

‘Weaponizing Human Rights’: UN Chief Bachelet’s Venezuela Report Follows US Regime Change Script

By [Anya Parampil](#)

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Former UN special rapporteur Alfred de Zayas slams UN High Commissioner Bachelet’s report on Venezuela as a politicized collection of baseless accusations by “advocates of regime change”

When United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights Michelle Bachelet traveled to Venezuela earlier this year, she met with an array of citizens who lost family members to right-wing violence in the country.

Among them was Inés Esparragoza, whose 20-year-old son, Orlando Figuera, was doused with gasoline and lit on fire by an opposition mob during violent anti-government riots, known as guarimbas, in May 2017.

“He was stabbed, beaten and cruelly burnt alive,” Esparragoza declared before Bachelet in March. “Simply because of the color of his shirt, the color of his skin, and because he said he was Chavista.”

While Esparragoza poured her family’s torment out before the former Chilean president, Bachelet scribbled notes and glanced down at horrific photos which captured the moment masked men attacked Figuera. As the young man knelt to the ground, a gang of anti-government thugs poured petrol over his body before lighting a match.

“I call on the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights to make justice,” she said. “These are not peaceful protesters, they are bloodthirsty.”

Yet shockingly, when Bachelet released her long-anticipated [report on the situation in Venezuela](#) on July 5, it was as though that meeting never took place.

Apparently unmoved by the testimony of Figuera’s grieving mother, or anyone else’s story of injury and suffering, Bachelet made no mention of opposition violence in her report. Her failure to properly detail the plight of Venezuelans who have suffered at the hands of anti-government rioters was just one of many glaring omissions which has one of the top international legal experts to have served at the UN calling the high commissioner’s objectivity into question.

Alfred de Zayas became the first UN rapporteur to visit Venezuela in 21 years, traveling to the country in 2017 to examine the social and economic impact of unilateral coercive measures applied by the US. He determined US-led sanctions were largely to blame for the country's hardship, accusing Washington of waging "economic warfare," and comparing its harsh measures to "[medieval sieges of towns](#)."

De Zayas was no less scathing towards Bachelet's report, slamming it as a politicized document that depended heavily on unfounded claims by activists dedicated to Maduro's removal.

"The new Bachelet report is methodologically flawed, as were indeed the earlier reports, relying overwhelmingly on unverified allegations by opposition politicians and advocates of regime change who are only interested in weaponizing human rights," the former special rapporteur told The Grayzone.

"The same occurred with the reports of [former UNHCHR] Zeid [Raad Al Hussein]," de Zayas continued, referring to Bachelet's predecessor. "The lack of professionalism on the part of the UN secretariat is a disgrace and should be exposed by civil society."

"I was not a UN employee with a salary, and no one could give me instructions," de Zayas noted, "A high commissioner is not independent and is subject to political pressures. I endured pre mission, during mission and post mission mobbing. A rapporteur is obliged to be independent. Sure enough, I was pressured, intimidated, insulted by non governmental organizations and even colleagues, but I was able to proceed with my investigation and reflect what I saw and learned on the ground. I am not an ideologue. There are many in the U N secretariat."

Prior to serving as UN high commissioner, Bachelet was a career politician in Chile, where she became the country's first female president in 2006. She was the most centrist figure among the leaders of the progressive "pink tide" that momentarily washed across Latin America. This January, a years-long [corruption investigation](#) into her son's land deals was closed.

Conveniently ignoring the impact of US sanctions

Just three short paragraphs in Bachelet's 16-page document are dedicated to the crushing sanctions the US and its allies have imposed against Venezuela since 2015. She went on to write off the claim "that due to over-compliance, banking transactions have been delayed or rejected, and assets frozen, [hindering] the State's ability to import food and medicines" as the government merely "assign[ing] blame" for its difficulties.

Bachelet's dismissal of the destructive impact of sanctions on the Maduro government overlook years of sustained economic attack on the Venezuelan economy by the most powerful nation on earth. With the Obama administration's [move](#) to declare Venezuela's government a "national security threat" in March of 2015, Venezuela's economy and its ability to restructure its debt have been under systematic attack.

As the independent Venezuelan outlet Mision Verdad [reported](#),

"Venezuela was catalogued by the French financial company Coface as the country with the highest risk in Latin America, similar to African countries that

are currently in situations of armed conflict... From 2015 onwards, the country-risk variable began to increase artificially in order to hinder the entry of international financing”.

