

U.S. willing to offer Maduro guarantees he'll be left alone if he leaves Venezuela

BY NORA GÁMEZ TORRES

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Opposition supporters protest in Venezuela

Thousands of people left their homes and workplaces in Venezuela on Jan. 30, 2019 in a walkout organized by the opposition to demand that President Nicolás Maduro leave power. By AP

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Thousands of people left their homes and workplaces in Venezuela on Jan. 30, 2019 in a walkout organized by the opposition to demand that President Nicolás Maduro leave power. By AP

With no resolution in sight for Venezuela's leadership six months after the leader of the national assembly declared himself president, the Trump administration appears willing to offer guarantees to Nicolas Maduro that the U.S. will leave him alone if he leaves Venezuela.

A senior Trump administration official suggested that the U.S. would consider not indicting Maduro if he leaves power.

"I think Maduro perhaps is looking for an exit, but he doesn't know what it looks like, he does not know if there are guarantees to that. I believe he still thinks that if he goes to, let's say, the Dominican Republic, we are going to come in and indict him and go after him," the high ranking official told the Miami Herald. "I think that's the concern and that's the only thing there's room for negotiation with Maduro."

The official urged the Venezuelan leader to take advantage of the offer before it is too late, citing a critical report written by Michelle Bachelet, the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights. The report detailed human rights violations in Venezuela under Maduro, and could be used to charge him in the International Criminal Court in The Hague. The United States does not recognize that court, the official said, but other governments in the region do.

"The time has come to say, this is the opportunity you have, and we are willing to negotiate to close this chapter, but your opportunity is closing because now even the United Nations has created a case that could be used against you at The Hague," the official said. "My concern is that it becomes a disincentive for him to find a way out. What we want to offer is ... this should be your chance to turn the page, now, before it's too late. "

The official requested anonymity to speak frankly about U.S. foreign policy towards Venezuela.

There are precedents for this kind of agreement. Haitian President Jean Bertrand Aristide was allowed to flee the country in 2004 aboard a U.S. military plane amid allegations of election rigging. He later was the subject of a U.S. grand jury investigation over drug trafficking allegations, but was never charged.

Several figures in the Trump government had already spoken of giving Maduro an exit. But the mention of guarantees seems to arise from the recognition that, after six months, there is no immediate solution to the Venezuelan drama.

“No one has ever told the president this would be quick,” the official said, pushing hard against what he calls a “media narrative.”

“It’s inarguable that we had more progress in the past 20 weeks in further weakening Maduro than the last two administrations had in 20 years. In that sense, we feel very good about where we are and the progress that has been made,” he said.

But the Trump administration, which has invested significant political and financial capital in supporting efforts to oust the Venezuelan ruler, has watched how the opposition plans have failed one by one, from an attempt to dramatically bring in humanitarian aid through the Colombian border to an effort to get the military on its side. As the clock ticks, Maduro continues to cling to power with the help of Russia, Cuba, and China.

And the refugee crisis is getting worse by the day. With minimum wages of \$8 per month, the lowest in the continent, and amid shortages of food and medicine, thousands of Venezuelans continue to emigrate to neighboring countries, threatening to double the current four million refugees by the end of next year.

Venezuelan migrants are having their parents join them abroad for better care

Thousands of Venezuelans who fled their homeland years ago to find work and send remittances to relatives are now opting to take their parents out of Venezuela as the quality of life there continues to deteriorate.

Pessimism is growing among many Venezuelans, and mass protests are fading.

“I think the media, unfortunately, portrays this wrong,” the official said. “It’s not about momentum and the people on the streets; it’s really the challenge to be able to get to the people, because every time Guaidó opens his mouth, the internet gets shut down by the Venezuelan [government] with the help of the Chinese. The biggest challenge [Guaidó] faces is getting his message [to the people]. People support his message, but, they cannot protest if they don’t know where to go.”

The United States was first in recognizing Guaidó as the legitimate president of Venezuela on Jan. 23. Since then, it has allocated more than \$250 million for humanitarian aid and has sanctioned members of the regime, security agencies, and economic targets such as PDVSA, the state oil company — everything short of military action, even though government officials, Vice President Mike Pence and the president himself have repeated the phrase “all options are on the table” to the media.

Six months later, a military intervention seems an increasingly distant possibility.

“I don’t know where in the Venezuelan political sphere it’s become a thing that the Venezuelans would ask for a military intervention and they’re going to get it,” the official said. “That’s not the way it works.”

“We’re going to do everything possible to help interim president Guaidó with the tools and the mechanisms that we have, but when it comes to that ultimate option, the national security of the United States is weighed heavily, and that’s not a decision the Venezuelans get to make, that’s a decision that the president of the United States gets to make,” he said.

