

Prepared Testimony of Steve Olive
Acting Assistant Administrator for Latin America and the Caribbean
United States Agency for International Development (USAID)
“Venezuela at a Crossroads”
House Foreign Affairs Committee
Wednesday February 13, 2019

Chairman Engel, Ranking Member McCaul, and members of the Committee, thank you for the invitation to testify today on this critical, timely subject. I am grateful for the Committee's long-standing support for Latin America and the Caribbean, especially Venezuela. By forging partnerships with civil society, faith-based and non-governmental organizations, the private sector, and like-minded governments to build free and prosperous societies, USAID advances U.S. national security and economic prosperity, and promotes a path to recipient self-reliance and resilience.

Development Context

This is a pivotal moment in the history of Venezuela. The people are standing up against a dictator. They are not alone. As USAID Administrator Mark Green said, “We proudly stand with the people of Venezuela who are yearning for freedom and a true democracy.”

The Venezuelan people have endured a steady erosion of human rights and fundamental freedoms under the Maduro regime. With a handpicked Supreme Court effectively abolishing all the powers of the country's democratically elected National Assembly, the creation of an illegitimate Constituent Assembly, and a corrupt electoral council that responds to the regime, Maduro gave himself almost unlimited powers. This culminated in early, sham, so-called elections last year, after which Maduro attempted to steal another six-year term.

These maneuverings, combined with decisions that devastated Venezuela's once-robust economy, led to a man-made crisis that has driven more than three million Venezuelans from their homeland since 2014. The effects of the regime's mismanagement have hit all sectors of society: the International Monetary Fund estimates that inflation exceeded one million percent

in 2018 and forecasts inflation of 10 million percent in 2019;¹ Venezuelans face widespread shortages of essential food and medicine. As the health system collapsed, the country saw major outbreaks of diseases such as diphtheria, measles, and malaria, which had previously been under control or eliminated. Crumbling infrastructure has disrupted basic services, including water and sanitation.

On January 23, 2019, the people said, “enough,” and peacefully took to the streets to protest against Maduro’s regime. The only remaining democratic institution in the country—the National Assembly – asserted its constitutional authority, took control away from Maduro, and put power back where it belongs – in the hands of the Venezuelan people. The United States quickly recognized National Assembly President Juan Guaidó as Venezuela’s Interim President, and President Trump made our support to the Venezuelan people clear: “I will continue to use the full weight of United States economic and diplomatic power to press for the restoration of Venezuelan democracy.”

Long-Term Programming: USAID Democracy Assistance

The struggle for democracy in Venezuela is led by the Venezuelan people themselves. I am proud that USAID has a long tradition of standing by those who have continued to assert their rights and maintain a democratic voice in the face of dictatorship.

USAID supports local human rights defenders, civil society, independent media, electoral oversight, and the democratically elected National Assembly in Venezuela. Over the past five years, we have provided close to \$40 million in democracy assistance to these groups, including the planned \$15 million in Fiscal Year 2018 funding.

For example, the regime has tried to impede the democratically elected National Assembly from pursuing its constitutional responsibilities to represent the will of the Venezuelan people, exercise oversight of the Executive branch, and carry out its Legislative agenda. USAID has offered technical expertise enabling the National Assembly to continue to serve the

¹ <https://www.imf.org>

Venezuelan people. Our assistance has been available to all members of democratic parties in the National Assembly.

I salute the bravery of the Venezuelans who have kept up the fight for democracy even when their cause seemed nearly impossible. Their efforts are coming to fruition. Moving forward, USAID will build on our long-term programs to support interim President Guaidó and the National Assembly as they restore democracy and prosperity in Venezuela.

Crisis Response: USAID Humanitarian Assistance

Given the dire conditions within the country, USAID's most immediate priority will be to get food and medicine to those who need it. USAID has always been ready and willing to help vulnerable Venezuelans. But as Maduro has tried to conceal the consequences of his mismanagement and corruption, the three million Venezuelans fleeing their country have told a different story. So, too, has Venezuela's Interim President, who has requested urgent humanitarian assistance from the United States. In response, Secretary of State Pompeo announced on January 24, 2019, that the United States is ready to provide more than \$20 million in initial humanitarian assistance to the people of Venezuela.

The U.S. is coordinating with Interim President Guaidó and his team of experts, governments in the region, and our humanitarian partners on the logistics of deploying aid, to mobilize a response efficiently and safely. We are prepositioning relief items—including food, nutritional supplements, hygiene kits, and medical supplies—in Colombia so that they are available to reach Venezuelans in need, as soon as is safe and logistically possible.

The United States is already providing robust support for response efforts throughout the region as the growing impacts of Venezuela's crisis spill into neighboring countries. Since Fiscal Year 2017, the United States has provided approximately \$140 million—including nearly \$97 million in humanitarian assistance and approximately \$43 million in development assistance—to support affected countries' emergency efforts and build their long-term capacity to host the more than three million people who have fled Venezuela. USAID deployed a

Disaster Assistance Response Team that is on the ground throughout the region conducting assessments, identifying priority needs, and coordinating the U.S. government's response efforts. Administrator Green and I met with some of the Venezuelans who fled their homeland when we visited Cucuta, Colombia, last July. I am proud of the work we have done to help them and the neighboring communities hosting them. However, while humanitarian assistance will help to alleviate the immediate needs of many Venezuelans, it will not—and cannot—address the root causes of Venezuela's instability, and it is not a long-term solution. Lasting political and economic reforms are the only sustainable solutions to the crisis.

Conclusion

Mr. Chairman, Ranking Member McCaul, members of the Committee, thank you again for the opportunity to testify today. I thank you for your continued support and look forward to engaging with you further as the United States helps the people of Venezuela to return to peace and prosperity and see the open, transparent, citizen-responsive government that they deserve.