

Trump Has Gone - Time to End US Sanctions on Cuba, Nicaragua and Venezuela

Now is the time to step up international campaigning against illegal US sanctions in Latin America, writes KEN LIVINGSTONE

By [Ken Livingstone](#)

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The United States has an extensive sanctions programme affecting two dozen countries across the globe, and three of those states singled out for coercive measures are in Latin America: Cuba, Nicaragua and Venezuela.

The cost to those three nations of US sanctions imposed allegedly “to counter threats to national security” are breathtakingly severe and must be stopped.

Not only do these unilateral sanctions cause immense harm to each country’s inhabitants, but they are also illegal under the charters of both the UN and the Organisation of American States.

In the last four years under the Trump administration, all three states have experienced an alarming extension in the breadth and harshness of the sanctions levied against them.

During the period from April 2019 to March 2020, for example, the US introduced 90 new economic actions and measures against Cuba, reaching unprecedented levels of hostility.

Nor are the sanctions — deadly as they are — the only form of aggression that the US has been employing against these three countries.

All have been subjected to internal destabilisation through, for example, US funding of right-wing (and often violent) opposition groups, and disinformation strategies aiming to discredit and isolate them internationally.

The US’s ultimate purpose is always the same: to bring about regime change in the country and enable the US to secure its economic and political dominance in the region.

The damage that US sanctions have imposed on Cuba, Venezuela and Nicaragua is huge.

In the case of Cuba, the six-decade-long blockade is estimated to have caused losses to its economy of over \$144 billion (£105bn).

At its core is the Foreign Assistance Act of 1961 which authorises the US president to establish and maintain a total embargo on trade with Cuba and prohibits the authorisation of any aid to the Cuban government.

Over time the embargo has become a multilayered blockade that not only restricts trade, especially through provisions for enforcing it extraterritorially on non-US companies, but has also frozen and confiscated Cuban assets, limited or prohibited tourism, cut flights to Cuba, and levied a host of other penal measures designed to strangle Cuba's economy and make ordinary life for Cubans as uncomfortable as possible.

For Nicaragua, the US's main vehicle for applying economic pressure to destabilise the country's government and economy is the "Nica Act" (Nicaraguan Investment Conditionality Act), introduced by Trump in December 2018.

This followed the failure by US-funded opposition forces to secure regime change through an attempted violent coup in spring 2018 which led to 200 deaths and untold economic damage.

The Nica Act's aim is to cut Nicaragua off from loans and financial or technical assistance by multilateral-lending institutions such as the World Bank and the IMF.

The Act also grants the president powers to block and prohibit financial and other asset transactions, and sanctions serving and former government officials.

Coupled with these sanctions, the United States Agency for International Development (USAid) committed in 2018 a further \$1.5 million in assistance "to continue to support freedom and democracy in Nicaragua".

USAid has an infamous reputation for funding "civil society" groups and right-wing opposition parties to undermine and oust elected governments seen as detrimental to US interests.

In anticipation that **President Daniel Ortega** and the FSLN party are likely to win the presidential election scheduled for November 2021, **USAid has also secretly hired a contractor to work on plans, codenamed Responsive Assistance in Nicaragua (Rain), to destabilise and replace Nicaragua's elected government.**

The US's aggressive tactics against Venezuela have drawn on its in-depth experience of destabilising and sanctioning both Cuba and Nicaragua in pursuit of regime change.

And the prize for securing such change in Venezuela would arguably be incalculably greater — the world's largest oil reserves, as well as extensive mineral wealth, notably gold and bauxite.

The raft of sanctions applied to Venezuela since an Executive Order in 2015 declaring Venezuela a threat to US national security now amounts to a blockade virtually indistinguishable from that imposed on Cuba.

The effects have been similarly far-reaching, with the Washington-based Centre for Economic and Policy Research calculating that US sanctions led to more than 40,000 deaths in 2017-18 alone.

Since the Covid-19 pandemic struck, these sanctions have had an even greater effect by restricting all three countries' ability to buy medicines and equipment to address the current health emergency.

Opposition to the sanctions has come from a range of voices.

In March 2020 UN secretary-general **Antonio Guterres** called for the waiving of sanctions, saying: "This is the time for solidarity not exclusion."

The Pope has also appealed for an end to sanctions preventing countries from "providing adequate support to their citizens."

And in an unexpected move that may signal a possible thawing in US policy, US Democratic Senator Ron Wyden, who chairs the Senate finance committee, has introduced a Bill to end Cuba's blockade and establish normal trade relations with the US.

A change of president potentially offers an opportunity for constructive engagement and dialogue with Biden.

But given his track record and position to date, a dialogue that could benefit all three countries cannot be assured.

Now more than ever it is vital to step up our expressions of international solidarity with Cuba, Nicaragua and Venezuela in defence of their national sovereignty and to make it clear that sanctions are not only illegal but also unacceptable and unjustifiable.

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*Featured image: US Democratic Senator Ron Wyden, who chairs the Senate finance committee, has introduced a Bill to end Cuba's blockade and establish normal trade relations with the US
(Source: Morning Star)*

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