

Press Releases: Briefing on Venezuela

Special Briefing
Elliott Abrams

U.S. Special Representative for Venezuela

Washington, DC
March 1, 2019

MR ABRAMS: Good morning. Apologize in advance for the cough.

QUESTION: Everyone's got it.

MR ABRAMS: Then I take back the apology. A few things to start with. First, there was a session of the UN Security Council yesterday on Venezuela. The United States presented a resolution that got the requisite nine votes for passage but was then vetoed by Russia and China. The Russians put in a resolution which got four votes, which I would call pathetic, and I think the results in the council demonstrate that there is very broad international support for democracy in Venezuela and for the National Assembly and Interim President Guaido.

Secondly, an announcement. The United States has imposed new visa restrictions on individuals responsible for undermining Venezuela's

democracy. We are applying this policy to numerous Maduro-aligned officials and their families. Maduro supporters that abuse or violate human rights, steal from the Venezuelan people, or undermine Venezuela's democracy are not welcome in the United States. Neither are their family members who enjoy a privileged lifestyle at the expense of the liberty and prosperity of millions of Venezuelans. The United States will continue to take appropriate action against Maduro and the corrupt actors and human rights violators and abusers who surround him.

The United States urges all nations to step up economic pressure on Maduro and his corrupt associates as well as restrict visas for his inner circle. Now is the time to act in support of democracy and in response to the desperate needs of the Venezuelan people. That's first.

Second, Treasury today announced additional sanctions. The United States also took action against six security officials of the illegitimate Maduro regime, individuals associated with the obstruction of the entry of international humanitarian aid into Venezuela or violence against those who attempted to deliver the assistance. Sanctions were imposed on Richard Jesus Lopez, commanding general of the Venezuelan National Guard; Jesus Maria Mantilla, commander of the Strategic Integral Defense Region Guayana; Alberto Mirtiliano Bermudez, division general for the Integral Defense Zone in Bolivar State; Jose Leonardo Norono, division general and commander for the Integral Defense Zone in Tachira State; Jose Miguel Dominguez, chief commissioner of the FAES, the special forces in Tachira; and Cristhiam Abelardo Morales, the national police director.

The United States and the international community continue to support the Venezuelan people as they strive to reclaim their democracy. We must support Interim President Juan Guaido's presidency per the Venezuelan constitution, the National Assembly, and the will of the Venezuelan people. Treasury will have made that announcement earlier this morning.

Okay, questions.

MR GREENAN: Matt.

QUESTION: Thank you. Just on the visa – can you give us a rough idea how many even if you can't name them?

MR ABRAMS: I'm treading carefully here. Dozens, let me just say that.

QUESTION: Okay. But – and but weren't there some that were already (inaudible)?

MR ABRAMS: Yes, yes. This is in addition.

QUESTION: So dozens more?

MR ABRAMS: Dozens more. And we continue to look at associates, close associates of Maduro who, with their families, have visas to the United States. This is an ongoing process.

QUESTION: Okay. And then secondly, and more importantly, I'm just – I'm wondering, are you guys, meaning the administration, at all concerned that the initial, for lack of a better word, excitement over Guaido and the recognition is losing some momentum and – given that Maduro doesn't seem to be going anywhere? He's certainly not taking the national security advisor's advice to go sit on a beach outside of Venezuela, and so are you concerned that you're losing momentum?

And then – and related to that, there is one member of Congress in particular, a senator, who has suggested that Maduro might meet the same fate as Qadhafi in Libya. And I – does that help or hurt your cause or your efforts to build momentum?

MR ABRAMS: I'm not actually going to get into that, commenting on what particular senators say, but I –

QUESTION: Well, forget I – forget the line about any senator. The comparisons between Maduro and suggesting that he might meet the fate of Qadhafi, does that – does that help your cause or –

MR ABRAMS: I'm not going to get into that other than to say that I think that dictatorships come to an end. Some last for a very long time, others a much shorter time. This one in Venezuela will also come to an end. We hope that it comes to an end quickly and peacefully. I'm not concerned about the loss of momentum that some people allege. You saw Juan Guaido become much more of an international figure in the last week than he had previously been. He'd not been very well known, but now he's been meeting with a series of Latin American presidents, our Vice President. He's in Brazil and Paraguay, so – after visiting Bogota, where there were several Latin American presidents.

The – what underlies all this is not anything the United States is doing. What underlies it is the desire of the Venezuelan people to escape from the condition of dictatorship and economic misery that they are suffering, and that has not diminished and isn't diminishing.

MR GREENAN: Lesley.

