

Amid warnings of famine and unrest in Venezuela, Maduro renews talks with US-backed opposition

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The effects of the COVID-19 pandemic, compounded by the five years of economic collapse and deepening US sanctions, have set the stage for a humanitarian catastrophe in Venezuela.

Growing signs of social unrest and the threat that Venezuela's devastated health care system will be overwhelmed by COVID-19 patients—thus far, officials have confirmed 318 cases and 10 deaths—have pushed the administration of Nicolás Maduro and his United Socialist Party (PSUV) to renew negotiations with the US-backed opposition.

Last Sunday, Maduro declared to *TeleSur*, “Venezuela is prepared to receive support from all governments who decide [to offer aid] through humanitarian agreements. We must place politics and the ideological battle aside and prioritize the health care of the people. Those who have sent private and public messages, my sole answer is: we are ready to negotiate.”

Then, on Wednesday, Reuters reported talks between representatives of the Maduro government and the US puppet and self-proclaimed “interim president” Juan Guaidó. It cited “seven sources,” including from within the government and the regime-change camp surrounding Guaidó.

The discussion revolves around the social consequences of the coronavirus, but Reuters added that each side is “convinced the outbreak will undermine the other politically.”

These talks are being held in the framework of the “Democratic Transition Initiative” proposed by the Trump administration earlier this month and initially rejected by Maduro. Ultimately, the “Initiative” is aimed at countering growing Chinese and Russian influence in US imperialism's “backyard,” by overthrowing the elected government of Maduro and installing a US puppet regime.

The US think tank Atlantic Council, who hosted Guaidó this week, states directly that US strategy must “focus on

containing Russian influence in Venezuela, since it cannot end it.” It advocates for a greater presence of Western companies to counter Russia “once all sides are engaging with a transitional government.”

The timing of the renewed talks, however, indicates that what is chiefly driving the PSUV government and its key base, the Venezuelan military, toward compromise with US imperialism is the urgency to prepare for a major challenge from below to their wealth and ambitions.

A recent report by the World Food Program estimated that last year, 9.3 million people or nearly a third of the population in Venezuela suffered from severe food insecurity, an indicator for the risk of famine. This condition was shared by 1.2 million Venezuelan migrants in Colombia and Ecuador.

The columnist for the Spanish *El País*, Ibsen Martínez, cites warnings by Venezuela's largest food producer, Empresas Polar, that gasoline, seed and fertilizer shortages could lead to a widespread famine as early as late July. Martínez refers to recent protests by nurses and working class communities and warns of an “imminent” social explosion.

“One is left to dream about the disembarking of the [US] 82nd Airborne Division at the baseball field of the Caracas University City,” Martínez writes, adding, “Venezuelan or American as long as the savior is military.”

The so-called “All-American” Division of the US Army has participated in the numerous invasions across the Americas, including the Dominican Republic (1965), Grenada (1983), Panama (1989), as well as the military occupations against riots in Detroit (1967), Washington D.C. (1968) and Baltimore (1968). Trump administration officials have also alluded repeatedly to the Panamanian invasion by 26,000 US soldiers that killed thousands of civilians to capture dictator Manuel Noriega as a threat against Maduro.

Washington has moved to weaponize the pandemic crisis since February. This began with sanctions against the

Russian state-owned Rosneft, which has been keeping reduced Venezuelan oil sales afloat, with Russia severely reducing its operations. Then, the US Justice Department indicted Maduro and other top officials on unfounded drug trafficking charges.

On March 31, the US State Department published its “Democratic Transition Initiative.” The plan calls for the installation of a provisional “Council of State” composed of opposition and PSUV figures—excluding both Maduro and Guaidó—as a “democratic” veneer for a US and allied military-backed regime change operation serving Wall Street and American corporations.

Its real content is exposed in two unequivocal terms presented by the “Initiative”: (1) “The international community provides humanitarian, electoral, governance, development, security, and economic support,” and (2) “Negotiations begin with World Bank, IMF, and Inter-American Development Bank for major programs of support.”

While dressed up in promises of legislative votes, social welfare programs and health care, the Trump administration’s policy of starving Venezuelans into submission, his war threats and Washington’s own plans to “reopen” nonessential workplaces in the US amid the pandemic, demonstrate that any such regime in Caracas will be characterized by corrupt subservience, placing the profit and geopolitical interests of US imperialism above any concern for the lives of the impoverished masses.

The Associated Press reported from anonymous lawmakers that pro-Guaidó legislators voted themselves \$5,000 per month stipends as part of a bill handing only \$100 bonuses to medical workers during the pandemic. The funds come from the many Venezuelan government assets abroad already seized by the Trump administration.

Despite receiving some aid from China, Russia, Iran and the World Health Organization to deal with the pandemic, the Maduro government requested a loan from the International Monetary Fund (IMF), signaling its desperate economic situation as a result of US sanctions and the massive drop in oil prices.

Then, last Wednesday the US Treasury Department ordered the US-based conglomerate Chevron, which maintains a partnership with the state-owned Petróleos de Venezuela (PDVSA), to stop drilling wells, selling, buying or transporting Venezuelan oil.

Earlier this month, the White House deployed, in the words of the AP, “one of the largest US military operations in the region since the 1989 invasion of Panama,” involving warships and “on-ground special forces seldom seen before in the region.” While presented as an “anti-narcotics” effort, the operation has centered on the Caribbean coasts of

Venezuela, which is not a significant source of the drugs flowing into the US.

At the request of the Russian government, the UN Security Council discussed US military threats against Venezuela on Wednesday, after the Venezuelan delegation denounced “the Trump administration for initiating an act of war against Venezuela, employing the pandemic as an additional weapon to increase the suffering of the civilian population—a crime against humanity!”

Any military intervention in Venezuela, however, faces enormous challenges such as growing US engagements across the Middle East, Africa and East Asia, and COVID-19 outbreaks among soldiers and sailors. The Pentagon announced Friday that one of the Navy ships sent to the Caribbean, the destroyer Kidd, was compelled to dock after more than a dozen sailors tested positive. As recently as last weekend, the chief of the US Southern Command, Adm. Craig Faller, dismissed concerns over the health of crew members by declaring that “We thrive in uncertainty.”

Moreover, with tens of millions becoming unemployed, long lines for food banks, shortages of COVID-19 tests and protective equipment for health care and other workers, the squandering of resources for a major military operation would be bound to trigger massive opposition within the United States and beyond.

Nonetheless, US imperialism’s response to its continued decline and growing domestic opposition has been more reckless military provocations and record spending on war.

After the Panama invasion in December 1989, the Workers League, the predecessor of the Socialist Equality Party in the US, wrote: “This combination of economic weakness and military power is an explosive mixture. But in the long run, the first factor is far more decisive, and the increasing recklessness in the use of American military power means that inevitably, US imperialism is headed for a monumental debacle...”

This process, accelerated by the pandemic, can be resolved progressively only by means of the revolutionary intervention of the working class on the basis of a socialist and internationalist program.



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