

Maduro Says "Multiple Cyberattacks" Backed by U.S. to Blame for Four Days of Widespread Blackouts

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Venezuelan President Nicolás Maduro, seen here during an interview within Miraflores presidential palace in Caracas in February 2019. Photo: Ariana Cubillos (AP)

Embattled Venezuelan President Nicolás Maduro—whose administration has been faced with a [massive economic crisis](#), allegations of [election-rigging](#), and a [growing power struggle](#) with U.S.-backed opposition leader Juan Guaidó—is blaming the country’s fourth consecutive day of widespread power outages on U.S.-backed cyberattacks.

[Per Reuters](#), Maduro tweeted on Sunday that “The national electrical system has been subject to multiple cyberattacks.” He added that the government is “making huge efforts to restore stable and definitive supply in the coming hours.” He did not provide any evidence for the claim, though Information Minister Jorge Rodríguez previously described the supposed attack as affecting an “automated control system” that determines how much power the plant generates based on capacity and demand, according to the [Associated Press](#).

“By attacking the automated control system, the machines stop as a protective mechanism,” Rodríguez said.

Yet experts say the outages are likely due to failing infrastructure rather than sabotage, Reuters wrote.

The blackouts began on Thursday and further rattled a country already facing major shortages of food, medicine, and consumer goods. According to Reuters, witnesses said that some stores and restaurants managed to remain operating on backup generators, though debit card payment systems were not working properly and customers were often asked to pay in U.S. currency. Public transportation is also in poor shape, with reports that many are unable to travel to their places of employment. Doctors for Health, a non-governmental organization, said on Saturday that 17 patients in hospitals had died due to lack of electricity, though [Reuters reported](#) it was unable to independently verify that figure.

At least some looting has occurred in a working class neighborhood in western Caracas, Reuters added, with a grocery store ransacked after protesters clashed with police. The impact on oil production, the key industry supporting the Venezuelan economy, is unclear.

Relatives of a patient use candles to navigate a darkened clinic in Caracas on March 7, 2019. Photo: Ariana Cubillos (AP)

A former president of the state-run electrical system, Miguel Lara, told Reuters that the blackouts are likely due to failing components that Maduro's government is failing to repair, rather than some sort of cyberweapon. The AP noted that smaller-scale power cuts have been a regular facet of Venezuelan life for years, though it also wrote that the outage on Thursday was unprecedented.

The [Washington Post](#) wrote on Friday:

For years, experts and workers at the state electric company have warned about a crippling lack of maintenance and the massive exodus of professionals from power plants and other institutions.

Russ Dallen, a Florida-based managing partner at the brokerage Caracas Capital Markets, said the cause of the outage was that the government "stole the money that should have been invested in upgrading the power grid and in buying power plants."

"One can infer from the delays and the results of the failure that it was a problem in the lines that leave Guri, rather than in the plant itself," Lara told Reuters.

One video from within Venezuela appeared to [show a transformer explosion](#) in Bolívar state, which journalist Germán Dam wrote likely contributed to the outages.

Guaidó, who used a provision of the Venezuelan constitution to claim the presidency in January, has accused the government of failing to provide a plausible explanation for the failure of the electrical grid.

“The regime at this hour, days after a blackout without precedent, has no diagnosis,” he said, per Reuters.

As the [New York Times reported](#) last year, the U.S. Cyber Command has grown more aggressive in cyberspace and likely has the capacity to launch such attacks on opponents, at one time preparing a program to “take down Iran’s air defenses, its communications systems, and its power grid if a conflict broke out.” Such an attack would require presidential approval, though aides said Donald Trump “has shown only a cursory interest in the subject,” the Times added.

It’s not the first time Maduro has accused the U.S. of trying to overthrow him using high-tech methods. In August 2018, his government said blasts at a military assemblage in Caracas were caused by [bomb-carrying drones](#) sent by his opponents and supported by expats in the U.S., Colombia, and other Latin American countries. While Maduro’s government arrested [dozens of alleged conspirators](#), critics have also regularly accused his government of [weaving baseless narratives](#) to protect his political power.

The situation in Venezuela is likely to continue to get worse, not better, as the Trump administration’s sanctions on the Venezuelan government continue to take affect. The U.S. has [vowed to further expand](#) the number of targeted institutions within the country. The White House has [refused to say](#) any options for dealing with the crisis are off the table, spurring some concern from domestic political opponents like [Vermont Senator Bernie Sanders](#) that it could be planning some sort of ill-advised military intervention.

The Trump administration’s point man on Venezuela, [Elliot Abrams](#), was [convicted in 1991](#) of lying to Congress about the Iran-Contra scandal while he was deputy secretary of state, and he has [reportedly been involved](#) in a ([temporarily](#)) successful coup against Maduro’s predecessor Hugo Chávez in 2002, undermining the results of Palestinian territory elections in 2006, and supporting genocidal regimes in Guatemala. Meanwhile, GOP Senator Marco Rubio recently [tweeted a clear threat](#) to Maduro in the form of two side-by-side images of late Libyan dictator Muammar Gaddafi, one of them likely a still image from footage of Gaddafi’s torture and execution in 2011.

(Disclosure: A news team from Univision, Gizmodo Media Group’s parent company, was [briefly detained](#) and [later deported](#) from Venezuela after an interview with Maduro late last month.)

[\[Reuters\]](#)