

Press Releases: Special Representative for Venezuela Elliott Abrams

Special Briefing
Elliott Abrams

U.S. Special Representative for Venezuela

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MR PALLADINO: Happy Friday, everybody.

QUESTION: Happy Friday.

MR PALLADINO: Good to see you all. We have back again this week Special Representative for Venezuela.

QUESTION: An encore performance.

MR PALLADINO: There is important things to talk about, so let's get to it, please.

MR ABRAMS: Okay, hi. I wanted to provide an update on Venezuela, which had another momentous week. Interim President Juan Guaido's return to Venezuela was an important milestone for his efforts to restore democracy to his country. The warm welcome he received from Venezuelans and the international community is a sign of the broad support he enjoys. You also know that the regime illegitimately declared, attempted to declare the German ambassador to Venezuela Daniel Kreiner persona non grata. The United States stands with Germany and the more than 50 other countries in the world recognizing Juan Guaido as the interim president of Venezuela.

Humanitarian aid – our humanitarian aid flights continue to Cucuta – there was a flight this week – in support of the urgent humanitarian needs of the Venezuelan people. And as you know, since February 4th we have pre-positioned hundreds of metric tons of critical relief supplies in Colombia and Brazil, procured internationally and also procured locally there to help tens of thousands of Venezuelans. Yesterday's flight included lifesaving medical supplies for hospitals and clinics, and we are continuing to try to find ways to support the people of Venezuela during this humanitarian crisis and ways to get that aid in.

On visas, earlier this week Vice President Pence announced another 77 visa revocations of regime officials and their families. You remember that last time I was here I announced 49. That's going to continue. We are going to continue to use this tool to show these officials and their families they are not welcome in the United States and to show that fact to all Venezuelans. We are using sanctions and diplomatic actions to pressure the Maduro regime, a regime that continues to undermine democratic institutions, carry out human rights abuses, and engage in rampant corruption. We are hopeful that other countries will use these and other tools at their disposal to increase the pressure on Maduro's inner circle and family members. Treasury is continuing its sanctions of financial institutions, and as I said yesterday on the Hill, there will be more.

The nationwide power outage throughout Venezuela is a reminder that the country's once quite sophisticated infrastructure has been plundered and allowed to decay under Maduro's misrule. For Venezuelans, this is much more than an inconvenience. It affects safety and security in an already dangerous country. For those in hospitals, this can affect lifesaving care. For those who have used very scarce personal resources to buy perishable foods that are already hard to come by, this can mean foregoing yet another meal or risking illness. As Secretary Pompeo tweeted last night, Maduro's policies bring nothing but darkness.

Just a word about the hearing yesterday. It was interesting. It was a subcommittee hearing, the Subcommittee on the Western Hemisphere. But the chairman of the full committee, Chairman Risch, and the ranking member of the full committee, Senator Menendez, were both present, in addition to the chairman and ranking member of the subcommittee. That's reasonably rare and it shows the level of interest. And I think we also saw yesterday the

bipartisan support for the policy of the administration in supporting Juan Guaido as interim president and helping the Venezuelan people achieve a return to democracy in Venezuela.

I'd be happy to take some questions.

MR PALLADINO: Matt.

QUESTION: So two things briefly. One, did the U.S. have anything to do with the power outage, as some people have suggested in a conspiratorial way?

MR ABRAMS: No. That's an easy one.

QUESTION: Okay. So what's the cause of it as far as you know?

MR ABRAMS: I don't know the exact cause. I don't know what line was overburdened, or what transformer blew up, or what caused it. I imagine that in the coming days we'll be able to find out. But somebody sent me an email this morning saying that this has been predicted, that the maintenance has not been taking place, and that a number of experts, having looked at this over the course of the last year, said there were going to be more and more blackouts. Now, of course there are – there have been a series of temporary blackouts. There's never been a basically nationwide blackout of what is now roughly 20 hours. That's new.

QUESTION: Okay. And then secondly, you keep referring to the support that Interim President Guaido has from the international community. You mention Germany specifically. But that number of countries that recognize him as – and not Maduro as the legitimate leader is static. It's not – it's 54, right? And it hasn't moved since you were last here a week ago, right?

