

## Video: US Sanctions on Venezuela Possibly Worse Than Iraq Sanctions before War

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*News about humanitarian aid shipments to Venezuela almost never compare how tiny a fraction this aid is relative to the devastating damage that US sanctions against Venezuela have caused, which is now as draconian as the pre-Iraq war sanctions were, says CEPR's Mark Weisbrot.*

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**GREG WILPERT:** It's The Real News Network, and I'm Greg Wilpert, coming to you from Baltimore.

The conflict over Venezuela is heating up again. Thursday evening, the former head of Venezuela's intelligence services, Hugo Carvajal, turned against Maduro in a video address. In a statement, he called on the military to reject Maduro, and said the government was completely beset by corruption. He also urged Maduro to take in the humanitarian aid that is being sent by the U.S. and international donors. Carvajal himself had long been under U.S. sanctions and allegations of being involved in drug trafficking. He's currently a representative of Venezuela's National Assembly.

Then on Friday, dueling concerts are taking place on the Venezuela-Colombia border. On the Colombian side, the billionaire and Virgin Atlantic airline founder Richard Branson organized a fundraising concert for humanitarian aid for Venezuela. And on the Venezuelan side, the government organized a rival concert with government supporters. Then on Saturday, self-proclaimed interim president Juan Guaido is promising to deliver tens of millions of dollars of international aid, mainly from the U.S., Canada, Colombia, and Brazil, into Venezuela, with the help of opposition supporters. President Maduro has denounced the effort, saying it is a pretext for military action. International aid groups such as the Red Cross and the UN have declined to participate, saying that the aid has been politicized, and thus does not meet their criteria for involvement.

Meanwhile, U.S.-imposed sanctions continue to wreak havoc on Venezuela's economy. Oil companies report that U.S. Gulf coast refineries are scrambling to find new supply sources for the heavy crude they once received from Venezuela. Venezuela itself says it can sell its oil to India and China instead of the U.S., but it's not clear yet how the payments will be processed. Also, a battle has erupted over who controls Citgo when the U.S. said it would impose a new board of directors that interim president Juan Guaido has named.

Joining me now to discuss the effects of the sanctions and some of the most recent

developments in Venezuela is Mark Weisbrot. Mark is co-director of the Center for Economic and Policy Research in Washington, D.C. Thanks for joining us today, Mark.

**MARK WEISBROT:** Thanks for inviting me, Gregory.

**GREG WILPERT:** So let's start with the sanctions. We've discussed these here before on several occasions, but it's increasingly becoming clear that the last round of sanctions that were imposed on January 28, only five days after opposition leader Juan Guaido swore himself into office, are more draconian than most sanctions the U.S. has imposed. How would you compare these sanctions to, let's say, the ones that have been imposed on Iraq? And just how much damage are they causing at the moment?

**MARK WEISBROT:** Well, the Iraq sanctions during the '90s were quite damaging. The UN estimates, other estimates of the number of children who died as a result of those sanctions is in the hundreds of thousands, during the '90s. And yet these are even worse, because the trade embargo—first you have to understand that when they recognized Guaido as president, that created a trade embargo, because Venezuela sells its oil for dollars around the world. And three quarters of its export markets consist of the United States and the countries that have joined the Trump regime change effort and recognized the Guaido government. And so that money, that foreign exchange, the source of almost all of the foreign exchange for the whole economy of Venezuela—not just the government, but the whole economy—that's gone with this. And they made some, they carved out some exceptions for their oil companies. But those are temporary, and the whole thing is still a sweeping trade embargo.

And so that's quite devastating. Now, they did this to Iraq, but they actually had an oil for food program that allowed them to export a fair amount of oil. So this is really a devastating set of sanctions that they've just imposed. But even before that, since August of 2017, that executive order by Trump created a financial embargo. And that was devastating. That, and I think we discussed this before, you know, that cut hundreds of thousands of barrels of oil out of production, and cost them at least six billion dollars in terms of lost oil production. And again, if you compare that to their total goods imports for 2018, which are \$11 billion, that's huge. Or you compare it to the \$2 billion that they used to spend on medicine.

So this is really a devastating set of sanctions going back quite a while. And if you want to go back further to when Obama issued the executive order in March of 2015, those sanctions also damaged the economy. Because even though they say those sanctions are targeted on individuals when they target government officials who have to handle financial transactions around the world, then that causes enormous problems, as well. And the banks and financial institutions take their cue from that, and they stop lending. And that really started a couple of years before the August of 2017 Trump sanctions.

**GREG WILPERT:** Now, legally, the only way the U.S. can impose sanctions is by naming Venezuela an unusual and extraordinary threat to the national security of the United States. No one ever seems to mention this. Is it perhaps because this is actually an irrelevant clause in U.S. law?

**MARK WEISBROT:** Yes, that's very important. Not only do they say in every executive order since March of 2015 that Venezuela poses an unusual and extraordinary threat to the national security of the United States, but they also declare a national emergency for the United States caused by Venezuela. So it's exactly what Trump did with the wall. Exactly the

same thing. He's declaring a national emergency. And that goes completely unnoticed. But it's—and I think it's important, actually, because organizations like Public Citizen have sued the Trump administration immediately, and some state governments, after he announced that he was going to use—he was going to use the national emergency declaration to build the wall and pay for it and take funds from elsewhere.

