

# Congress of the United States

## Washington, DC 20515

August 12<sup>th</sup>, 2021

The Honorable Antony Blinken  
Secretary  
U.S. Department of State  
2201 C Street NW  
Washington, D.C., 20520

Dear Mr. Secretary,

We write to you to strongly consider conducting a prompt review of our government's current policy towards Venezuela and to consider pursuing an alternative approach to the one adopted by former President Trump.

While Nicolás Maduro and his entourage are largely responsible for Venezuela's grave political and humanitarian crisis, the Trump administration's ill-conceived policies have only exacerbated the crisis and damaged U.S. credibility throughout the region. Our government should act urgently to alleviate the suffering of the Venezuelan people by taking immediate steps to lift the broad and indiscriminate sanctions while supporting internationally mediated dialogue efforts and expanding our diplomatic engagement with a broader range of political actors in Venezuela.

By any measure, the current "maximum pressure" policy towards Venezuela has been a total failure. Trump officials attempted to force Maduro from power by imposing far-reaching sanctions; trying to foment a domestic military uprising; threatening U.S. armed intervention; and by cutting off all relations with Maduro and Maduro-aligned authorities. Despite these and other aggressive measures, Maduro remains more firmly in place than ever.

U.S. economic sanctions enacted since 2017 have inflicted greater hardship and suffering on ordinary Venezuelans. Rampant mismanagement and corruption under Maduro are at the root of Venezuela's humanitarian crisis. But, as a recent [GAO report](#) noted, U.S. sanctions have likely contributed to the country's steep economic decline by sharply reducing the country's oil revenue. Economist Francisco Rodríguez [calculates](#) that U.S. financial and oil-sector sanctions led to \$17 billion of lost revenue for Venezuela per year between 2017 and 2019.

These dire numbers signify an escalation of the human tragedy taking place in Venezuela. A [2019 study](#) found that sanctions contributed to significant increases in malnutrition, disease and general mortality in 2017 and 2018 (before even harsher sanctions were imposed by former President Trump, starting in 2019). As a [UN Human Rights expert](#) noted, sanctions on Venezuela "have exacerbated pre-existing economic situations and have dramatically affected

the whole population of Venezuela, especially but not only those in extreme poverty, women, children, medical workers, people with disabilities or life-threatening or chronic diseases, and the indigenous populations.”

Sanctions have also seriously hampered COVID-19 relief efforts in Venezuela. While the Biden administration recently issued a [general license](#) to allow Venezuela to access COVID-related medical goods, the general license does not resolve issues with banking and supply chains. Sanctions continue to deprive the country of the necessary resources with which to effectively combat the pandemic. To date, [less than one percent](#) of the Venezuelan population is fully vaccinated.

The Trump administration claimed to want to bring relief to those suffering from malnutrition and disease in Venezuela, but sanctions - as noted above - have done exactly the opposite. Furthermore, a recent [USAID Inspector General review](#) has shown that such policies politicized the humanitarian aid it offered to Venezuela, thereby denying the general population of desperately needed relief.

The Trump administration further damaged U.S. credibility as a fair and principled arbiter in Venezuela by threatening to invade the country militarily and by calling for a military rebellion. A violent military or civil conflict would have further harmed Venezuelans, and U.S. support for such an outcome strengthened the image of the U.S. as a bellicose and threatening power rather than as a defender of democracy, peace and human rights.

A more robust and inclusive policy of engagement with actors on the ground is urgently needed. Trump and his advisors spurned engagement with moderate opposition forces in Venezuela, focusing exclusively on the most hardline elements of the Venezuelan opposition that have advocated for Maduro’s immediate overthrow and largely rejected dialogue. The failure of these hardliners to instigate change in Venezuela has contributed to a dramatic drop in popular support for their political movement.

Recent developments indicate a potential opportunity for constructive engagement by the U.S. In the space of a few weeks, a new electoral council was created that includes prominent opposition figures, the World Food Program reached an agreement with the Maduro government to distribute food to thousands of Venezuelan children; and the government transferred six U.S. citizens charged with corruption from prison to house arrest.

Given all the above, we respectfully urge you to consider the following steps to chart a new path in our policy towards Venezuela:

- Immediately lift all U.S. financial and sectoral sanctions that exacerbate the humanitarian crisis. Most urgently, the U.S. should reverse the Trump ban that prohibits Venezuela from exchanging crude oil for diesel, thereby hindering food production and distribution.
- End the politicization of U.S. assistance to Venezuela and work with respected, neutral actors such as United Nations agencies and the International Red Cross to ensure the most effective delivery of aid to the Venezuelans that most need it.

- Support internationally mediated dialogue efforts in Venezuela led by widely respected actors like the government of Norway and the Vatican.
- Engage in direct dialogue with the Maduro government while maintaining strong diplomatic pressure in opposition to Maduro's human rights abuses and anti-democratic actions.
- Engage in dialogue with a broader array of political actors in Venezuela, including moderate opposition sectors that are not aligned with Juan Guaidó and moderate chavista sectors that are critical of the Maduro government.

Thank you for your prompt attention to our requests.

Sincerely,



Raúl M. Grijalva  
Member of Congress



Jesús "Chuy" García  
Member of Congress

/s/

Karen Bass  
Member of Congress

/s/

Mondaire Jones  
Member of Congress

/s/

Jared Huffman  
Member of Congress

/s/

Ro Khanna  
Member of Congress

/s/

Pramila Jayapal  
Member of Congress

/s/

James P. McGovern  
Member of Congress

/s/

Henry C. "Hank" Johnson, Jr.  
Member of Congress

/s/

Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez  
Member of Congress

/s/  
Ilhan Omar  
Member of Congress

/s/  
Mark Pocan  
Member of Congress

/s/  
Ayanna Pressley  
Member of Congress

/s/  
Bobby L. Rush  
Member of Congress

/s/  
Mary Gay Scanlon  
Member of Congress

/s/  
Jan Schakowsky  
Member of Congress

/s/  
Juan Vargas  
Member of Congress

/s/  
Maxine Waters  
Member of Congress

/s/  
Bonnie Watson Coleman  
Member of Congress

