

TESTIMONY OF
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U.S. DEPARTMENT OF STATE
BEFORE
THE SUBCOMMITTEE ON THE WESTERN HEMISPHERE
HOUSE COMMITTEE ON FOREIGN AFFAIRS
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Chairman Duncan, Ranking Member Sires, Members of the Committee, thank you for inviting me to participate in today's hearing on Venezuela. I appreciate your interest in Venezuela and your support for U.S. assistance and our policies there.

We share Congress's deep concerns about the situation in Venezuela, including worsening shortages of food and medicine. We are troubled by credible and independent reports that 85 percent of medicines on the World Health Organization's list of essential medicines are not available at pharmacies and hospitals, while many other medicines are scarce or hard to find. The Venezuelan people, including vulnerable populations such as children, persons with disabilities, and the elderly are not able to access the basic medicine and health services they need. In the face of a burgeoning Zika crisis, Venezuelans cannot find mosquito repellent. The International Monetary Fund predicts the macroeconomic picture will continue to worsen, with estimates of 700 percent inflation and GDP contraction of eight percent this year.

These dire conditions are a direct result of the Venezuelan government's economic mismanagement and misguided policy decisions. A sustainable remedy can only come about through meaningful dialogue, including between the executive branch and the legislature and the willingness to make the necessary decisions to right the economic ship.

In the December 6, 2015 legislative elections, voters expressed their overwhelming desire for a change in the direction of their country. Opposition candidates won a two-thirds majority of seats. Since then, however, we have witnessed how the executive and judicial branches have stripped away, undermined, and diluted the National Assembly's constitutionally guaranteed functions and responsibilities.

The legislature's authority to call ministers to hearings similar to this one we are at now, in order to ask their executive branch to explain its decisions, was blocked by an executive order from President Maduro on May 2. This was President Maduro's response to the legislature's efforts to hold accountable former and current food ministers for the scarcity crisis. President Maduro and his allies have threatened lawmakers to discourage them from traveling abroad to raise awareness of Venezuela's struggles. The country's Supreme Court has interfered with the independence of the National Assembly to set its own agenda and prevented it from examining certain issues falling under the purview of the other four branches of government, such as Central Bank data and budget allocations. We remain deeply concerned about these efforts to

undermine the democratic separation of powers enshrined in Venezuela's constitution.

The Department has taken steps to impose visa restrictions on more than 60 individuals believed to be responsible for or complicit in undermining democratic governance, including corruption, and human rights abuses. Certain family members of such individuals can be affected by these actions. We will continue to evaluate further actions against those who undermine democratic governance, commit human rights abuses, and line their pockets with public monies.

We continue to call on the Venezuelan government to release those who have been imprisoned solely for their political beliefs, including opposition leaders Leopoldo Lopez, Daniel Ceballos, and Antonio Ledezma, Judge Maria Lourdes Afiuni, student protesters, and many others. Rather than intimidating and imprisoning its critics, we believe the Venezuelan government should focus on finding real solutions for Venezuela's problems through dialogue.

At the OAS General Assembly on June 14, Secretary Kerry expressed our commitment to working with all OAS member states to help Venezuelans remedy the deeply troubling situation in Venezuela. He emphasized the need for dialogue in Venezuela that would ultimately address the political, economic, social, and humanitarian dimensions of the crisis. The Secretary renewed calls for the Venezuelan government to release political prisoners, respect freedom of expression and assembly, alleviate shortages of food and medicine, and to honor constitutional

mechanisms, including a fair and timely recall referendum. It is clear: resolving the challenges that 30 million Venezuelans face will require an inclusive, meaningful discussion within Venezuela that addresses political prisoners, the role of the legislature, and economic reforms, and that advances the recall referendum. In Santo Domingo on June 15, fifteen foreign ministers signed a statement of strong support for the efforts of former Spanish Prime Minister Zapatero, former Dominican President Fernandez, and former Panamanian President Torrijos to promote a timely, national, inclusive, and effective political dialogue, encouraging respect for separation of powers, rule of law and democratic institutions, and the fair and timely implementation of constitutional mechanisms.

All of this illustrates how important it is for the region to work collectively and demonstrate the leadership necessary to address the erosion of democratic institutions in Venezuela, and uphold our region's commitment to act in concert in the defense of democracy and human rights in the Americas when they are threatened.

The Venezuelan constitution guarantees Venezuelans the right to pursue a recall referendum if they so choose. We have seen some recent, albeit unreasonably and intentionally slow, progress by the National Electoral Council to allow a constitutional process, a recall referendum, to move to its next step. As we are here today, the National Electoral Council is scheduled to validate signatures of those expressing support for a recall referendum. At the same time, we have heard troubling remarks from President Maduro and his allies dismissing the

possibility of a recall this year. The recall referendum process offers the best opportunity for the Venezuelan people to express their political will in a constitutional, peaceful, and democratic manner. Given rising social and political tensions, it is urgent that the recall effort advance without delay.

We continue to call on the Venezuelan executive branch to respect the institution of the National Assembly and to engage with Venezuelans across the political spectrum. We are joined by countries and organizations in the region, the European Union, the Vatican, and others, in calling for dialogue in Venezuela to identify lasting solutions to complex challenges that the Venezuelan people face. The Secretary and other senior officials have discussed our concerns about the situation in Venezuela with their counterparts throughout the hemisphere and with other key interlocutors.

I would like to be clear: we want to see a prosperous and stable Venezuela. We remain committed to maintaining our strong and lasting ties with the people of Venezuela. We favor Venezuelan solutions to Venezuelan problems, with the support of the region. We are prepared to continue to use all appropriate tools in our toolkit, and we will continue to call attention to human rights abuses and other actions that undermine democratic principles. We did just that at the OAS General Assembly June 13-15 and will continue to do so at future OAS Permanent Council meetings. We were encouraged to hear member states united in their calls for dialogue, including Canada, Dominica, Colombia, Bolivia, Nicaragua, and Ecuador, to name a few.

We will continue to work closely with Congress and others in the region to support greater political expression in Venezuela, and to encourage the Venezuelan government to comply with its human rights obligations and live up to its commitment to democracy, as articulated in the Universal Declaration on Human Rights, International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights, the OAS Charter, the Inter American Democratic Charter, and other important global instruments.

Mr. Chairman, I would like to end by saying that we sincerely appreciate the House Committee on Foreign Affairs' contributions to the promotion and protection of human rights in Venezuela. The strong, bipartisan cooperation among this Committee's Members and staff to support the U.S. government's championing of democracy and human rights, including the right to freedom of expression, throughout the hemisphere is a credit to our great country.

Thank you and I look forward to answering your questions.

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