What the U.S. is willing to do is expanding the sanctions to new targets in Venezuela. Last week, the Treasury Department sanctioned Venezuela’s General Directorate of Military Counterintelligence of Venezuela and four of its members for their role in the death of a military officer who had turned against the regime, Capt. Rafael Acosta Arévalo.

“You’re going to see tougher measures... bigger, broader, more holistic things coming,” the official said. The effect of some of the sanctions against the Venezuelan oil sector, he added, has barely been felt because the regulations include grace periods for U.S. companies to end their operations in that country.

Following the Bachelet report, the European Union also warned that it would expand targeted measures “in case there are no concrete results from the ongoing negotiations,” which are facilitated by the Norwegian government, said E.U. High Representative Federica Mogherini in a statement.

But sitting down to talk with representatives of Maduro, first in Oslo and recently in Barbados, has divided the opposition and weakened Guaidó domestically. Prominent voices like Maria Corina Machado and the former mayor of Caracas, Antonio Ledezma, have spared no words in criticizing what they consider a failed gesture that only strengthens Maduro. The pushback against the dialogue has forced Guaidó to walk a fine line to appear as a pragmatic politician while insisting that he will not stop until achieving “the end of the usurpation,” a phrase that alludes to Maduro leaving the Miraflores presidential palace.

In an unpublished fragment of an interview to el Nuevo Herald in May, Guaidó referred to the talks in Oslo as “just another initiative. We are facing a dictatorship ...

that for years has used this type of initiative to delay and gain time to confuse public opinion and to make us look weak. In this case, it did not work for them.”

“Venezuela does not have time,” the interim president said. A few weeks later, at the beginning of July and with no quick solution in sight, representatives of the opposition and the Maduro regime sat down again to talk in Barbados. They are currently conducting a second round of talks on the Caribbean island.

Both Norway and the European Union support a political solution that includes new elections for both the presidency and the National Assembly under a renovated National Electoral College and a new voters roll. But elections under Maduro, or even with him as a candidate, have proved a controversial point.

Secretary of State Mike Pompeo said Saturday that free and fair elections while Maduro is still in power, with the support of the Cuban government, is “inconceivable.”

A State Department spokesperson for Western Hemisphere Affairs made clear Maduro is seen as the only obstacle for a resolution of the crisis.

“The only thing preventing moving forward with a transitional government, suspension of sanctions, and preparation for elections is Maduro’s refusal to step down to let the transitional government take over,” the spokesperson said.

“We are not supportive of courses of action that leave corrupt and non-democratic actors in power or buy time for the Maduro regime to further consolidate its hold on the country,” the spokesperson said regarding the talks mediated by Norway. “Any discussion of a transition must include Maduro’s departure as a precondition for elections; the increasing repression and attacks against democratic institutions are proof positive that Maduro is unwilling or incapable of respecting democratic processes.”

Although the Trump administration is skeptical about the talks, the high-ranking administration official said that U.S. sanctions had led Maduro to sit at the dialogue table, a point echoed by Florida Republican Senator Marco Rubio, who has been actively involved in the U.S.’ Venezuela policy.

“Without the rapid and forceful support of President Trump, this challenge to Maduro would have collapsed months ago. The only reason why the Maduro regime is even at the bargaining table in Barbados is the actions taken by this administration,” Rubio said.

“It’s not just the U.S. that is skeptical of talks,” he said. “The Vatican explicitly refused to participate in new talks, and the E.U. just voted to impose sanctions if they fail, because Maduro has a long history of using talks to buy time and try to divide the

opposition. It is the hope of achieving relief from U.S. sanctions that forced the regime to the negotiations.”

But even if Maduro agrees to leave, it is not clear that other members of the regime would also step aside. On Twitter, Rubio pointed to the elephant in the room: Diosdado Cabello, the regime’s number two, who has been accumulating more power recently.

He not only presides over the Constituent Assembly, which is unconstitutional, he wrote, but family members and loyalists control key positions in the army, spy agencies, tax collection, and public works. Rubio also claimed Cabello and his closer circle control many “colectivos,” paramilitary groups accused of political violence in the country.

Cabello’s cousin, Major General Alexis Rodríguez Cabello, was recently promoted as Commander of the Bolivarian Army. A month before, an unusual trip Cabello made to Havana generated countless rumors.

“Diosdado Cabello is someone the Cubans have distrusted, and in spite of it, he spent a weekend in Havana, discussing what?” the high ranking official said. “Any curious observer would say this guy is trying to sell the Cubans that maybe he is the best option.”

Despite the uncertainty, the official insisted that U.S. policy toward Venezuela was paying off.

“Just look at how radically different the situation is versus January 31,” he said. “If anybody thinks that momentum has been lost, that a lot of ground hasn’t been gained, that Maduro is not mortally wounded, then they’re looking at a whole different world.”

Miami Herald reporter Jacqueline Charles contributed to this story.

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