White House plans oil blockade of Venezuela in drive for regime change

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Following the US seizure of an oil tanker off the coast of Venezuela on Wednesday, the Trump administration has pledged to further escalate its campaign of piracy against the government of Venezuelan President Nicolás Maduro.

Reuters reported Thursday that the administration is preparing to seize more oil tankers, citing six sources familiar with the matter. The news agency reported that "the U.S. has assembled a target list of several more sanctioned tankers for possible seizure" and that "the U.S. Justice Department and Homeland Security had been planning the seizures for months."

"Further direct interventions by the U.S. are expected in the coming weeks," Reuters added.

White House press secretary Karoline Leavitt effectively confirmed Reuters' reporting Thursday. "We're not going to stand by and watch sanctioned vessels sail the seas with black market oil, the proceeds of which will fuel narcoterrorism of rogue and illegitimate regimes around the world," Leavitt told reporters. She confirmed that the seized tanker is being brought to a US port, where authorities intend to confiscate its cargo of approximately 1.1 million barrels of Venezuelan crude oil worth roughly $78 million.

In other words, the Trump administration is initiating a blockade of Venezuela, which is typically treated as an act of war under international law.

The Venezuelan government issued a statement Wednesday. "Under these circumstances, the true reasons for the prolonged aggression against Venezuela have finally been exposed. It is not migration. It is not drug trafficking. It is not democracy. It is not human rights. It has always been about our natural resources, our oil, our energy, about the resources that belong exclusively to the Venezuelan people."

The planned escalation of piracy against Venezuelan oil shipments takes place amid an unprecedented military buildup in the Caribbean and an ongoing series of massacres of civilians on boats in the Caribbean and Pacific. Since September, US forces have launched 22 drone and missile strikes against boats, killing at least 87 people. The administration has provided no public evidence to support its claim that the boats are involved in drug smuggling, and such evidence would not justify the strikes even if true.

The Pentagon has deployed more than 15,000 troops, a dozen warships—including the aircraft carrier USS Gerald R. Ford, scores of aircraft, and thousands of personnel to the Caribbean Sea and Pacific Ocean. This represents the largest US military mobilization in the Caribbean since the 1962 Cuban Missile Crisis. According to an analysis published Wednesday by RANE (formerly Stratfor), "the most likely scenario remains an escalation to U.S. airstrikes or special forces operations inside Venezuelan territory, as Washington tries to weaken Maduro and indirectly create the conditions for regime change in the long term."

In an interview Tuesday, President Donald Trump refused to rule out sending ground troops, telling *Politico* that Maduro's "days are numbered." He has warned that attacks could expand "very soon" from boats to targets inside the country.

The US media is, meanwhile, openly discussing a pledge by the Trump administration to overthrow the Venezuelan government. The *Wall Street Journal* editorial board published a statement Thursday declaring that Trump is now "obliged to follow through" on his commitment to oust Maduro.

"The seizure signals that Mr. Trump isn't backing down on his effort to oust the dictator," the *Journal* wrote approvingly. The editorial added: "Having

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committed the U.S. to oust Mr. Maduro, Mr. Trump is obliged to follow through."

The *Journal* editorial also celebrated the transfer of Venezuelan opposition leader María Corina Machado under US military protection to Norway, to receive her Nobel Peace Prize, suggesting "the CIA may have sources in the country that can help with a democratic restoration."

Machado confirmed Thursday that "we had support from the United States government" for her departure from Venezuela, where she had been in hiding for nearly a year. According to the *Journal*, her network "made an important call to the U.S. military before they set out to sea, warning American forces in the region of the vessel's occupants to avoid the kind of airstrike that has hit more than 20 similar vessels in the past three months, killing more than 80 people."

The coordination reveals the intimate relationship between Washington and the so-called "opposition." Machado has outlined a $1.7 trillion privatization plan for Venezuela's economy and has repeatedly praised Trump's military buildup. "I believe that President Trump's actions have been decisive," she told reporters in Oslo Thursday.

The tanker seizures and military threats must be understood in the context of the Trump administration's National Security Strategy, published December 4. The 33-page document explicitly establishes a goal of "restoring American preeminence in the Western Hemisphere" while denying "non-Hemisphericcompetitors"—meaningChina—"theability to position forces or other threatening capabilities, or to own or control strategically vital assets" in the region.

The strategy makes clear that the administration views Latin America as a captive supplier of resources for US corporations, to be blockaded from Chinese investment and trade at gunpoint. China currently purchases roughly 80 percent of Venezuela's oil exports, and the piracy campaign is aimed at severing this trade.

Venezuela holds the world's largest proven oil reserves—more than 300 billion barrels, representing 17 percent of global reserves. The claim that Washington is intervening to combat "drug smuggling" is a transparent fraud. The seized ship was actually bound for Cuba, which is heavily dependent on Venezuela to fuel its economy.

Trump has also threatened Colombian President Gustavo Petro, declaring that "Petro is next," making clear that the campaign extends beyond Venezuela to any government in Latin America that fails to submit to Washington's dictates. Colombia is also a significant oil producer, although far less than Venezuela.

A *New York Times* report Thursday underscored the criminal character of the boat strikes. According to the *Times*, the administration has repatriated survivors rather than bringing them to the US to "ensure survivors did not end up in the U.S. judicial system, where court cases could force the administration to show evidence." The survivors who have been rescued were returned to their home countries and never charged with any crime.

The Democratic Party has offered no serious opposition to these war preparations. Senate Minority Leader Chuck Schumer, when asked Wednesday whether he opposes regime change in Venezuela, refused to state his opposition. "Ya know, obviously if Maduro would just flee on his own, everyone would like that," Schumer said.

The bloodbath already unleashed with the boat strikes is just the beginning of what the Trump administration has planned for Latin America. Having declared its intention to overthrow the Venezuelan government, announced a blockade of the country's oil exports and deployed the largest military force to the Caribbean since the Cuban Missile Crisis, the administration is threatening a broader war to reduce the entire hemisphere to a US colony.

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