

Testimony by Dr. Vanessa Neumann, president of Asymmetrica
to the House Foreign Affairs Committee of the United States Congress
Hearing on H.R. 1004: Prohibiting Unauthorized Military Action in Venezuela Act
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Thank you, ladies and gentlemen of the committee, for inviting me to testify here today, but more broadly, for your concern for my beloved Venezuela.

As you know, I am a Venezuelan-American, born in Caracas, and a long-time vociferous advocate for Venezuela's return to democracy.

I am the author of *Blood Profits*, about my decade of work mapping out transnational criminal networks, corruption, and their connections with terrorism, mostly in the Western Hemisphere, but also in the Levant, Middle East and Horn of Africa. I am also the president of Asymmetrica, a political risk and anti-corruption consultancy specializing in Latin America. Asymmetrica is a member of the Global Counter-Terrorism Research Network (GCTRN) for the United Nations Security Council's Counter-Terrorism Committee Executive Directorate (CTED). I worked DDR of Colombian paramilitaries, which is why I was also the academic reviewer for USSOCOM's ARIS Series reference text on counterinsurgency (COIN) in Colombia. I served four years on the OECD's Task Force on Countering Illicit Trade (since its inception) and on their Advisory Group. I also co-authored *The Many Criminal Heads of the Golden Hydra* (for the Counter-Extremism Project, May 2018), an extensive analysis of illicit trade and corruption in the Tri-Border Area. I got my Ph.D. in moral political philosophy in 2004 from Columbia University for my dissertation *The Autonomy and Legitimacy of States: A Critical Approach to Foreign Intervention*. It is ironic that 15 years later, it is directly on point for Venezuela.

In it, I foresaw that political changes were laying the ground for tyranny. I also foresaw a situation where a country could collapse into chaos and become unable to deliver basic goods in an orderly manner to its citizens. I also foresaw a situation where the rulers would lose legitimacy through two mechanisms: questionable elections or acting counter to what the citizens would want, including widespread human rights violations. What I did not foresee was the combination of all these scenarios or the depth of human suffering that would befall my country.

In many ways, Venezuela is already suffering from a war.

A Country Already in a State of War

The functions of state have been captured by a serious transnational criminal organization that provides safe haven and financing for terrorists (actively bombing their neighbors, as the ELN did a month ago to the Colombian police academy), is the main transit point for cocaine into the rest of the world (destabilizing Central America and therefore our Southern

border), all while wresting territorial control from a legitimate government and intentionally murdering Venezuelan citizens. On February 23rd, Maduro used armed gangs to blockade the entry of humanitarian aid and shoot to kill unarmed civilians carrying food to their starving relatives. On the border with Brazil, they massacred the Pemón tribe. On March 11th, the dictator Maduro went on national television ordering armed gangs to slaughter the people. This is what Third Sergeant Miguel Torrosa warned us of when he crossed a bridge into Colombia on February 22nd: “Maduro wants to slaughter the people!” he shouted. The dictatorship certainly seems content to let them starve and die of treatable disease.

Violence and Starvation

For me, the paradigmatic case was the woman who took her 19 year old daughter to the hospital because she was dying of starvation. It was the first night of the blackouts and the local hospital was shut. She later walked the streets carrying the body of her 19 year old daughter, who weighed only 10 kgs -- 22 lbs.

Venezuela suffers as a country at war:

- It has worse inflation than any war zone -- set to hit 10,000,000% in 2019.
- It has a higher infant mortality than Syria.
- More than 333,000 have been killed by violence under the Bolivarian Revolution.
- 18.7 million Venezuelans are losing weight rapidly (25 pounds in the past year).

That means we are facing a massive starvation -- that rivals that of Ethiopia, Somalia, and Darfur -- but in our hemisphere. And according to the Gallup *2018 Global Law and Order*, Venezuela is the least safe country in which to live. It is no wonder then that Venezuelans are fleeing in droves.

Refugee Crisis

At 3.4 million, Venezuela is the second largest refugee population in the world. It is second only to Syria. There are more Venezuelan refugees than South Sudanese, Somalis, or Afghans.

Before the pervasive blackouts (caused by the greatest kleptocracy the world has ever seen), the UN and the OAS estimated two million more Venezuelans would flee in 2019, bringing the total refugees from the dictatorship to 5.4 million by the end of this year. The Brookings Institute and the OAS Working Group to Address the Venezuelan Migrant and Refugee Crisis in the Region estimated that more than 7.2 million Venezuelans will have fled by the end of 2020. Now that there is almost no electricity or gasoline (in addition to no food, medicine, or money), those numbers should skyrocket well past those projections.

