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How cocaine and corruption led to the indictment of Maduro

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NEW YORK (AP) — A newly unsealed [U.S. Justice Department indictment](#) accuses [captured Venezuelan President Nicolás Maduro](#) of running a “corrupt, illegitimate government” fueled by an extensive drug-trafficking operation that flooded the U.S. with thousands of tons of cocaine.

The arrest of [Maduro and his wife, Cilia Flores](#), in a stunning military operation early Saturday in Venezuela sets the stage for a major test for U.S. prosecutors as they seek to secure a conviction in a New York courtroom against the longtime leader of the oil-rich South American nation.

Attorney General Pam Bondi said in a post on X that Maduro and Flores “will soon face the full wrath of American justice on American soil in American courts.”

Here’s a look at the accusations against Maduro and the charges he faces:

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Drug and weapons charges

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Maduro is charged alongside his wife, his son and three others. Maduro is indicted on four counts: narco-terrorism conspiracy, cocaine importation conspiracy, possession of machine guns and destructive devices and conspiracy to possess machine guns and destructive devices.

Maduro is facing the same charges as in an [earlier indictment brought against him](#) in Manhattan federal court in 2020, during the first Trump presidency. The new indictment unsealed Saturday, which adds charges against Flores, was filed under seal in the Southern District of New York just before Christmas.



Venezuela's President Nicolas Maduro gestures as he walks with his wife Cilia Flores in Red square after the Victory Day military parade in Moscow, May 9, 2025, during celebrations of the 80th anniversary of the Soviet Union's victory over Nazi Germany during the World War II. (AP Photo/Pavel Bednyakov, Pool, File) Read More

Maduro is due to make his first appearance Monday in federal court in Manhattan. A video posted Saturday night on social media by a White House account showed Maduro, smiling, as he was escorted through a U.S. Drug Enforcement Administration office in New York by two federal agents grasping his arms. He was expected to be detained while awaiting trial at a federal jail in Brooklyn.

'Cocaine-fueled corruption' flourished

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The indictment accuses Maduro of partnering with "some of the most violent and prolific drug traffickers and narco-terrorists in the world" to allow for the shipment of thousands of tons of cocaine into the U.S.

Authorities allege powerful and violent drug-trafficking organizations, such as the Sinaloa Cartel and [Tren de Aragua gang](#), worked directly with the Venezuelan government and then sent profits to high-ranking officials who helped and protected them in exchange.

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But a [U.S. intelligence assessment](#) published in April, which drew on input from the 18 agencies that comprise the intelligence community, found no coordination between Tren de Aragua and the Venezuelan government.

Maduro allowed “cocaine-fueled corruption to flourish for his own benefit, for the benefit of members of his ruling regime, and for the benefit of his family members,” the indictment alleges.

U.S. authorities allege that Maduro and his family “provided law enforcement cover and logistical support” to cartels moving drugs throughout the region, resulting in as much as 250 tons of cocaine trafficked through Venezuela annually by 2020, according to the indictment.

Drugs were moved on go-fast vessels, fishing boats and container ships or on planes from clandestine airstrips, the indictment says.

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“This cycle of narcotics-based corruption lines the pockets of Venezuelan officials and their families while also benefiting violent narco-terrorists who operate with impunity on Venezuelan soil and who help produce, protect, and transport tons of cocaine to the United States,” the indictment says.

Successive U.S. administrations have warned about Venezuela’s role as a transit point for cocaine and a haven for criminal gangs, terrorist groups and drug-smuggling leftist rebels from neighboring Colombia. While reliable data is hard to ascertain, the vast majority of cocaine departs South America from Colombia and Ecuador, making its way northward through the eastern Pacific Ocean, not the Caribbean.



Federal law enforcement personnel patrol outside the Metropolitan Detention Center as they await the arrival of captured Venezuelan President Nicolas Maduro, Saturday, Jan. 3, 2026, in New York. (AP Photo/Yuki Iwamura) [Read More](#)

Allegations of kidnappings and murders ordered

The U.S. accuses Maduro and his wife of ordering kidnappings, beatings and murders “against those who owed them drug money or otherwise undermined their drug trafficking operation.” That includes the killing of a local drug boss in Caracas, according to the indictment.

Maduro’s wife is also accused of accepting hundreds of thousands of dollars in bribes in 2007 to arrange a meeting between “a large-scale drug trafficker” and the director of Venezuela’s National Anti-Drug Office. In a corrupt deal, the drug trafficker then agreed to pay a monthly bribe to the director of the anti-drug office as well as about \$100,000 for each cocaine-carrying flight “to ensure the flight’s safe passage.” Some of that money then went to Maduro’s wife, the indictment says.

Nephews of Maduro’s wife were heard during recorded meetings with confidential U.S. government sources in 2015 agreeing to send “multi-hundred-kilogram cocaine shipments” from Maduro’s “presidential hanger” at a Venezuelan airport. The nephews during the recorded meetings explained “that they were at ‘war’ with the United States,” the indictment alleges. They were both sentenced in 2017 to 18 years in prison for conspiring to send tons of cocaine into the U.S. before being released in 2022 [as part of a prisoner swap](#) in exchange for seven imprisoned Americans.

Rubio calls operation a ‘law enforcement function’

During a news conference, Secretary of State Marco Rubio and Dan Caine, the chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, cast the military raid that captured Maduro and his wife as an action carried out on behalf of the Department of Justice. Caine said the operation was made “at the request of the Justice Department.”

Rubio, as he responded to a question about whether Congress had been notified, said the U.S. raid to get the couple was “basically a law enforcement function,” adding that it was an instance in which the “Department of War supported the Department of Justice.” He called Maduro “a fugitive of American justice [with a \\$50 million reward](#)” [over his head](#).

Richer reported from Washington. Associated Press writer Joshua Goodman in Miami contributed to this report.



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