

Venezuela warns against US military intervention as domestic crisis deepens

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Venezuelan officials have issued warnings that the US and its right-wing allies in Latin America are preparing a possible military intervention aimed at overthrowing the government of President Nicolas Maduro.

Tensions have escalated in the region as both Colombia and Brazil have increased their military deployments on Venezuela's border. The moves are ostensibly in response to an accelerating flow of migrants driven by the deepening economic crisis that has led to widespread unemployment, poverty and hunger among the Venezuelan masses.

Colombia has claimed that some half a million Venezuelans have crossed its border, while the Brazilian government indicated that it is preparing to declare a state of emergency in the border state of Roraima, one of the country's poorest, and place the army in charge. Brasilia reports that some 40,000 Venezuelans have entered the state, adding up to 12 percent of its population.

Diplomatic provocations against Venezuela have also increased, with the so-called Lima Group "disinviting" Maduro from a Summit of the Americas set to open in the Peruvian capital in the second week of April. The sanction against Maduro issued by the group—which consists of 12 out of the 35 countries that attend the Summit—was justified on the grounds that elections called by the Venezuelan government for April 22 "will lack all legitimacy and credibility."

One of the countries issuing this charge was Honduras, whose president, Juan Orlando Hernández, was installed through an unconstitutional and blatantly rigged re-election that was accompanied by wholesale repression of popular opposition. The same countries condemning Venezuela are silent on the criminal character of the Honduran regime, a close regional ally of Washington.

Earlier this week, Venezuelan Attorney General Tarek Saab charged that Colombia was planning "a military bombing and the invasion of the fatherland."

Colombia's Army chief, General Alberto Mejia, responded to the charge Wednesday by insisting that the buildup of troops on the border was aimed solely at dealing

with the flow of Venezuelan migrants into Colombia. He claimed that the deployment was also aimed at preventing attacks by the National Liberation Army (ELN), a Castroite guerrilla group that has as yet failed to reach a peace deal with the Colombian government. Bogota has claimed, without substantiation, that Venezuela has offered the ELN sanctuary.

Suspicious surrounding Colombia's military actions were heightened by a visit to the country last weekend by Admiral Kurt Tidd, the chief of the US Southern Command, which oversees Washington's military operations in the region. Tidd held meetings with Colombian President Juan Manuel Santos, senior government officials and commanders of the Colombian armed forces.

In testimony before the Senate Armed Service Committee last year, Tidd stated that Venezuela's crisis was a source of "instability" that "could eventually compel a regional response." The admiral's warning was in line with US President Donald Trump's statement last August that he would not rule out a "military option" in dealing with Venezuela.

Threats of military intervention have been accompanied by increasingly open appeals by Washington to the Venezuelan military to overthrow the Maduro government.

Last week, Republican Senator Marco Rubio of Florida, who is largely directing US policy toward Latin America under the Trump administration, declared on Twitter, "The world would support the Armed Forces in #Venezuela if they decide to protect the people & restore democracy by removing a dictator."

This call for restoring "democracy" by overthrowing an elected president merely made more explicit remarks by Secretary of State Rex Tillerson earlier this month on the eve of his five-nation Latin American tour, which was directed at solidifying an anti-Venezuelan bloc aligned with Washington.

"In the history of Venezuela and South American countries, it is often times that the military is the agent of change when things are so bad, and the leadership can no

longer serve the people,” Tillerson declared. No doubt, the secretary of state was thinking of the long and bloody record of US imperialism in orchestrating military coups in Brazil, Chile, Argentina and other countries in the 1960s and 1970s, leading to decades of dictatorships and police state repression of the Latin American working class.

Tillerson, the former CEO of ExxonMobil, said in the same speech that a key aim of Washington is “integrating the wealth of energy resources within the hemisphere,” adding that “Venezuela boasts the world’s largest proven oil reserves.”

Overlaying the naked profit motives of US imperialism and the American-based energy conglomerates in the turn toward intervention in Venezuela are broader strategic considerations. These have been spelled out in the recent series of national strategy and defense documents issued by Washington, which define Russia and China as “revisionist powers” seeking to challenge US hegemony, and define an orientation toward “great power” conflicts as the central focus of the Pentagon.

While the US has imposed a series of sanctions that have driven down Venezuela’s oil exports to the US, China has doubled its share of the Venezuelan oil market, while exports to Russia’s state-owned oil company Rosneft PJSC have more than tripled. Both countries have also provided the country with loans and favorable debt restructuring in return for guaranteed oil exports.

The Trump administration is reportedly discussing the imposition of more punishing sanctions against Venezuelan oil. It has already blocked the state-owned oil company PdVSA from access to the international bond debt-refinancing markets.

The US accounts for roughly 40 percent of Venezuela’s oil exports. In his remarks Thursday, Maduro dismissed the threat of US sanctions on Venezuelan oil, declaring, “If the US puts an oil embargo on us, we will take our boat and go somewhere else.”

The reality, however, is that Venezuela is equally dependent upon imports of technology, light crude and other products needed to blend Venezuelan oil for export. A cutoff of these supplies could prove just as devastating, if not more so, to the country’s oil industry as the loss of the US market.

The imposition of such sanctions would be aimed at triggering a catastrophic deepening of Venezuela’s already severe economic and social crisis.

Soaring inflation, pegged at 2,600 percent in 2017, has left large sections of the population without the means to procure adequate food. The value of the monthly minimum wage has fallen to the equivalent of US\$3. This has led to forms of protest quite distinct from the mass rallies of the privileged layers of the middle class that have been mounted against

Maduro and his predecessor, the late Hugo Chavez.

Workers’ strikes and protests as well as food riots and looting have broken out across the country in poor and working class neighborhoods. These have been met with police repression and violence by a government that, its pseudo-socialist rhetoric notwithstanding, has ruthlessly defended capitalist private property and enriched a whole layer of foreign investors, financiers, contractors and corrupt government officials, while masses of workers face extreme poverty.

In one recent incident reflecting the immense social tensions building up in Venezuela, Venezuelan army troops killed 18 miners at an illegally operated gold pit in the jungle region of Guasipati in the south of the country. The government is carrying out a campaign to close down the illegal mines, which are often controlled by criminal gangs, as part of its proposed Arco Minero del Orinoco megaproject, which aims to open up a vast area of the Guayana region to foreign mining conglomerates for investment and exploitation.

Washington’s appeal to the Venezuelan military to overthrow Maduro has yet to produce the desired results. In 2002, the CIA working in conjunction with a section of the military command and Venezuelan big business groups mounted an abortive coup that briefly removed Chavez from office before he was restored to the presidential palace by mass popular protests.

Today, the military is the principal pillar of the government, with active and retired officers directing several ministries and serving as governors. The armed forces control key sectors of the economy that have allowed a layer of senior officers to enrich themselves. Faced with a revolutionary challenge from below, however, the military command could seek to save itself at Maduro’s expense.



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