Such a massive and rapid exodus, will absolutely destabilise the entire hemisphere, as people will look for employment that could well be provided by armed groups like the ELN and FARC and even ISIS, in Trinidad and Tobago, where it has an alarming rate of recruitment, and those recruitment patterns are very different from what we have seen in Europe or North Africa; they are better suited to the profiles of Venezuelan refugees.

Lessons from ISIS

We have learned something else from our past experience with ISIS: when gasoline is a rare and precious commodity, as it is now becoming in Venezuela, armed groups make what small distribution points they can find or gasoline refineries they can cobble together from makeshift parts and convert them into operational bases. ISIS did this and sold the oil and gasoline to whoever paid the highest price, even their enemies on the battlefield. There is no reason to think that this will not happen in Venezuela, further fracturing into warlord fiefdoms.

Human Rights Abuses

According to Venezuelan NGO Foro Penal, there are more than 960 political prisoners. The last case happened within the last 48 hours. Well-respected journalist Luis Carlos Díaz was illegally detained by the dictatorship when he was heading home. His whereabouts were unknown for several hours until the security forces ransacked his home and robbed his bedridden cancer-stricken wife. The journalist was ludicrously accused of being responsible for the five-day national blackout. This is just but one example of the escalation in the dictatorship's war on freedom of speech and information, which are the lifeblood of any democracy.

A Dictatorship's Policy

This catastrophic state of repression and chaos was entirely predictable, as it is the result of regime policy. It will not allow humanitarian aid to save the 18.7 million starving Venezuelans, because it would rather keep the political control starvation affords it. Venezuela's war-like conditions are due solely to the intransigence of Maduro who does not care about the human cost of his clinging to power.

Venezuela needs international humanitarian aid to enter its borders as soon as possible to prevent the horrors that will predictably ensue if it doesn't.

A Request for Assistance

What is unique about Venezuela is it has a legitimate interim government that is loved by the people and broadly recognized by the world's democracies; it can request international assistance in the provision of aid and restoring territorial control away from NSAGs (non-state armed groups), such as the FARC, the ELN, the colectivos, the illegal miners, or even Hezbollah. After all, we have already been invaded: our slaughter is at the behest of nefarious foreign powers, such as Cuba, which insists on its oil shipments, even through the blood of my people.

I am not here today to discuss whether military intervention is justified now or not. I am here to say that there are numerous scenarios where some form of international assistance is foreseeable, and this proposed legislation is not only redundant, repeating what is already well-established in the US Constitution, but it sets the conditions for the further endangerment of my people. We are ruled by thugs, who understand only force. If they think that our assistance in a crisis of a breakdown of civil order or a mass starvation will be entangled in the partisan wranglings of US domestic politics, we could well be doomed.

International law recognizes an exceptional right to take action in a case of overwhelming humanitarian necessity. For this there are three criteria:

1. convincing evidence of large scale humanitarian distress requiring immediate relief
2. no practical alternative to save lives
3. the use of force is:
 - a. necessary,
 - b. proportionate to the crisis, and
 - c. limited in time and (geographical) scope

We are not framing this as a war, intervention, or invasion. The correct framework is a military cooperation which, by the way, should be multilateral. According to the Venezuelan Constitution, Article 187.11, the National Assembly could request a foreign mission to Venezuela. In such a case, it would be a legally-sanctioned act by the only legitimate and democratic institution in Venezuela. Let's hope that won't be necessary, but many fear it might.

It is widely accepted that the 'responsibility to protect' is owed in the first instance by all sovereign states to their own citizens, over whom it exercises authority in a contractual relationship of rights and obligations, but must be picked up by the international community if that first-tier responsibility is abdicated, or if it cannot be exercised, as a logical consequence of taking seriously the concepts of equality and dignity of all people. This view was first espoused in the 18th century by Immanuel Kant in his *Metaphysical Elements of Justice*: one of the results of globalization is a globalization not just of money and information, but also of responsibility. Let us meet that responsibility, rid our region of its greatest threat, restore the dignity and freedom of millions of Venezuelans who were once our close friends. Let us find a path back to democracy in friendship and cooperation, and not hand a dictator a *carte blanche* for further slaughter (of our only democratic forces and your friends) with a legislation that is unnecessary and serves only to plunge my people's misery in DC partisan politics. The Venezuelan crisis has been a source of bipartisan cooperation; 32 million of us need you to keep it that way.

I thank the committee for the time it has afforded me here today, and for its concern for Venezuela. I remain at your service as you develop policies that will be productive for both my countries.