So in your mind, what – the international community is 54 countries? I mean, that's fewer than are in the coalition against ISIS, it's fewer than there were in the coalition of the willing, and I mean, far fewer. And again, it's only – it's less than a third of UN member-states. So what's the justification for saying that the support is increasing or even that the "international community," quote-unquote, unless you have an odd definition of international community being a small number – what backs up the claim that he has increasing support?

MR ABRAMS: I would say first, I think if you identify the countries, you have most of the world's leading democracies in the Western Hemisphere and in Europe, and you have many that are economically significant. Secondly, in our conversations with other countries that have not recognized President Guaido, we do not hear very often, "You have the wrong policy." What we hear is, "We're not there quite yet," or "This is a domestic political issue, we're trying to solve it," or frankly in the case of the Caribbean, we hear great concern about debts and what the regime might do. In some cases where countries have lots of citizens of their own in Venezuela, they say that they are concerned that their embassy might be closed or there might be actions taken against their citizens. We do not hear, that is, "Oh, this is all wrong and we don't agree with your support of Interim President Guaido." So –

QUESTION: But I thought that you said that you had spoken to the Russians. Don't they say that? Don't the Chinese say that?

MR ABRAMS: The Russians and the Chinese do say that.

QUESTION: Right.

MR ABRAMS: I wasn't talking about the Russians and Chinese.

QUESTION: Oh, okay. Right.

MR ABRAMS: I was basically talking about democracies that have not yet recognized Mr. Guaido as president. I'm really happy with the list of countries we have. It will be nice to add to it; I don't know that it will make a huge difference to the internal situation in Venezuela, frankly. So we are trying to expand the list, but I think the extraordinary thing is, again, we have – if – I think I have the number right – 24 of 28 EU countries. We have most of the major Western Hemispheric countries in Latin America, Canada, the United States, and that's very rare in a situation like this. So we're very happy with where we are in terms of international support.

MR PALLADINO: Let's go *Washington Post*. Carol.

QUESTION: Thank you, Mr. Abrams. You say that the United States had nothing to do with the immediate cause of this electricity going down, but is it possible that sanctions may have exacerbated the situation and indirectly caused it? And do you really have any other arrows in your quiver besides sanctions? And if they don't work, why is Maduro still clinging to power?

MR PALLADINO: I don't accept the argument which I have heard made that one of the key causes to problems inside Venezuela – economic problems – is our sanctions. And I would urge you to take a look at comments made yesterday – actually, at the end of my own appearance and beginning of the second panel by Senator Menendez, who addressed issue squarely, and reminded the committee that the sanctions are much newer than the problems. This is a multi-year decline in Venezuela. The situation there, due to the mismanagement, the economic policies, and the sheer corruption of this regime are the cause of those problems. So the United States did not cause those problems, the international community did not; the regime caused those problems. The United States had nothing to do with the regime's failure over a 10-year period to attend to the electric infrastructure of the country, for example. So I just – I don't accept that view.

As to the second part of the question, we are working with the National Assembly, Interim President Guaido, lots of other countries to put diplomatic pressure on the regime, to help the National Assembly, which is actually acting as an assembly – I mean, they meet; they pass laws – to prepare for the transition. I do think that the sanctions are very useful in bringing home, to people in the regime as well as other Venezuelans, that they're in a situation that cannot possibly end well for them. So we make no apologies for the sanctions.

I do think that there were a lot of people who had the view that, oh, the

United States is going to do PDVSA sanctions, for example, and then Maduro will leave and then it will be February. We did not have that view, and as I think I may have said here, but I frankly don't remember, Secretary Pompeo did not, when he asked me to do this, say come on over to the State Department for three or four weeks and we'll resolve all this and then you go back to the Council on Foreign Relations. We have understood that this is a struggle in Venezuela whose length we can't predict. No one can predict it. Regimes always look or often look quite solid and quite strong the day before they collapse, so none of us know how to predict the timing, but I think the direction is very, very clear and the outcome is clear.

MR PALLADINO: Let's go to NTN.

QUESTION: Mr. Abrams, I wanted to ask you two things. Number one, the Lima Group opposed the use of force, and there doesn't seem to be a lot of support for a military intervention in the U.S. Congress. What would it take for the U.S. Government to take a more decisive position towards a military intervention? What would have to happen? And number two, Human Rights Watch and some of Mr. Guaido's public officials here in Washington asked for the U.S. Government to include Venezuelans within the TPS program. You said in Congress that it was under review. What would it take for the White House to clear Venezuelans for a TPS program? Thank you.

