to President Trump, and [worked security at a Trump campaign rally](#) in 2018. In addition, the Wall Street Journal reported the [CIA was aware of the plan](#).

The plan involved kidnapping President Maduro, taking control of an airport and flying him to the United States, ostensibly to collect on the \$15 million bounty offered by the Department of Justice. Had the mercenaries been successful, it is hard to believe that the Trump administration, with the US Navy floating right outside Venezuela’s maritime border, would not have seized the opportunity to grab President Maduro.

Yet whether the United States government was involved in this particular raid, the Trump administration has been openly and directly supporting violent regime change in Venezuela since April 30, 2019. That is the date Guaidó launched his failed military uprising, in which he tried to take over a Caracas airbase. Had a few things gone differently that day, Venezuela would be in a civil war. Guaidó was responsible then and he is responsible now. Additionally, he was [educated in Washington](#), he [declared himself “president” because of Washington](#), he has [bipartisan political support](#) and he [receives U.S. taxpayer money](#). Given Guaidó’s involvement, it is impossible for Washington to wash its hands of the plot. The Trump administration is responsible for giving him what little power he has, and therefore it is responsible for his actions.

A Growing Liability

Guaidó has denied knowledge of the affair, but he is proving to be a liability for the Trump administration. He has been [photographed with members of a drug cartel](#) who subsequently [claimed Guaidó traded favors with them](#). His team [embezzled funds raised from a “humanitarian aid” concert](#) held in Colombia. He led a [failed uprising in April 2019](#) that was ridiculed around the world, as it consisted of just a few dozen soldiers. He is using Venezuelan funds previously frozen in a Citibank account [to pay his associates \\$5,000 a month](#), while [failing to deliver on promises](#) to send Venezuelan doctors and nurses \$100 for their efforts in fighting Covid-19. Now he faces credible accusations and evidence that he is involved in arms trafficking, financing a terror plot and planning a potential genocide in Venezuela.

The capture of two Americans may change the political landscape, as they are poised to become a point of contention between the Trump and Maduro administrations. Secretary Pompeo said the United States will “use every tool” to secure the release of the two Americans, but to date, there is one tool the Trump administration has never used with regards to Venezuela: dialogue. The best-case scenario is the handover of the pair to the United States as part of a deal to begin direct talks between the two governments. The worst-case scenario is that the Trump administration will perceive them as hostages and retaliate with military action.

Sensible politicians could use this event as a catalyst to spur talks within Venezuela and between Venezuela and the United States. The Puebla Group, a bloc of progressive Latin American politicians that includes ten former heads of state, has done just that, issuing [a statement](#) which warns that military action would lead to “geopolitical instability throughout Latin America” and calls for “democratic dialogue and a peaceful solution” to the conflict.

In the U.S., Democrats have been almost entirely silent on the matter, with the exception of a letter by Senators Chris Murphy, Tom Udall and Tim Kaine that questions the Trump administration’s tactics, but not its strategy or objectives. Unless Democrats begin to take advantage of the liability Guaidó represents and push back against Trump’s regime change efforts, there seems to be little hope of improving U.S. – Venezuela relations, regardless of who wins the presidency in November.

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Featured image: The townspeople of Chuao, Venezuela, being honored for their role in the capture of eight mercenaries. (Source: author/CODEPINK)

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