US military launches new strikes on Venezuelan soil, amid plans for long-term presence

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6 November 2026

The US military participated in a drone and helicopter attack on a camp of the Colombian National Liberation Army (Ejército de Liberación Nacional, ELN) in the Venezuelan state of Apure last Friday, according to four US officials cited by the *New York Times*.

The *Wall Street Journal* reported that US military drones executed the strike with the "cooperation" of the Venezuelan government. The local NGO Fundaredes has raised the death toll from 19 to 23.

Friday's operation carries inland the campaign of US military strikes on alleged drug boats in the Caribbean and the Pacific, which has killed at least 240 people since September 2025.

The attack hit Puerto Páez, an area near the Colombian border controlled by the ELN. Fundaredes' Apure coordinator, Juan García, said interviews with survivors and relatives showed that civilians with no connection to the guerrillas were also killed. Local reporters identified eight of the dead, among them two Colombians and four Mexicans.

The strike came as the *Times* revealed that the State Department under Marco Rubio is negotiating a Status of Forces Agreement (SOFA) with Caracas. Such pacts provide, US officials explained, "a clear and predictable legal framework for US forces to work on mutually agreed activities." Such pacts typically guarantee US troops immunity from prosecution for crimes committed on a country's soil.

The Apure attack is the second known US strike on Venezuelan soil since the January 3 bombing of Caracas and abduction of Nicolás Maduro and Cilia Flores. In June, an airstrike guided by CIA intelligence killed Héctor "Niño" Guerrero, the alleged leader of the Tren de Aragua, in the gold mines of Bolívar state, and US officials thanked their Venezuelan counterparts for their cooperation.

These operations mark the conversion of Venezuela into a US military protectorate. The armed forces, police and intelligence apparatus built under Chavismo now act as the local adjuncts of the occupying power. Their task is to secure the plunder of the country's oil and to hold down a working class that is moving into struggle.

On October 29, Rodríguez named Oliver Blanco, a 34-year-old former leader of the right-wing Democratic Action (Acción Democrática) party, as foreign minister. In 2011 Blanco wrote that trying Hugo Chávez at The Hague would show his followers "that the world recognizes him as what he is, a criminal." In 2013 he celebrated Chávez's death, placing him in hell alongside Osama bin Laden.

On Monday, Blanco became the highest-ranking Venezuelan official received by the Trump administration, meeting Rubio and Treasury Secretary Scott Bessent.

Rubio stressed his "three-phase plan" of "stabilization, economic recovery and political reconciliation, and democratic transition." The acquiescence of the Chavista leadership could be summed up by inverting an old revolutionary slogan: it is better to live on your knees than to die on your feet.

The military operations aim to secure an oil grab of colonial proportions, privatizations and further attacks on wages amid a surge of working-class protests.

The Venezuelan Observatory of Social Conflict counted 1,101 protests in September, 531 of them over power outages. On October 27, demonstrators marched in Caracas under the slogan "They take our oil and leave us in darkness." On November 5, an intersectoral assembly of university, health, education and public administration workers called a 12-hour national stoppage for November 16, after the government ignored the demands they had delivered to the Miraflores presidential palace. They backed hunger-striking workers of the state-owned Venezuelan Guayana Corporation (CVG) in Bolívar.

Under an agreement presented by the White House on August 31, North American Blue Energy Partners (NABEP) received 100-year rights over 17 oilfields holding some 65 billion barrels of proven reserves. The Pentagon's Office of Strategic Capital takes a 35 percent stake while investing nothing and holds a veto over the board.

Washington, which has controlled Venezuela's export revenues since January, has kept $4.7 billion of them to pay for its own attack that month, according to Luigi Pisella, president of the Conindustria business association. "To the victor belong the spoils," Trump has repeated.

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The rest of the economy is being sold off. “I have ordered the evaluation of non-essential state assets to be offered to the private sector or returned to their previous owners,” Rodríguez announced on October 29. Parliament is preparing to partially privatize the electricity sector.

Responding to the growing unrest, Rodríguez promised workers quarterly income increases in 2027 pegged to GDP growth. The minimum wage has been frozen since March 2022 at 130 bolívares, about 15 US cents. With prices in dollars expected to rise 20 to 30 percent this year, increases tied to growth of 5 to 10 percent amount to a massive wage cut. Meanwhile, the employers’ federations want a labor “reform” that cuts social security contributions and severance pay.

Washington’s answer to the unrest was to bring back its longtime “asset,” the fascistic opposition leader María Corina Machado, who has advocated oil privatization and a military invasion of her own country, to channel this anger behind promises of elections in 2027.

This deepening assault on living standards comes on top of the June 24 earthquakes, which gave Washington the opening to make its military presence routine. The Pentagon’s Southern Command deployed nearly 2,000 troops, berthed the USS *Fort Lauderdale* at La Guaira as a “communications and distribution node” and placed military personnel in the control tower of Maiquetía, the country’s main airport.

The official death toll stands at 6,509. A hundred days after the quakes, Doctors Without Borders (MSF) reported that families in La Guaira and Caracas were still living in tents, and its teams had given mental healthcare to 8,147 people. Thousands are still missing.

The bankruptcy of “left populism”

In 2006, the Argentine anti-Marxist theorist Ernesto Laclau wrote in *Nueva Sociedad* that Venezuela required “a new collective actor, whose symbol is Bolivarianism and whose emergent is Hugo Chávez, through a populist rupture.” He defended “the centrality of the leader as the unifying factor” and insisted that “if there is a danger to Latin American democracy, it comes from neoliberalism and not from populism.”

In a recent lecture, David North, chairman of the WSWS International Editorial Board, explained that Laclau and his collaborator Chantal Mouffe provided the theoretical framework for a non-socialist “left populism” that shaped Syriza in Greece and Podemos in Spain, whose founders were their declared disciples. In *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy* (1985) they announced that what was in crisis was “a whole conception of socialism which rests upon the ontological centrality of the working class.” In place of the working class, they put a “people” assembled around a leader.

Venezuela was offered as the proof. “Perhaps the one who went furthest is Chávez,” Mouffe said in a 2019 interview with Samuele Mazzolini. “He gave the Venezuelan masses a political identity.” She recalled with approval how Chávez told the anti-globalization activists at the World Social Forum in Caracas: “look, we are the state.” What remained of this, she said, explained “the support that Nicolás Maduro still has.”

The founders of Podemos learned in the same school. Íñigo Errejón, the party’s chief strategist, wrote his doctoral thesis on the “struggle for hegemony” under the first government of Bolivia’s Movement Toward Socialism (MAS), co-authored *Construir pueblo* (2015) with Mouffe, and directed a research program at GIS XXI, a polling firm linked to the Venezuelan government. “Chávez and Chavismo are a profound source of political pedagogy,” he declared in 2013.

Venezuela now teaches the real lesson of left populism. The “we” that Chávez said was the state was the army and the state apparatus of the national bourgeoisie. When US imperialism struck, that apparatus caved. It handed over the oil, opened the airport and the airspace to US forces, and now leaves the dead from the earthquake uncounted.

The repudiation of the working class as the revolutionary class served to tie workers to a bourgeois nationalist leadership that has delivered them to imperialism. The transformation of Venezuela into a protectorate overseen by Chavismo is, in fact, a profound source of political pedagogy. It confirms Leon Trotsky’s theory of permanent revolution: in countries with belated economic development, democracy, which fundamentally includes independence from imperialist oppression, cannot be secured under capitalist rule, but requires that the working class take power as part of the world socialist revolution.

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