MR ABRAMS: On the second point, I really don't have anything to add to what I said at the hearing yesterday. We're aware of the situation of Venezuelans in the United States; we're aware of views of many in Congress, particularly senators and congressmen and women who represent Florida; we're aware of the legislation that Senator Rubio and I think Senator Menendez have introduced, and we are working on this issue. We are thinking about how to address this issue. I would point out that there are 74,000 current applications for asylum by Venezuelans in the United States, and those applications represent sometimes individuals, but they may also represent families. So we're not exactly sure of the number of people who are included in asylum applications. So Venezuelans who are here are aware of how they can try to regularize their status and stay in the United States longer. But anyway, we are – that's a subject of concern that we are thinking about.

What would have to happen to use the military? You know I can't speculate about that. There – this is a dangerous world. One cannot predict the way things turn. I wouldn't try to do so. I wouldn't want to give you hypotheticals, but I would just say the President has said all options are on the table. They always are on the table. But that is not the path we are choosing to follow. The path we're choosing to follow now is the one that has been often described, which is diplomatic, economic, and financial pressure in an effort to support the people of Venezuela. That's the path we are taking now.

MR PALLADINO: Let's go to Bloomberg.

QUESTION: Mr. Abrams, in the weeks since Juan Guaido was recognized as the interim president, the Secretary of State and you have sort of intimated that there would be – that the military would flip in – imminently, that something

might happen next week or the next week. Have you been disappointed – I mean, you remarked a little bit about the timeline, but have you been disappointed that the military continues to seemingly side with Mr. Maduro?

MR ABRAMS: Wouldn't say that – I wouldn't use the word "disappointed." I would say we continue to call on the Venezuelan military to follow their own constitution. We call on them to restore – it's better in Spanish – *institucionalidad*. We don't really have a word in English – institutionalism – but to restore their own proper role in any country. One of the definitions of having a state is having monopoly on force and violence for the security forces of the state. That's not happening in Venezuela, where the government is using, the regime is using armed gangs, *colectivos*. One would think that the police and military in any country would find that unacceptable.

So we continue to hope that people in the Venezuelan security forces understand that the future of their country is going to be in much better hands if the Maduro regime comes to an end and the transition to democracy begins. And again, I would say it doesn't look like that is happening until the day that it begins to happen.

QUESTION: So you have no indication right now that that's imminent, a switch in allegiances?

MR ABRAMS: Well, we have lots of information suggesting that just as most Venezuelans are clearly unhappy with this regime and want it to come to an end, most members of the Venezuelan military feel the same way. That's not surprising. If you're a member of the Venezuelan military, you may get a small and inadequate lunch at the barracks, but that doesn't help your aunts and your uncles and your cousins and your brothers and your sisters. Members of the Venezuelan military know what's going on in the country. So we will continue to call upon them to act upon that knowledge.

MR PALLADINO: PBS.

QUESTION: Thanks, Mr. Abrams, for doing this. Two questions, if you don't mind. One, the national security advisor talked about secondary sanctions on Twitter. Kind of an invitation for you to put some meat on the bone. Is that about Russia and Cuba? Is that about India, who's been buying petrol from Venezuela? Is that about ships going between Venezuela and Cuba?

And the second one – there were 200 soldiers or exiled soldiers near the bridge in Cucuta the day that the humanitarian assistance was supposed to cross, led by General Alcala. Colombian Government stepped in and stopped that plan. Was the U.S. involved with that at all? Regardless of that, is it helpful to have that happen? Thanks.

MR ABRAMS: The United States Government has said that we will not use force to deliver that aid, and the Colombian Government has said the same thing. So obviously we agree with that view and would not be involved in any actions that would be contrary to that view.

On secondary sanctions, it's always – it's out there. It's always a

possibility. We have not done it yet and I wouldn't want to speculate as to whether we will or what would lead us to make that additional decision.

MR PALLADINO: Fox.

QUESTION: Thanks, Mr. Abrams. Is – following up on Nick's question, is there a way beyond sanctions, perhaps, that the United States can get to or attempt to turn the military and political leadership in that country?