Even mainstream outlets like The Wall Street Journal have [acknowledged](#) that the measures applied by the US “have made banks more reluctant to touch accounts that might relate to Venezuela for fear of sanctions violations.”. WSJ even noted that Goldman Sachs was criticized in 2017 “when it was revealed that the company bought about \$2.8 billion in Venezuelan bonds, which were seen as a lifeline to the Maduro government”.

According to the US government’s [own summary](#) of Venezuela related sanctions, unilateral measures introduced by the Trump Administration in 2017 and 2018 “restrict the Venezuelan government’s access to U.S. debt and equity markets” and “[prohibit] transactions related to the purchase of Venezuelan debt”.

Considering these restrictions and Washington’s move to freeze what National Security Advisor John Bolton [estimated](#) to be \$7 billion worth of Venezuela’s US-based assets, it’s hard to understand how Bachelet so easily dismissed the idea that sanctions have contributed to the economic crisis. As The Grayzone [reported](#) this May, the US State Department openly bragged about its ability to destroy Venezuela’s economy in a factsheet published on its own website, which it quickly deleted out of apparent embarrassment.

Among the “key outcomes of US policy” listed in the document was the fact that oil production in the country had been drastically reduced.

“If I were the State Department I wouldn’t brag about causing a cut in oil production to 763,000 barrels per day,” Mark Weisbrot, Co-Director of the Center for Economic and Policy research told The Grayzone at the time. “This means even more premature deaths than the tens of thousands that resulted from sanctions last year.”

In April, Weisbrot co-authored a [report](#) which documented 40,000 preventable deaths that occurred between 2017 and 2018 as a direct result of US sanctions. This groundbreaking report was also ignored by Bachelet, who had far more resources at her disposal to investigate its disturbing conclusions and perhaps prevent thousands more deaths.

While Bachelet did concede “sanctions are exacerbating” Venezuela’s economic woes, she argued that the current crisis predated those measures, thus transferring blame onto the policies of a besieged government.

The author of this article recently participated in a panel discussion during which Venezuela’s ambassador to the United Nations, Samuel Moncada, addressed accusations like these.

I recently addressed this very point along w Ambassador [@SMoncada_VEN](#). I note the fact that Venezuela's economy is still largely controlled by the private sector, while Ambassador Moncada highlights faulty logic: "if we are committing suicide, what do you need sanctions for?"

pic.twitter.com/Ydacd4yUbC

— Anya Parampil (@anyaparampil) [July 5, 2019](#)

Responding to the widely repeated accusation of economic mismanagement, Moncada asked,

“If we are committing [economic] suicide, what do you need sanctions for? The problem is they are applying sanctions as never before. So they actually think that sanctions have an aim and an end result, and they are trying to implode the country.”

Moncada also explained how the 2015 oil crash impacted Venezuela’s economy, insisting that “we tried, perhaps erroneously, to keep the very same social support policies going without the oil” wealth on which the government traditionally depended. The international oil market collapsed in 2015, just months after Reuters [reported](#) US Secretary of State John Kerry met with Saudi King Abdullah in order to discuss plans to increase petrol production.

I also explain that since 2015, sanctions have prevented Venezuela from paying its debt & assert the only reason to sanction the country's top diplomat ([@jaarreaza](#)) is to support regime change. [@SMoncada_VEN](#) notes crash in oil market also contributed to current crisis. pic.twitter.com/z9FBtUYnus

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Former special rapporteur de Zayas agreed with that determination, telling The Grayzone,

“the initial cause of the economic crisis was, of course, the dramatic fall in oil prices. The current crisis is ‘made in the USA’ and corresponds directly to the sanctions and financial blockade.”

Bachelet claimed Venezuela’s oil industry was “already in crisis before any sectoral sanctions were imposed,” discounting the ebb and flow of the international market. She also noted a “drastic reduction of oil exports” between the years 2018 and 2019, but stunningly failed to connect the decline to US sanctions unleashed in January 2019 which specifically aimed to prevent Venezuela’s oil industry from exporting products to the outside world.

By the logic of High Commissioner Bachelet, Maduro is so incredibly incompetent or evil that he refused to pay his country’s bills and destroyed its entire oil industry singlehandedly in an effort to starve his own people.

Attacking Venezuela’s food distribution program with baseless claims

In 2016, the government of Maduro introduced the Local Committees for Supply and Food Distribution program, or CLAP, to offset the impact of sanctions and the economic crisis brought on by falling oil prices. Today, the program provides food and sanitary supplies at almost no cost to six million families – a whopping slice of Venezuela’s population.

