

## Venezuela's Opposition Plans to Deliver Aid, Undermining Maduro

By Anatoly Kurmanaev, Ana Vanessa Herrero and Ernesto Londoño  
The New York Times, Feb. 5, 2019

Children eat lunch at a soup kitchen sponsored by Venezuela's opposition. Gabriela Vega, third from right, runs the charity out of her living room in La Vega slum. Meridith Kohut for The New York Times



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CARACAS, Venezuela — Venezuela's opposition says it is preparing to deliver tens of millions of dollars in food and medicine to ease devastating shortages and undermine the authoritarian rule of Nicolás Maduro. But some major relief organizations are reluctant to cooperate, fearing the plan could turn humanitarian aid into a political weapon.

On Tuesday, the opposition said it would begin stocking warehouses near the Venezuelan border with supplies donated by the United States, Colombia and Venezuelans abroad. The humanitarian aid — baby formula, nutritional supplements, medicine and hospital supplies — could provide the opposition with a tangible way of weakening Mr. Maduro, who has long relied on food handouts to keep his political base loyal during the country's long economic collapse.

Getting the aid into Venezuela, past Mr. Maduro's security forces and into the right hands will be a critical test of the opposition's ability to rally the nation and establish an interim government. While the United States and more than 30 other nations have recognized the opposition leader, Juan Guaidó, as Venezuela's rightful leader, he and his supporters still need to show that they can run the country effectively.

"We want to provide tangible early results," said Miguel Pizarro, the opposition lawmaker in charge of organizing the aid delivery. "We can't wait for the political transition to start reducing the people's suffering."

The standoff in Venezuela has created an untenable situation in which two men claim to be the legitimate president. On Tuesday, Pope Francis said he would be willing to mediate a peaceful resolution if asked by both Mr. Guaidó and Mr. Maduro. He said Mr. Maduro had written him a letter asking for dialogue.

"We are always willing," said Francis on the papal plane, but added that both parties needed to be willing.

Residents of Petare, a large slum on the outskirts of Caracas, deliver food ration boxes handed out by the government. Meridith Kohut for The New York Times



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The opposition is suspicious of Mr. Maduro's calls for talks, and hopes that its aid plan will accelerate his ouster.

But international aid organizations and local activists are concerned not just about the many logistical and security problems but also about the prospect of using aid as a tool in a political contest.

The International Committee of the Red Cross and its local affiliate in Colombia said in a statement that they would not participate in the delivery effort for the time being, citing the group's "fundamental principles of impartiality, neutrality and independence."

Similarly, the Venezuelan branch of Caritas, the humanitarian arm of the Catholic Church, has also said it is not ready to commit. Humanitarian aid, the group said, should not be deployed to "serve political interests, but solely to benefit the most vulnerable people."

Food has been used as a weapon by Mr. Maduro's government for years — distributed by his loyalists, handed out to supportive voters at election time and sometimes withheld from critics who oppose him.

Now it has become part of a political struggle yet again — this time in the battle to force him from power.

Venezuela's President Nicolás Maduro, center, at a military ceremony in Caracas, on Monday. Miraflores Palace



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Opposition leaders say they have no choice but to press ahead with their plan to alleviate the crippling shortages in the country because Mr. Maduro rejects humanitarian aid and refuses even to acknowledge the crisis.

They say all deliveries will be done by nonprofit organizations, volunteers and religious groups, rather than political operatives. Deliveries will be based on need, not political affiliation, they say.

"This is a question of life or death for many people," Mr. Pizarro said. "This is not a political game."

But opposition leaders also hope the aid drive will put Mr. Maduro in a political bind. If border guards refuse to let aid trucks in from Colombia, many Venezuelans and world leaders will blame Mr. Maduro for deliberately worsening a humanitarian crisis that has already led to widespread hunger, illness and an exodus of millions of people.

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And if the trucks do get across, the opposition can present itself as an answer to Venezuela's chronic suffering, while Mr. Maduro will appear to have lost control of the country's borders. That could accelerate defections from the ruling party and the military.

Dimitris Pantoulas, a political scientist in Caracas, called the opposition's aid delivery plan a high-stakes gamble.

Juan Guaidó, the leader of Venezuela's opposition, gives a speech to supporters last month. Meridith Kohut for The New York Times

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"This is 99 percent about the military and one percent about the humanitarian aspects," he said. "The opposition is testing the military's loyalty, raising their cost of supporting Maduro. Are they with Maduro, or no? Will they reject the aid? If the answer is no, then Maduro's hours are numbered."

But if the delivery of aid is not carried out smoothly, faith in the opposition's ability to address the country's enormous problems could erode.

"This is a challenge for the opposition to show that it can govern," Mr. Pantoulas said. "If this fails, this could damage the image of the opposition."

There is little question that the country needs help. Years of rampant corruption, a badly mishandled economy, poorly managed price controls and deep problems at the state oil company — a major source of the nation's hard currency — have taken a huge toll on the Venezuelan people.

Pharmacy shelves are often bereft of essential medicines, causing a fall in life expectancy and the re-emergence of previously eradicated diseases, including diphtheria. The Venezuelan pharmaceutical industry association puts national medicine stocks at 20 percent of basic needs.

Mr. Maduro recently dismissed the plan to deliver aid as part of a plot orchestrated by Washington and right-wing politicians to carry out a coup.

Abraham Rivas digs through a dumpster looking for scraps of food in La Vega slum. Meridith Kohut for The New York Times

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"Don't make a false promise to Venezuela with this supposed humanitarian aid," Mr. Maduro said at a recent rally. "We are not beggars."

Mr. Guaidó's allies in Europe and the Americas are making new aid contributions almost daily, with Canada pledging \$40 million on Monday, doubling the \$20 million pledged made by the United States.

Mr. Guaidó, 35, said in an interview on Sunday that he hoped the aid would help persuade the country's security forces to rally behind him.

"We're putting the ball in their court," he said. "We're telling them they have the chance to help their relatives, their cousins, their children, their mothers, who are suffering as much or more than the average Venezuelan."

The promise of food and medicine has already raised hopes in some of the poor neighborhoods that traditionally form the backbone of Mr. Maduro's support.

"The majority of Venezuelans agree with this humanitarian aid," said Gabriela Vega, a former government supporter who runs a soup kitchen in her house in La Vega, a working-class district in the capital. "Even though Maduro and his crew don't want this to happen, we, the people who are suffering, who are hungry, who are sick, we do want this aid."

A few blocks away, Abraham Rivas was digging through a dumpster looking for scraps of food. Graffiti on a nearby wall proclaimed the area "Chavista territory," a reference to Mr. Maduro's predecessor and mentor, the former president Hugo Chávez.

"So many people here are dying of hunger," he said. "With a paycheck, you can merely afford a carton of eggs."

Ana Vanessa Herrero and Anatoly Kurmanaev reported from Caracas. Ernesto Londoño reported from Miami. Meridith Kohut contributed reporting from Caracas.

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