And just a second question. Sixteen Democratic lawmakers reportedly sent the State Department a letter saying that the U.S. stands alone in imposing sanctions against Venezuela, that it hurts the civilian population there, and that it also plays into the narrative that Juan Guaido is a puppet of Washington. If you wouldn't mind responding to that as well.

MR ABRAMS: We've been saying from the very beginning of the sanctions that the sanctions are meant to be temporary. Every single notice from Treasury – and you see this in the – the next notice says sanctions can be removed. The purpose is to motivate people to change their behavior. So while we impose sanctions or visa revocations, we make it very clear this is reversible if people's pattern of conduct changes. So it's not just a punishment; we hope it is also an inducement to a changed pattern of behavior.

The allegation that Juan Guaido is some kind of puppet of the United States I think is, first, ridiculous, and second, has been disproved in a number of ways. One of them is the number of countries that support him, countries which were called puppets of the United States in the UN Security Council in a manner, I must say, that did not help the cause of Nicolas Maduro and his regime. But you saw the way in which Guaido was received as he stopped in a bunch of Latin American capitals – received by the presidents of those countries. So I just think if you look at the Lima Group, if you look at the EU countries, the leadership we've seen in Canada, which hosted a Lima Group meeting, it's a ridiculous charge.

As to the – again, as to the sanctions hurting people in Venezuela, the United States has now spent weeks trying to get additional aid into Venezuela. We have actually used DOD assets to move the aid as close to the border Venezuela as we possibly could. The reason that aid has not gotten in, and much more aid that could get in, could get in from Curacao by boat, that could get in across the Brazilian border, is very simple to describe: It's the Maduro regime.

But again, I would add, as I did, I guess, to Carol that this economic decline is not new. The situation in Venezuela now is a product of years of corruption and incompetence and venality on the part of this regime. That's the problem, and the solution is to replace it with a democratic government that actually is responsive to the needs of the people. Senator Rubio made the comment yesterday that there is – this was after Administrator Green's testimony – there is malnourishment and there is real hunger in Venezuela, but when you look at Maduro and his closest aides, you don't see any malnourishment. They're not sharing in the suffering of the people, which is considerable.

So we're trying to help, and the regime has not permitted it. Other countries – Latin American countries, European countries, have sent food. Several Latin American countries sent food to Cucuta, and it's clear that more would be available if the regime would let it in.

MR PALLADINO: Last question, BBC.

QUESTION: The UN is again warning about the growing refugee crisis, so I just wondered, is the administration at all open to taking in some Venezuelan refugees as part of its policy, or is that absolutely not a consideration? And secondly, I just wondered about your take on how Guaido was allowed back into the country without – there was warnings that he might be arrested and that sort of thing, but – so what's your take on how he was able to come back?

MR ABRAMS: There were some statements by people in the regime that he would be arrested. There were lots of voices out there. Some said he will be arrested, some said justice will be done or other words like that that suggested he would be. And of course, we feared not only for his arrest, but worse. It didn't happen. And he made the comment that when he – as he passed through customs and immigration, one of the agents said, "Welcome, *Bienvenido, Presidente.*" "Welcome, President." It was extraordinary.

He then rode into town and he rode past a neighborhood that is generally viewed – of apartment houses built in the Chavez period that is generally viewed as an area not only that is pro-Chavez, but where a lot of *colectivos* are, and people were cheering. So I think his reception was extraordinary. Why did the regime decide to do it? One can only speculate, and our speculation is that they thought the public reaction, the popular reaction, would be dangerous to the regime if they acted against him.

On the refugee situation, well, I've said before that we are thinking about the question of Venezuelans who are in the United States, and a very significant proportion of the Venezuelans in the United States are already availing themselves, in a sense, of American refugee and asylum policy by seeking asylum status. In general, I guess I should say that most Venezuelans don't have that opportunity and have taken the opportunity instead to walk – or go by bus in many cases – across the borders, particularly to Colombia, Peru, Ecuador. And those countries have proved very hospitable to them.

I guess I'll leave it there. Thank you.

QUESTION: But the only discussion about refugees –

MR PALLADINO: All right. Thanks.

QUESTION: – is about TPS. It's not about –

MR PALLADINO: Good? Elliott, thanks for coming today, appreciate it.

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