

Driving Venezuela Towards Famine

By [Daniel Larison](#)

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Warnings of famine are increasing in Venezuela, and [U.S. sanctions are responsible](#) for driving the country over the edge:

In a new study, Venezuelan economist Francisco Rodriguez at New York brokerage Torino Capital set out evidence that US financial sanctions are associated with a 797,000 b/d drop in oil production, worth about \$16.9bn a year. He warned of disastrous consequences in a country which grows barely a third of the food it needs.

“We’re going to see a famine in Venezuela,” Mr Rodriguez said [bold mine-DL]. “Total imports in April were only \$303m and around half of those were oil-related. That is just 8 per cent of the 2012 figure . . . even if all the imports were of food, it would still be far off the amount needed to feed the country.”

Rodriguez has been warning for months that sanctions could cause a famine in Venezuela. It was clear months ago that strangling Venezuela’s oil sector would have devastating consequences for the population, which relies on the imports paid for by the government’s oil revenue. Rodriguez and Jeffrey Sachs [warned](#) back in [February](#):

By commandeering Venezuela’s only lifeline to food supplies and oil field equipment, the United States has lit the fuse. By the Trump administration’s own estimates, sanctions will cost Venezuela’s economy \$11 billion in lost oil revenue in the next year, which is equal to 94 percent of what the country spent last year in goods imports. The result is likely to be an economic and humanitarian catastrophe of a dimension never seen in our hemisphere.

U.S. sanctions are supposed to strike at the Venezuelan government, but they have predictably bludgeoned the people as they always do. Modern famines are typically man-made, and this one would certainly qualify as that. Famines today are created by governments and other political actors that choose to put their agenda ahead of the welfare of suffering people. If there is mass starvation in Venezuela, it will be because the people have been made to starve.

In this case, the U.S. would bear a significant portion of the responsibility for a famine in Venezuela. The administration’s decision to strangle Venezuela doesn’t seem to be having any effect on the government, but it is having and will continue to have a deadly effect on ordinary people. As Alex de Waal said in his book *Mass Starvation*, “Today, acts of commission—political decisions—are needed to turn a disaster into mass starvation.” Venezuela was already suffering from a serious economic and humanitarian crisis. Interventionists then chose to make things much, much worse in their destructive pursuit of regime change. Regime change appears to be far off, and famine is much closer.

Since the [failed would-be coup](#) at the end of April, the Trump administration has largely moved on and forgotten about the country that their sanctions are starving to death. If the administration were the least bit concerned about the welfare of the Venezuelan people that they claim to want to help, they would lift sanctions on Venezuela's oil sector immediately. Enormous harm has already been done, but the U.S. can at least stop contributing to the disaster. That is what this former U.S. official recommends:

Thomas Shannon, formerly the top-ranking career diplomat at the US state department and now a senior policy adviser at the law firm Arnold & Porter, believes Washington should change its stance.

“Keeping these sanctions in place, with no mediating action, will have a profoundly negative impact on the Venezuela people,” he said. “It is amazing that some people deny this, but it highlights first the enormity of their miscalculation when they advocated the oil and gas sanctions, and second their willingness to cause great damage to Venezuela to drive Maduro from power. Kind of like the fire bombing of Dresden or Tokyo.”

Broad sanctions on Venezuela's oil sector were always going to create worsening humanitarian conditions in the country. It was a fantasy that the sanctions would force Maduro and his allies from power before the crisis turned into a catastrophe. By taking sides in Venezuela's crisis and seeking to use economic warfare to force political change, the Trump administration has interfered in the worst way imaginable short of invasion. The U.S. is starving a whole nation in a vain bid to force out its current leadership, and because of that there could be massive loss of life and there will be an ever-growing exodus of people from Venezuela into neighboring countries. Every problem related to Venezuela's crisis has been made worse over the last six months of fruitless U.S. interference. Meddling in our neighbor's internal affairs isn't just unnecessary, but it is also cruel and unjust.

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