QUESTION: Hello, how are you? How much diplomacy – how much effective diplomacy can you make when Russia and China continue to undermine your efforts? You probably saw today that the Russians have sent wheat supplies to Maduro, so – and at this stage it looks like sanctions is one of the only viable pressure points that the U.S. has.

So my second question after this one is how have you managed to get and who is on board with adding sanctions against Maduro? So which countries?

MR ABRAMS: I'm not – you know I'm not going to make announcements on behalf of other countries.

QUESTION: Of course.

MR ABRAMS: I think you will see additional sanctions tied to the behavior of the regime. And if the regime engages in additional particularly provocative

acts, I think you will see more international reactions.

Clearly the support of Russia and China for the Maduro regime helps the regime. I don't think you're going to see large amounts of additional money put in by either Russia or China, but their political support, their diplomatic support helps the regime, and we have made the argument – unsuccessfully to date – to both Russia and China that they're not helping themselves. That is, if their concern – or to the degree their concern is about the recovery of monies they have lent or invested, a bankrupt Venezuelan economy will never be able to repay those amounts. Only a Venezuela in recovery will be able to do so, and that's not going to happen under the Maduro regime.

QUESTION: So you can't really – I mean, Maduro won't step down until you've got Russia and China stepping away.

MR ABRAMS: Well, I would say Maduro won't step down until the day he steps down, and that day will come.

MR GREENAN: Shawn.

QUESTION: Can I just follow up on the issue of Russia, the Russian announcement of wheat, of medical supplies? How does the U.S. feel about this? Could this be something significant? If the U.S. goal is to help the people of Venezuela, how do you feel about Russian aid going –

MR ABRAMS: Well, the problem we have with various kinds of aid is where does it go. We know very clearly that for years the regime has corruptly sold some aid that's delivered and has used other portions of the aid exclusively for supporters of the regime – in other words, it becomes a political weapon rather than a means of improving the life of most Venezuelans. And I think it's fair to ask that question about any aid that's given to or through the regime. Obviously we are in favor of giving humanitarian assistance to Venezuela. We are not in favor of giving it to this corrupt regime.

MR GREENAN: (Inaudible.)

QUESTION: Gustau Alegret, NTN-24. I was wondering if you could share some more details about those family members that are going to be sanctioned by the U.S.

And second question, what the Maduro regime is requesting in the conversations that are having with you or the U.S. administration? And Foreign Minister Arreaza suggested this week in Geneva a potential meeting between Trump and Maduro. Is that an option for the U.S.?

MR ABRAMS: I can't reveal much at all about the visa revocations. I am told by the lawyers that their – according to their reading of the statute, we just can't do that. It's visa confidential information. I would be happy to do so if we were permitted. We can't by law.

QUESTION: Just the number?

MR ABRAMS: I don't even know if I'm actually permitted to give the number, and I noticed that in the announcements the number is not there. I will ask if we can do that.

Conversations with the regime. Our conversations with the regime, the de facto regime, are primarily about the safety of Americans. As I've noted here before, we have an embassy. We have 12 Americans in prison in Venezuela, we have tens of thousands of American citizens in Venezuela, and the protection of all American citizens is at the top of our list of concerns. So in any situation like this, you talk with the guys who have the guns, who have the power right now, yes, to protect Americans.

I would – I guess on the question of meetings that the President – meetings with the President, that really is a question for the White House.

MR GREENAN: Michele Kelemen, NPR.

QUESTION: Are you confident that Guaido will be able to go back into the country, and what if anything is the U.S. doing about that? And just following up on the question of your meetings, did you have meetings with Maduro's representatives at the UN when you were there this week?

MR ABRAMS: No. The answer to the second question is no.

The answer to the first question is that we, I think and many other countries, are very concerned about Interim President Guaido's ability to go back home, which he has a right to do as a Venezuelan citizen, and to go back home safely. Because a number of regime officials have actually threatened him with arrest. We certainly hope that he is able to go home safely. We know that there are dozens and dozens of other governments who share that concern. I think that if he were arrested on his return, you would see a very large reaction on the part of the Venezuelan people and on the part of the international community.

MR GREENAN: Venezuela TV.

QUESTION: Thank you. Good afternoon. Just to follow up the question of my colleague, you can name – you can give us the number, or you can give us the names, but they are already being expelled from the United States, these family members? This is the first question.

And the second one will be: Venezuelan people was expecting on the February 23rd that Maduro were overthrown. And – because they thought that this humanitarian aid will go into the country. What will be the next step from the United States to put more pressure on the dictatorship?

MR ABRAMS: On the first question, we take a look at visas and we revoke them. In some cases people can be in the U.S., in other cases they may be outside the U.S. That's not a primary consideration for us. And you will find – you won't find, because we can't give you the information, but there is a mix.

