

US kidnaps Venezuelan diplomat for defying sanctions regime

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Alex Saab, a Venezuelan-Colombian businessman and diplomat, was dragged before a Miami federal court judge Monday in handcuffs and an orange jumpsuit to hear that he is being charged with eight counts of money laundering that could put him in a US prison for 20 years.

The appearance follows an extra-legal extradition, more akin to a rendition, that took place Saturday afternoon after police in the West African island nation of Cabo Verde stormed the house where Saab was being held and forced him onto a US Justice Department plane that flew him to Miami and a federal lockup.

Saab was detained after his plane landed in Cabo Verde in June 2020 for refueling. He was en route to Iran to negotiate an agreement to secure food and fuel for Venezuela, which has been starved for both, as well as for medicine, due to the “maximum pressure” economic blockade imposed by the Trump administration against the country. US President Joe Biden has continued these punitive measures, which are aimed at starving the Venezuelan people in order to secure regime change and the imposition of a US puppet in Caracas. Venezuela boasts the largest known oil reserves in the world.

The extradition—or rendition—was carried out on the day before national elections in Cabo Verde, a date no doubt selected to dull the impact of the news within the country. The ruling party was defeated in Sunday’s election. The opposition party, the African Party for the Independence of Cape Verde (PAICV)—the bourgeois party that was the successor to the PAIGC, which led an armed struggle to overthrow Portuguese colonialism—made little issue over the fate of Saab. Nonetheless, polls indicated that Cabo Verdeans were overwhelmingly hostile to the government’s bowing to Washington’s extra-legal demands, contributing to the defeat of the ruling Movement for Democracy (MpD).

The Trump administration had used bribes and threats to compel Cabo Verde to hand over Saab. At one point, a US Navy warship was dispatched to the coastal waters of Cabo Verde in a show of force over the issue.

Saab, who holds both Colombian and Venezuelan

citizenship, had negotiated numerous deals to secure food, fuel, medicine and other basic goods for Venezuela by circumventing US sanctions. This included an agreement reached with Iran last year, just before he was detained, to ship emergency supplies of gasoline and other petroleum products to Venezuela.

Other deals negotiated by Saab secured food for Venezuelan supermarkets and the government’s subsidized food program, known as CLAP. He traveled to Turkey, China, Dubai, Eastern Europe, Serbia and other regions, making complex deals that would funnel badly needed supplies and foreign currency into Venezuela in exchange for gold, petroleum and other products. These agreements were in defiance of US sanctions, which criminalize any trade in Venezuelan oil and any access by Venezuela to the US-dominated world financial system.

The money-laundering allegations against Saab reportedly involve his having set up numerous shell corporations for the purpose of moving assets in and out of Venezuela. Given the unilateral US sanctions regime, which punishes third parties daring to engage in internationally legal trade with Venezuela, the creation of such companies and so-called “money-laundering” were necessary means of evading Washington’s retribution.

In any case, as the recently released Pandora Papers revealed, the United States is the global center for the creation of shell companies aimed at protecting the assets of the world’s billionaires and multi-millionaires from taxation.

The US has alleged that Saab has skimmed money off of deals made to supply subsidized housing and food to the Venezuelan population. While no evidence has been presented to support these claims, the obvious question is, what gives Washington the right to pursue allegations of corruption in Venezuela?

While there is no doubt that the government of President Nicolas Maduro and its key constituencies, the so-called *boliburguesia* made up of speculators and business figures with close ties to the government and the military, have

engaged in corruption, the same can be said for any number of regimes backed by Washington, from the recently ousted puppet government in Afghanistan, to the dictatorship in Egypt, the right-wing governments of Central America and the regime in Ukraine.

The persecution of Saab has been carried out on an extra-legal basis in pursuit of nakedly imperialist political aims. There exists no extradition treaty between Cabo Verde and the US and there was no international arrest order for him when he was detained.

The Cabo Verdean government, meekly bowing to Washington's demands, overrode the decisions of the country's own courts and bundled Saab onto the US-bound plane before he had exhausted his appeals and with no legal order and no notification to either Saab's lawyers or his family, who had been barred from entering Cabo Verde.

The government ignored a ruling by the regional Economic Community of West Africa (ECOWAS) Court, which ordered Cabo Verde to release Saab and pay him \$200,000 in damages. The court's decisions are legally binding on countries, including Cabo Verde, which signed the treaty creating it.

The Cabo Verde government likewise ignored the demands made by four United Nations special rapporteurs and one UN Working Group. They demanded that the government account for "the factual grounds and legal basis for the arrest, detention and possible extradition of Ambassador Alex Saab Moran to the United States, including the exact nature of the charges against him and the facts supporting those charges; on the violation of judicial, consular and other fair trial guarantees; on the allegations of torture and ill-treatment of Ambassador Saab; on the violation of his right to physical integrity and the deterioration of his health attributable to the authorities; on the risk of torture in the event of extradition; and on the violation of the diplomatic immunity of Ambassador Alex Saab."

Venezuela has insisted that Saab is the country's ambassador and was flying on a diplomatic passport, making his arrest and extradition illegal and a gross violation of the Vienna convention protecting diplomatic immunity. A challenge filed in a US court to the extradition on these grounds was rejected on the basis that the case could not be heard until Saab was under arrest. The US State Department, meanwhile, asserted that Saab's diplomatic status had not been registered with or accepted by the department. Saab's defense team countered that "there is no process by which a Special Envoy or Ambassador of a foreign country to another country is obliged to procure any kind of registration or acceptance from the US State Department. ... In this case, the nomination of Alex Saab is strictly a matter between

Venezuela and Iran and nobody else."

In response to Saab's arrest, the Maduro government in Venezuela ordered the re-imprisonment of six former executives—five of them US citizens—of the US-based, Venezuelan-owned refining company CITGO, who were charged with corruption. The six had been released to house arrest last April in an apparent gesture aimed at furthering rapprochement with Washington. The Biden administration, however, has shown no intention of loosening the US economic stranglehold on Venezuela.

The Maduro government also suspended talks in Mexico with the right-wing US-backed Venezuelan opposition. Caracas had demanded that Saab be included in its delegation participating in this "dialogue" with Washington's puppets.

Given that an agreement reached through these talks constituted a pre-condition for easing sanctions imposed by both Washington and the European Union, the extradition of Saab may well be a deliberate provocation aimed at blowing up this process and keeping the blockade in place. The Biden administration, like those of Trump and Obama before it, views Venezuela through the prism of the struggle against China and Beijing's influence in what US imperialists have described as their "own backyard."

The rendition of Saab to Miami is of a piece with the persecution of and attempt to extradite Huawei Technologies executive Meng Wanzhou from Canada for allegedly violating US sanctions against Iran, and most infamously, the ongoing attempt to extradite WikiLeaks founder Julian Assange from the UK to the US to face charges under the Espionage Act with a potential life sentence for revealing Washington's war crimes, torture, surveillance, corruption and coup plots.

Everywhere, US imperialism pursues a policy of gangsterism, wantonly violating international law, while insisting on its "right" to carry out the extra-territorial enforcement of US laws and the unilateral imposition of secondary sanctions.

At a rally in Caracas on Sunday, Saab's wife, Camila Fabri Saab, read a letter he had written just before his extradition in which he insisted that he had committed "no crime in the United States or any other country" and that he had no intention of "lying to help the United States."

Saab also warned that if "they kill me and say it was suicide, this is something that I would never do."



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