According to Bachelet, Maduro did not initiate this program to feed the most vulnerable among his country's population, but in order to promote "intelligence gathering and defence tasks." She provided no supporting evidence for her claim.

Bachelet also baselessly claimed that the food delivery program was used in a politically prejudicial manner, asserting that some families "were not included in the distribution lists... because they were not government supporters."

Bachelet's attack on CLAP came just as the Trump administration [threatened](#) to target the food delivery program with sanctions.

The claims made by Bachelet during an abbreviated tour of Venezuela stood at stark odds with the findings of multiple media outlets, Venezuelan citizens and foreigners who recently traveled to Venezuela to witness CLAP distribution.

Terri Mattson of CODEPINK spent three months living with a family in Venezuela earlier this year and was also on the aforementioned panel with this author and Ambassador Moncada.

"It's a fantastic program and it's helping people who would not otherwise have access to food," Mattson remarked. "My neighborhood... was predominantly opposition. Those people got food just as we in the chavista household got food. The food was distributed through the community council, the community council was majority opposition... everyone got food, everybody participated in the weekly community council meetings."

As a reporter who recently witnessed the incredible local organization required to deliver CLAP, I can say these are outright falsehoods. But don't take my word for it, listen to Terry Madsen of [@codepink](#) & another US citizen who recently traveled to Venezuela dispel that lie: pic.twitter.com/umthOsCPgl

— Anya Parampil (@anyaparampil) [July 5, 2019](#)

Bachelet's assault on CLAP will undoubtedly be used to justify the US government's attempts to sanction the program and further contribute to the starvation of Venezuelans. If a critical food distribution program is undermined from the outside, what other outcome can be expected but more hunger?

Ironically, Bachelet's critique of CLAP directly contradicts the recommendation at the end of her report, which requested that the government "take all necessary measures to ensure availability and accessibility of food, water, essential medicines and healthcare services," to average Venezuelans. Yet she did not demand the US government end the sanctions it has imposed against the country, this rendering the fulfillment of her recommendation nearly impossible.

"The government of Venezuela has demonstrated that it is already doing its utmost to ensure availability and accessibility of food and medicine," former special rapporteur de Zayas said in response, "what the high commissioner should have demanded is the immediate lifting of US and EU sanctions."

Bachelet's recommendations amount to an all-out attack on the structure of Bolivarian

revolution. If implemented, they would not only amount to the dismantling of the government's structure, but would likely lead to society-wide chaos and mass starvation.

Echoing US propaganda on Venezuela's colectivos

Besides assailing the CLAP program, Bachelet called for the government to "disarm and dismantle pro-government armed civilian groups" known as colectivos, accusing them of "exercising social control".

Her comments echoed [sensationalist](#) US corporate media headlines as well as allegations by [John Bolton](#) and Florida Senator [Mark Rubio](#), who have attempted to brand colectivos as violent gangs personally controlled by President Maduro.

This March, The Canary's John McEvoy spent two weeks living with a colectivo in Caracas. The British reporter found that the groups serve an entirely different purpose than the one relayed back to the Western public by corporate media and centrist leadership.

"After the election of Hugo Chávez in 1998, colectivos mushroomed across Venezuela with the wide scale devolution of power to local communities," McEvoy [explained](#), "their demonisation in the corporate media serves a distinct purpose: to delegitimize Venezuela's grassroots democratic movements."

"As across Latin America, social organisations in Venezuela are deemed incompatible with the opposition's US-backed neoliberal project," the reporter continued. "They are consequently dehumanised, delegitimize, and attacked by a compliant media that categorically ignore their roots, popularity, and social value."

With this context, Bachelet's call for the colectivos to disarm appears to equal a demand that the country surrender its last line of defense against an ongoing regime change operation that has featured assassination attempts and threats of a full scale military invasion.

When Bachelet met with victims of guarimba violence this March, many hoped it meant those voices ignored by mainstream western media would finally be heard on the international stage. Yet the high commissioner decided their stories were unworthy, instead offering up a document which reads like a hand out from the US State Department.

And like clockwork, the State Department [seized on Bachelet's report](#) to drive its unilateral campaign for regime change, but this time with the stamp of UN approval and behind the guise of a respectable center-left political leader.

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Anya Parampil is a journalist based in Washington, DC. She previously hosted a daily progressive afternoon news program called In Question on RT America. She has produced and reported several documentaries, including on-the-ground reports from the Korean peninsula and Palestine.

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