

Press Releases: Interview With Gesell Tobias of VOA Spanish

Interview
Michael R. Pompeo

Secretary of State

Asuncion, Paraguay
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QUESTION: Thank you, Secretary Pompeo, for another time, another opportunity to talk to you.

SECRETARY POMPEO: It's great to be with you again.

QUESTION: Thank you. Let's begin with one of the hottest topics, Venezuela. This is one of the topics you have been talking about for quite a long time already, and I would like to know how you can explain to the Venezuelan people who is the real president. We take into consideration that some Venezuelans still pay taxes to the government of Nicolas Maduro. If a government, a foreign government, needs to help their own citizens living in Venezuela, they need to get in contact with Maduro's officers. How can we explain that to the Venezuelan people?

SECRETARY POMPEO: That's a great and important question. The Venezuelan people have spoken. The sham election that gave Maduro the pretend authority that he has – the world has recognized. There are now 54 countries in addition to the people of Venezuela who recognize that Maduro is not a legitimate leader. He still has control of elements of power, to be sure, but the people have spoken; we know what they want.

Maduro and his henchmen have destroyed this nation. The Venezuelan people can see that very plainly. It's why they didn't want him back. They gave power to the National Assembly, now Juan Guaido, in a way that will ultimately deliver true democracy and prosperity back to Venezuela.

You know the history. This is a rich nation, a wealthy nation, a nation of people who are industrious and are prepared to work very, very hard. What they need is a leader who is prepared to help them, not be corrupt, not turn over power to the Cubans, and demand interventions to save them by the Russians. The new leadership will do that, and the United States stands ready to support not only the Venezuelan people but all of the countries in this region – we're sitting here today in Paraguay – the countries of this region

who recognize the same.

QUESTION: What about if Maduro continues to hold the military power and to hold the city? Does the U.S. have a new strategy to go – does Maduro have a deadline, for example, for the U.S. Government?

SECRETARY POMPEO: So the strategy is not just an American strategy. It's the Venezuelan people's strategy. The opposition groups banded together, made clear that it was unacceptable what Maduro's regime did. They gave Juan Guaido the authority through the National Assembly to lead their nation forward. This won't be an American solution to this problem. It'll be the solution that the Venezuelan people choose.

I remark sometimes people think Maduro is winning, and yet he's handed over all of his power to the Cubans, to the Russians. This is weakness from Maduro. And so this weakness will ultimately lead to his departure, and democracy and prosperity will be restored in Venezuela. I am very confident of that.

QUESTION: And I know you already answered this question many times, but I have to ask. Are all options on the table still?

SECRETARY POMPEO: Of course. They remain on the table. We keep all options on the table because it's very important, in that we don't know how things will proceed. The Venezuelan people are entitled to the democracy that they have demanded, and we want to make sure that the resources of the United States of America aren't foreclosed from being used if that turns out to be the right thing to do.

QUESTION: Now, as you mentioned, Maduro has the support of Russia and China. Does that turn a decision against the government of Maduro more complex to take? Could this rise tensions between Washington and the Kremlin?

SECRETARY POMPEO: I always remark I'll hear some of the Maduro people talk about intervention in Venezuela. The Russians will say the Americans shouldn't intervene in Venezuela. I mean, it's almost funny to say, right? They have intervened in the most fundamental ways. The Cubans own the security apparatus. I would think if you were a Venezuelan military leader, you'd be embarrassed by that, right? The people, the people of Venezuela, want their own security. They want their own democracy. They want Venezuelans to lead their nation, not people from a small island, not people from Russia. They want their country to be led by their own people, and that's what – that's what Brazil and Colombia, the Lima Group, the OAS, here in Paraguay, that's what all the leaders of the region are demanding, and it's what the United States stands ready to support.

QUESTION: Is there any line of communication between U.S. officials and Venezuelan militaries?

SECRETARY POMPEO: I don't think there's any mistake about what America's position is with respect to the Venezuelan military. We've made clear publicly that they ought not to continue to support Maduro, that this regime

is over, it's done, its day is finished, and that a new page needs to be turned, and that those who continue to support Maduro will face their own consequences, and those who make a different decision, those military leaders that make the decision to defend the Venezuelan people, will find happier days.

QUESTION: And does the U.S. support or has given any advice to the Guaido government about giving amnesty to any Venezuelan military who turns their back on Venezuelan government?

