

# VENEZUELA'S POLITICAL CRISIS CONTINUES TO ESCALATE

By Andrew Richards



Venezuelan President Nicolás Maduro has said he cannot rule out the possibility of civil war as pressure mounts on him to stand down. In a TV interview, he warned that US President Donald Trump would leave the White House "stained with blood" if he intervened in the crisis. He also defiantly rejected the EU's Sunday [3 February] deadline to call snap elections. Opposition leader Juan Guaidó declared himself interim president last month and won US backing. He said on Sunday he would build an international coalition to deliver humanitarian aid to Venezuelans, but Mr Maduro has accused him of organising a coup. **(BBC News)**

## ***A recent history of protests***

Protest against President Nicolás Maduro's rule is nothing new – opposition began almost immediately after he was first elected president in 2013, following the death of the late president Hugo Chavez. In November of the same year, inflation reached fifty percent, prompting protests. Between February and March 2014, protests over poor security in Venezuela's western states spread to the capital where anti-government rallies became common. After the government accused the opposition of seeking a coup, there was a violent stop to the protests and 28 people were killed. In December 2015, the opposition (the Democratic Unity Roundtable) won a two-thirds majority in parliamentary elections, allowing them to end 16 years of Socialist Party control. By January the next year, the opposition lost its majority due to fear-induced resignations. Again, in September 2016, huge protests throughout the capital called for the removal of the president, blaming him for the country's economic problems. Between April and June 2017, protests continued with a call for early presidential elections. In July, the opposition held an unofficial referendum in which a reported seven million people rejected Mr Maduro's proposal to convene a new constituent assembly. Throughout 2018, widespread protests against Mr Maduro was a common sight, as people protested the rising cost of basic goods, and the lack thereof, which has forced thousands into poverty.

## ***Foreign intervention***

While the majority of countries in North and South America, as well as the European Union and others, have thrown their support behind the official opposition led by Juan Guaidó, there are others, notably Russia (and Mr Maduro himself) that are accusing the US in particular of starving the people through sanctions, and even inciting a coup. US President Donald Trump was quoted as saying that a military intervention is "an option".

Speaking on the FOX Business Network, Asymmetrica CEO Vanessa Neumann commented on the US acknowledgement of Guaidó as interim president and the implementation of sanctions: "They [the US] are supporting the constitution of Venezuela, according to which Guaidó is the president. Guaidó is an intro president, meaning that he has the presidency for one year during which he is supposed to call elections. He has to name a government and lead the country into free and fair elections, which he might win. It was important for the US to stop buying Venezuelan oil [and imposing sanctions] because on the one hand you cannot call it a despotic regime or a human-rights-abusing regime, and still be the main financier for it, by buying its oil."

Do Venezuelans seek intervention? According to a poll by Hinterlaces, a Venezuelan Intelligence Agency specialising in public opinion and market research services, more than eight out of 10 Venezuelans oppose international intervention, both military and non-military, in their country, as well as the crippling sanctions.

## ***Undercover report***

With inflation rising to an unprecedented one million percent, CNN's Nick Paton Walsh went undercover to interview Venezuelans from every walk of life, to see if it is negative Western influence as Mr Maduro claims or a corrupt government that has forced the country to its knees.

Walsh summarised his visit with the following: “It’s startling how we tend to cast the crisis in Venezuela as some big geopolitical new cold war, a battle of wills between Moscow and Washington, but really for the people inside it’s about food, it’s about the startling mismanagement and corruption of the Maduro government and how that’s left people unable to get their daily things we take for granted. People everywhere are waiting in long lines to get fuel, in the capital there is a queue for everything and everywhere hunger is breeding a special kind of anger. Many of the people I spoke with requested anonymity out of fear.”

Walsh interviewed one family who were long-time Maduro supporters, who said: “We can’t hold it in any more. We are being crushed. We are beggars now, always begging. This is not political, this is survival. People are killing each other for a kilogram of rice, even over water.”

In another interview with a junior military officer, Walsh asked if the military was really behind Mr Maduro, and if he would open fire on protesters on the street if Mr Maduro ordered it. The officer responded: “I would say 80 percent of soldiers are against the government, with some even going to demonstrations. But the big issue is the senior officers are the ones eating, getting rich while at the bottom we have it hard. I get a dollar and a half every month, enough for one chicken and a food box from the barracks. Then I have to work magic to make it last like everyone else. Will I shoot someone in the street? I would rather quit. That person could be my brother or mother. We need one of the generals to flip, to make a change.”

### **Opposition response**

Guillermo Olmo, a *BBC Mundo* correspondent, interviewed Juan Guaidó and asked whether he was afraid of pushing the country into a civil war. Guaidó said: “In Venezuela we either accept domination, total oppression and torture, among other things, or we choose freedom, democracy and prosperity for our people. Mr Maduro’s regime is killing young, poor people on the streets. Just 40 people in one week. 170 people were killed in 2017 and nearly 80 in 2014. This is Mr Maduro’s regime.”

### **FROM A CHRISTIAN PERSPECTIVE**

The world can ill afford another Syria, Yemen or a South Sudan. Global numbers for displaced people have reached an all-time high in 2018, when an average of more than 44,500 were displaced every day of the year. Dany Bahar, associate researcher at the Brookings Institution, says that the difference with Venezuela it “is not being driven by a violent war but by a socioeconomic disaster”. Bahar adds that “the economic and humanitarian crisis in Venezuela is perhaps the worst that the hemisphere has seen in modern history and that in the near future, by looking at the number of refugees leaving the country, that the ongoing refugee crisis could surpass that of Syria.”

In November 2018, the UN’s Refugee Agency (the UNHCR) announced that the number of refugees and migrants from Venezuela has now reached three million, with other sources claiming as much as four million. According to the UNHCR, Colombia has the highest number of refugees and migrants from Venezuela, a total of over one million. It is followed by Peru (with over half a million), Ecuador (over 220,000), Argentina (130,000), Chile (over 100,000) and Brazil (85,000).

These migrations in the Americas will likely present regional challenges, but will also offer divine opportunities for the Church to step in and reflect a God of compassion. For believers in North and South America who felt far removed from the Arab world and Europe when refugees fled recent wars, the Venezuelan crisis is far more ‘neighbourly’, with easier access and a more culturally friendly connection for strategic involvement.

### **PRAY**

- **For God to firmly direct all local and foreign decision-makers involved in the situation**
- **For leaders to seek the best for the people of Venezuela**
- **For the Church in South America to reach out to all those seeking hope and a future**

### **IMAGE SOURCE:**

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