And I think a lawsuit could definitely be filed for the same thing around this national emergency. It'd be more difficult to win, because in the United States we don't—the rule of law is very weak when it comes to foreign policy. The courts have generally let the president get away with almost anything. Although that now is also changing, with the House just a week or so ago using the War Powers Resolution to, in fact, restrict the president's ability to get involved in wars. And this is very similar, and the Senate's going to vote on this, and so on.

So that is changing some in Congress. And there's also a bill right now in Congress with 33 cosponsors from Cicilline, Representative Cicilline, and that just says flatly that the Congress will not authorize any military intervention in Venezuela.

**GREG WILPERT:** Actually, I want to get to that point in a moment. But first I want to ask about something else that's a huge issue, which is this coming weekend there will be an effort to bring some monetary aid into Venezuela that the opposition is organizing with the help of the United States and the governments of Colombia and Brazil. Many groups, such as the Inter-American Dialogue, a think tank based in Washington, D.C., are calling on Maduro to accept this aid, but do not want to say a word about the effects of the sanctions. Now, just—this raises the question just how do the sanctions compare to the aid that is being offered?

**MARK WEISBROT:** Yeah, the aid is tiny compared to what the sanctions, the billions of dollars that are lost to the economy. And that's what makes the whole thing so farcical. Imagine here is this huge power, and it's doing everything it can to deprive people of food and medicine. It's really that that's what they're doing. And spare parts, and everything that the economy needs. And wiping out the income of millions of people and doing this very—as forcefully as it can really do. As I said, the only exception they carved out from the latest set of sanctions is to protect—is to protect the profits of some of their own oil industry.

But this is really a massive effort to increase the suffering there so that people will rebel or the army will rebel. They've said that openly. And at the same time, then, they say as a PR stunt we're going to try and get this aid across the border. And then they openly admit, both the Trump administration and the their allies inside Venezuela, that the purpose of this operation is to get the army to disobey orders from Maduro so that it will weaken him enough to topple the government. And they say this very openly. And that's why the international organizations that really care about humanitarian aid, like the International Red Cross or the United Nations, they want nothing to do with this so-called relief effort. But I have to say, you know, if you weren't following this very, very closely, and you were just watching the television news, or most of the news that people get here, their whole PR stunt appears to be pretty solid. It looks like they're actually trying to help, and this evil person that they've demonized is trying to prevent people from getting their benefits and aid.

**GREG WILPERT:** Now, another issue which is related to the point you raised earlier is that a spokesperson for Bernie Sanders recently told Newsweek that Sanders opposes the threat of U.S. military intervention in Venezuela. Immediately, Florida Democrats criticized Sanders

very strongly. And Representative Donna Shalala, as a matter of fact, said that the statement was regrettable, and suggested that Sanders would never be the Democratic nominee for president in 2020.

Now, this also parallels a resolution that you mentioned already that was introduced in the House of Representatives with 33 cosponsors, including Ro Khanna, Tulsi Gabbard, Mark Pocan, and Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez, et cetera, as stating that the president should not have a congressional authority to intervene militarily in Venezuela. Now, do you see this resolution as having a chance of passing? And if not, why are Democrats such as Shalala playing Trump's game in Venezuela?

**MARK WEISBROT:** I think it does have a chance of passing. I think that even the worst kind of pro-sanctions Democrats, like Elliott Engel, the chair of the Foreign Relations Committee, who supported the recognition of Guaido and therefore—as an interim president—and therefore is supporting this new trade embargo. They don't—even they don't want a military option there. They said clearly that there's no—there is not going to be any military option. So that is the majority view, certainly overwhelming majority among Democrats and some Republicans.

Now, how it plays out, you know, with the Florida delegation doing what it's doing and what it's been doing since the Cuban revolution, this is a real curse. You know, these people are just—and I think these people are just looking at it from the point of view of their right-wing base, right-wing Cubans, Venezuelans, other right-wing Latin Americans that go to southern Florida. And this is a lobby. And since Florida is a swing state, this is something that affects the presidential election. They're trying to intimidate Bernie right now. There was a tech piece in Politico going after him.

But I don't think they have even most of the mainstream media on their side on this. You know, or the State Department, or possibly even the Pentagon in terms of the military intervention. And a lot of the other things they're saying they don't—they're in a minority trying to punish him for not being hostile enough to the government of Venezuela. I don't think they'll get that far with this. They really do represent extremist elements. Of course, we do have some of the most violence-prone and extreme elements in Bolton, Rubio, Abrams. Trump himself, who's openly said why don't we attack Venezuela, because they've got the oil and they're in our backyard? And Bolton talking about the oil companies, as well. You know, this is almost unprecedented in the 21st or late 20th century for them to be so candid about this.

So I think though the Florida thing is very big, you know, if they were going to give this relief, so-called relief operation, a name, it should be Operation Florida 2020. If I had to guess the main reason why Trump is doing this, well, the oil is definitely part of it. He looks at these things this way. He said the same thing about Iraq, why didn't we grab their oil. But it's also Florida. And it is—it's a real problem. But I don't think they're going to prevail.

**GREG WILPERT:** OK. Well, we're going to leave it there for now. I was speaking to Mark Weisbrot, co-director of the Center for Economic and Policy Research in Washington, D.C. Thanks again, Mark, for having joined us today.

**MARK WEISBROT:** Thank you, Gregory.

**GREG WILPERT:** And thank you for joining The Real News Network.

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