SECRETARY POMPEO: Sure, we're talked with Juan Guaido about what a first day would look like, right? Maduro will leave, and we want to make sure that that next day that the world stands ready to support Venezuela. That will involve making decisions about how to address the transgressions of senior military leaders, those that inflicted violence, those who did harm to Venezuelans – well, they'll be held accountable. Those who made a different decision, a better decision, a decision on behalf of the democratic institutions of Venezuela, will be treated very differently.

QUESTION: With many countries in Latin America turning to the right and with the economical crisis in Venezuela at its worst, do you think the Iranian Government still have some presence in Latin America? And if it does, is it still a threat for the U.S. national security?

SECRETARY POMPEO: So the question is does the – do the Iranians? Yes. There's no doubt Iranian money remains in South America being used for malign purposes, supporting Hizballah, supporting transnational criminal organizations, supporting efforts at terrorism throughout the region. The United States is working with our partners in this area to take down those networks, to take down that risk.

IRGC – you saw the other day there was an air flight straight, straight from Tehran to Caracas. This is Iran intervening in South America. That's not in the best interest of the South American people, and the United States stands ready. We see Iran for what it is, the world's largest state sponsor of terror. That's a global threat, and we're prepared to push back against it not only in the Middle East but in South America and wherever we find that threat present.

QUESTION: Moving forward, Secretary Pompeo, yesterday you mentioned in a speech from Santiago, in Santiago, and you used Chile as an example, as a model for economical growth. But Chile also have many trades with China – \$43 billion, if I'm not mistaken – and the U.S. comes as a second partner. Can any country from Latin America have economical and diplomatic relationship with China while at the same time they do with the United States?

SECRETARY POMPEO: Well, of course. What we have said about China is very clear. The United States has big economic relationships with China. We want China to thrive and prosper.

Here's what we don't want, especially in South America. We don't want China to show up with bags full of money and bribe officials. We don't want China

to show up and put Huawei or Chinese technology into the infrastructure of these countries so that the citizens, the citizens of Chile or the citizens of Paraguay, have their information, their private information, stolen by the Chinese Government. We don't want corrupt activity.

China should compete. We have democracies here in South America now. This is a glorious thing where there's free markets and capitalism and opportunity. That value set of transparency, of the rule of law, that's the one the South American people are demanding. It is not what China brings.

If China shows up to compete on a commercial basis, that seems perfectly reasonable. When they show up with malign intent, to give money with strings attached, which will destroy the sovereignty of a South American nation, that's not good for the people in that country, and the United States is prepared to help those countries recognize that threat and to offer alternatives to it.

QUESTION: Changing the topic a little bit, the U.S. cut the funds for three countries in Central America – Honduras, Guatemala, and El Salvador. Is this a final decision, or can they make things better and gain the confidence of the U.S. Government and also the money?

SECRETARY POMPEO: Yeah, of course, they can. The United States is the most generous nation when it comes to both humanitarian and foreign assistance of any country in the world. The Trump administration has maintained that.

What we want to make sure is where we provide those resources, those dollars from the American taxpayer, that they are effective, that we get outcomes not only what we want but that those countries want as well. So President Trump's decision, we saw that those countries weren't doing what needed to be done to prevent this enormous migration challenge, this crisis that the United States has at its southern border. As those countries work to develop systems to prevent their citizens from taking this incredibly dangerous journey from Guatemala, from Honduras, or from El Salvador through Mexico into the United States, when those countries begin to take actions that stop that, we'll reconsider that decision.

QUESTION: And my last question, Secretary. This week Nicaragua will remember a year since the political and social crisis began. More than 350 people died in this crisis. The negotiations are very slow right now, and their oppression continues with people who has demonstrated publicly. Is the United States taking new steps against the government of the president in Nicaragua?

SECRETARY POMPEO: That's a great question. Here I am in Paraguay. I was in Chile. I'll be in Peru, I'll be in Colombia, before I head back to the United States. You watch most of the countries in South and Central America turning in the direction of freedom, in the direction of liberty, in the direction of democracy; and yet, you have Venezuela and Nicaragua stuck in history, stuck with dictatorships, stuck with bad leadership, kleptocrats, stealing from their own people.

Our efforts in Nicaragua are very similar to those in Venezuela. We want the

Nicaraguan people to have all the great things that they are entitled to have and that they so desperately want. And Mr. Ortega and his wife both need to change their ways in order to give Nicaragua that very opportunity.

QUESTION: Secretary Pompeo, thank you very much for your time with Voice of America's Spanish Service.

SECRETARY POMPEO: Thank you very much. Thank you, sir. It's great to see you again.

QUESTION: Thank you.

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