

Trump administration warns Russia against troop buildup in Venezuela

BY FRANCO ORDOÑEZ

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Secretary of State Mike Pompeo called the Russian foreign minister on Monday to tell him the United States won't "stand idly by" as Russia sends military forces to Venezuela.

Pompeo warned Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov that Russia was exacerbating tensions in Venezuela and undermining efforts to restore democracy in the South American nation, Robert Palladino, a State Department spokesman, said.

"The continued insertion of Russian military personnel to support the illegitimate regime of Nicolas Maduro in Venezuela risks prolonging the suffering of the Venezuelan people who overwhelmingly support interim President Juan Guaidó," Palladino said.

The United States and regional allies became concerned this weekend when Russian planes landed in Caracas. Venezuelan journalists reported that about 100 Russian soldiers arrived on the planes. The Russian personnel were involved in training and military cooperation with their Venezuelan counterparts.

The once mighty oil-rich nation of Venezuela is mired in an economic and humanitarian crisis that has led to hyperinflation and widespread shortages of food and medicine. More than three million people have fled the country across the hemisphere.

After the United States imposed sanctions meant to punish Maduro's government for steamrolling democratic institutions, Caracas has been [desperate to find](#) new ways to get cash and other forms of international support.

"Clearly, Maduro's enablers in Moscow and Havana are pushing continued escalation with the end-goal of crushing the opposition once-and-for-all," said José Cárdenas, who served in the National Security Council under former President George W. Bush and regularly speaks with Trump administration officials. "They also want to deplete the peaceful options at the disposal of the U.S.-led international effort to promote change in Venezuela and then dare them to contemplate the worst option: military intervention."

Russia has helped Venezuela on several occasions to make billions of dollars worth in debt payments. The Russian state oil firm Rosneft also holds a 49.9 percent stake in the Venezuelan-owned, U.S.-based refinery Citgo following a \$1.5 billion loan from the Russian company.

Just weeks ago, Venezuela's Vice President Delcy Rodriguez announced that state-run oil company, PDVSA, would move its European headquarters to Moscow from Lisbon.

Earlier this month, Pompeo blamed the Russian government along with Cuba for propping up Maduro and thwarting efforts by the Venezuelan people to restore democracy.

He criticized Russia for vetoing a U.N.-sponsored resolution to allow aid to be delivered to the Venezuelan people and accused Russian leaders of using its state sponsored media outlets of attempts to "divert attention from the humanitarian disaster." He said Russia has provided more than \$17 billion in loans and investments and helped the Maduro regime convert gold to cash.

"The Kremlin is standing with its Venezuelan cronies against the will of the people of a sovereign nation to protect a Moscow-friendly regime," Pompeo said at that time.