As to next steps, well, you see some of the next steps. Pardon me. As to next steps, you see some of the next steps right now. You see visa revocations,

you see additional sanctions, you see moves in the United Nations. We're having – we are having conversations with governments that have not yet acknowledged Juan Guaido as the interim president, urging them to do so. We have conversations with lots of governments about what efforts we in the international community, particularly the democratic community, can take together to put additional pressure on the regime and to show additional support for the National Assembly, for Juan Guaido, and for the Venezuelan people.

MR GREENAN: Dmitry.

QUESTION: I wanted to know if you and the Russian diplomats, Russian officials, are engaged in any direct, meaningful interactions, or you only trade accusations from podiums?

MR ABRAMS: I had a very nice conversation with the Russian ambassador to the UN yesterday prior to the session and prior to his attacks. Yes, there are conversations obviously constantly between the United States and Russia on a variety of issues, including this one.

QUESTION: You mean yourself? Including you?

MR ABRAMS: Including by me, yes.

QUESTION: Okay.

MR GREENAN: Nicole, CNN.

QUESTION: Hi. Thank you for doing this. This morning or earlier today Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov suggested that he thinks the U.S. will intervene militarily, and he named you personally. I want to read you what he said. "Elliott Abrams" –

QUESTION: You look like you can't wait. (Laughter.)

QUESTION: – "just escalates the situation that would provoke an explosion and bloodshed in Venezuela to justify military intervention, as the U.S. wishes." So could you please respond?

MR ABRAMS: Oh, I have known Foreign Minister Lavrov for 15 years. There was a time in the Bush administration when I was working on the Middle East. We had the Middle East Quartet which I participated in, and he – the Quartet was U.S., EU, UN, Russia.

QUESTION: (Off-mike.)

MR ABRAMS: Yes. And he is still foreign minister. So I've known him for quite a while. I don't think he actually believes that we're attempting to do that, and I think, as you know, we are not attempting to do that. The United States is pursuing a policy of economic, financial, political, diplomatic pressure on the de facto regime in Venezuela in support of Juan Guaido, the interim president, the National Assembly, the Venezuelan people.

We continue to say and we always will that all options are on the table because they always are. But I think anyone who actually looks at American policy in Venezuela could not reach that conclusion.

MR GREENAN: Courtney, Wall Street Journal.

QUESTION: A bipartisan group of senators has introduced legislation that would encourage granting of temporary protected status to Venezuelans in the United States. Is that part of the administration's considerations, conversations with lawmakers or others?

MR ABRAMS: Conversations, sure. I mean, when I have gone up on the Hill in the last few weeks, that is a question that's frequently raised, and it's something that obviously the administration has to talk about internally. There has been no decision. It will have to be considered not only here at State but clearly by the Department of Homeland Security and ultimately the White House, but it is not something on which a decision has been made.

QUESTION: Hi. Shayna Estulin, i2NEWS. There was a tense exchange between you and Congresswoman Ilhan Omar a couple of weeks ago. What do you think that was all about? And two, have you guys worked things out? Are you all good?

MR ABRAMS: We've not engaged in further conversations. I really don't know what that was all about. You would have to ask the congresswoman what her – what her intent was in that colloquy.

MR GREENAN: We have time for one last question. Abbie.

QUESTION: Thank you so much. Yesterday at the UN you mentioned that if Maduro stayed in power there could be 5 million people who are fleeing Venezuela. Is there any push within the administration to take in more refugees from Venezuela given those rather stark numbers?

MR ABRAMS: The number comes – you've got it too now, gave it back to me. The number comes from a mathematical extrapolation. We – generally about – there's a lot of movement, or there was, on the Colombian-Venezuelan border. We – the number was something like 5,000 people a day additionally going into Colombia, so just do the math. You would reach about 5 million at the end of calendar 2019.

On all of these questions regarding admissions to the United States, again, it's not just a State Department question, it's an administration question. It's one that we will have to talk about and talk to Congress about. The one thing that we have done and continue to do is to make sure that in the places where most Venezuelans go – Colombia, Peru, Brazil – we give more and more help. And we have every – I guess I'd say every week been announcing additional amounts of assistance to help them cope.

And it's worth saying it's a real burden, as you can well imagine, from the point of view of public schools taking in more of more children, from the point of view of labor markets, from the point of view of food supplies, from the point of view of hospitals. It's a real burden, and it's one that we should salute those neighboring countries for undertaking. And we are trying

to help them with financial assistance to help defray these costs.

MR GREENAN: Thank you very much, everybody.

The Office of Website Management, Bureau of Public Affairs, manages this site as a portal for information from the U.S. State Department. External links to other Internet sites should not be construed as an endorsement of the views or privacy policies contained therein.