

Biden renews US “state of emergency” against Venezuela

Bill Van Auken
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US President Joe Biden Tuesday formally renewed a declaration of a state of national emergency initiated by the Obama administration in 2015, branding Venezuela “an unusual and extraordinary threat to the national security and foreign policy of the United States.”

This declaration, maintained in effect under the Trump administration, is the legal foundation for a series of draconian and escalating unilateral US economic sanctions aimed at starving the Venezuelan population into submission and achieving regime change in Caracas.

Hopes expressed by the government of Venezuelan President Nicolás Maduro that Washington would ease its policy with the election of Biden—Maduro publicly claimed that he had read Biden’s inauguration speech “three times”!—have been quickly dashed.

US Secretary of State Antony Blinken, who during his confirmation hearings rejected any possibility of negotiations with the Maduro government, spoke Tuesday with Washington’s right-wing puppet Juan Guaidó, addressing him as “interim president” and declaring US intentions to “work with likeminded allies ... to increase multilateral pressure and press for a peaceful, democratic transition,” i.e., carry out regime change.

Reuters, meanwhile, quoted an unnamed White House official as stating that the Biden administration is “in no rush” to ease the “maximum pressure” sanctions regime imposed under Trump with the aim of blocking Venezuela’s oil exports and crippling its economy. The official claimed that the sanctions included exemptions for humanitarian supplies and that the suffering of the Venezuelan people was due to the Maduro government “actively preventing the delivery of humanitarian assistance.”

This lie was exposed by a United Nations envoy who issued a blistering denunciation of the impact of US and EU sanctions following a 12-day visit to the country last month.

Alena Douhan, a UN human rights special rapporteur, called for the immediate lifting of economic sanctions and for the governments of the US, the UK and Portugal to grant Caracas immediate access to billions of dollars in Venezuelan funds that are frozen in those countries so that they can be used to alleviate the humanitarian catastrophe gripping the South

American country.

In her preliminary findings, Douhan, a Belarusian lawyer, stated that both the US 2015 national emergency declaration and the subsequent rounds of escalating sanctions violate “international law” and “the principle of sovereign equality of states,” while constituting “an intervention in the domestic affairs of Venezuela.”

The UN official stated that the impact of the sanctions has created “economic and humanitarian calamities,” with a particularly “devastating effect” on the country’s poor.

The effect of the sanctions and freezing of assets on Venezuela’s health care system had “resulted in outbreaks of malaria, measles and yellow fever and opportunistic infections,” she said, adding that lack of resources had “prevented transplants of liver and bone marrow to 53 Venezuelan children.”

This impact has been compounded by the COVID-19 pandemic. “Repeated refusals of banks in the United States, the United Kingdom and Portugal to release Venezuelan assets even for buying medicine, vaccines and protective kits ... impedes the ability of Venezuela to respond to the COVID-19 emergency.” The country has thus far recorded more than 140,000 cases and 1,358 deaths, but with barely one-tenth of the testing compared to the US, the real figures are undoubtedly far higher.

Sanctions against the energy sector had resulted in gasoline shortages which “exacerbates the challenges of delivering food and medical supplies—especially in remote areas,” Douhan reported, while “exacerbating the food insecurity of the Venezuelan people.”

She also pointed to the effect of secondary sanctions, which result in “over-compliance” by foreign companies and financial institutions refusing to deal with Venezuela, even for the purchase or funding of humanitarian supplies, for fear of incurring Washington’s retaliation. The result has been banks refusing to transfer funds or charging exorbitant fees that jack up the prices for all imported goods.

The sanctions regime, the UN official concluded, has “had an enormous impact on access to the right to life, to education, to food, medicine, and in every other ambit of life.”

US Ambassador to Venezuela James Story, who operates out

of neighboring Colombia, a center of right-wing exile plots against the government in Caracas, dismissed the UN report, claiming that all of Venezuela's crises stemmed from "the regime's corruption."

The Colombian government has been collaborating with Washington and its intelligence agencies, including the CIA, FBI and DEA, in an attempt to foment divisions and revolt within the Venezuelan military, Venezuela's Defense Minister Gen. Vladimir Padrino charged in a February 28 interview on the state-owned television network Venezolana de Televisión (VTV). Padrino said that over 600 members of the FANB, Venezuela's military, had been approached by Colombian and US agents seeking to turn them against the government.

Such efforts have so far proven a failure. The attempt by Guaidó, with Washington's backing, to spark a military coup in April 2019 resulted in a complete fiasco, leading to the evaporation of support for the "interim president." Similarly, an invasion attempt launched from Colombia, supported by Guaidó and led by US mercenaries in May of last year ended with the invaders either killed or captured as soon as they landed.

Nonetheless, in addition to sanctions, Washington is continuing its military threats against Venezuela, maintaining the deployment of the largest military force in the hemisphere since the 1989 invasion of Panama on the pretext of combatting drug trafficking. US SOUTHCOM, which oversees US military operations in the region, announced at the end of last month yet another set of joint US-Colombian military exercises.

While Guaidó retains Washington's sponsorship, with tens of millions of dollars being funneled through the hands of him and his cronies, he enjoys increasingly scant popular support in Venezuela itself, and a number of governments have dropped the fiction that he is the "interim president" of anything.

Large sections of the right-wing opposition have also rejected his leadership and, in defiance of Washington's proscription, are planning to participate in gubernatorial and local elections being organized by the government later this year.

The Maduro government is seeking to curry favor with these elements of the Venezuelan right, together with Venezuelan and foreign capital. It has established a "Dialogue, Peace and Reconciliation" commission in the National Assembly for the purpose of reaching an accommodation with the big business lobby FEDECAMARAS.

While the Maduro government unfailingly meets its debt payments to foreign banks and provides full tax exemptions for foreign oil companies, the full burden of Venezuela's protracted and deepening economic crisis has been placed on the backs of the working class. Workers have been subjected to structural adjustment programs, the evisceration of labor rights and the suppression of their struggles against the destruction of living standards and employment.

Jettisoning the bourgeois nationalist policies upon which the pretensions of "21st century socialism" were based under

Maduro's predecessor, Hugo Chávez, the Maduro government late last year rammed through its "Anti-Blockade Law." This legislation, pitched as means of countering Washington's sanctions regime, is aimed at providing the most attractive conditions for international capital, allowing private investors to take control of national industries and empowering the government to rescind previous restrictions on foreign ownership, including in the strategic energy sector, which was nationalized long before the advent of *chavismo*. As one clause in the law states, its aim is to "stimulate or benefit the partial or complete participation, management and operation of the national and international private sector in the development of the national economy."

The Maduro government's accommodations to both the Venezuelan right and world imperialism are driven by its principal concern: a challenge from below to the wealth and privileges of the sectors of the Venezuelan bourgeoisie that constitute its main constituency.

Washington will not be satisfied, however, until it is able to install a US puppet regime in Caracas. Its aggression against Venezuela is driven by US imperialism's determination to counter growing Chinese and Russian influence in its "backyard." Having opposed Trump from the right, as too "soft" on Moscow and Beijing, the Democrats in power in Washington will only escalate imperialist aggression in Latin America.

As Maduro's right-wing policies and overtures to imperialism make clear, the defense of the Venezuelan masses against imperialist aggression and capitalist austerity can be successfully waged only by opposing all factions of the bourgeoisie and mobilizing the working class independently on the basis of an internationalist and socialist program.



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