

Maduro says U.S. seeks to destroy Venezuela state-backed food program

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Washington is preparing sanctions and criminal charges against Venezuelan officials suspected of using the food program to launder money for Maduro.

Venezuelan President Nicolás Maduro on Thursday accused the United States of seeking to destroy a food aid program that the government of the crisis-stricken OPEC nation says feeds some 6 million families.

Washington is preparing sanctions and criminal charges against Venezuelan officials and others suspected of using the food program to launder money for the Maduro government, sources familiar with the matter said on Tuesday.

The measures against the program, known in Venezuela by its Spanish acronym CLAP, are expected to be enacted within the next 90 days, according to the sources, who asked not to be identified.

“(The U.S.) is preparing sanctions to destroy the CLAP system,” Maduro said in televised broadcast, accompanied by the military high command.

“Do what you want to do, Venezuela will continue with the Local Supply and Production Committees,” he said, referencing the full name of the CLAP program.

The State Department did not immediately respond to an email seeking comment.

The program sells boxes of food at subsidized prices that include products such as rice, pasta, oil and powdered milk. Some of the products are imported from countries such as Turkey, Mexico, Colombia and Brazil.

Maduro launched the plan in 2016 in response to chronic food shortages and spiraling prices, as Venezuela struggled under hyperinflation and a severe economic contraction. Critics call the program a form of social control that is used to pressure its recipients to support the ruling Socialist Party.

Venezuela’s political crisis has deepened since opposition leader Juan Guaido invoked the constitution to assume an interim presidency in January, arguing that socialist Maduro’s 2018 re-election was illegitimate.

The United States as well as most European and Latin American countries have recognized Guaido as Venezuela’s rightful leader.

But Maduro retains control of state functions and the support of the military’s top brass, as well the support of allies such as Russia, Cuba and China. He says the country’s economic problems are the result of an “economic war” led by his political adversaries with the help of Washington.

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