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Venezuela: International Efforts to Resolve the Political Crisis

Background

The international community remains divided over how to respond to the political crisis in Venezuela. The United States and 54 other countries have formally recognized the interim government of Juan Guaidó, who Venezuela's democratically elected National Assembly named president. These countries have undertaken a variety of initiatives to place pressure on authoritarian leader Nicolás Maduro, in power since 2013, and facilitate a political transition. Other countries, such as China, Cuba, Nicaragua, and Russia, have provided diplomatic, financial, and military support to Maduro, and have sought to block anti-Maduro actions within international organizations. A third group of countries, including Mexico, Norway, Uruguay and some Caribbean nations, has remained neutral in the crisis.

These international dynamics appear to have contributed to a political stalemate in Venezuela, even as conditions within the country have continued to deteriorate. On April 30, a Guaidó-led, U.S.-backed uprising failed to garner enough high-level military support to compel Maduro to leave office. While some observers maintain that Maduro is weak politically, others fear a prolonged, potentially violent standoff between the respective supporters of Maduro and Guaidó. Some observers hope that international action will coalesce behind talks leading to the convening of free and fair elections. Both sides have sent envoys to Norway for exploratory talks on how to resolve the crisis, but actions taken against the opposition by Maduro could hinder progress in reaching a political solution.

United Nations (U.N.)

The U.N. Security Council (UNSC) has discussed the political and humanitarian crisis in Venezuela, but divisions within its members have stalled action. Russia, and to a lesser extent, China, support Maduro. The United States, and most countries in Europe and the Western Hemisphere, support Guaidó. Despite that polarization, U.N. agencies are increasing humanitarian relief within Venezuela after securing approval in April from Maduro and Guaidó. The U.N. High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) and the International Organization for Migration (IOM) are coordinating efforts to serve the roughly 3.7 million Venezuelans who had left the country as of March 2019 and the communities hosting them. The U.N. Human Rights Council is investigating allegations of crimes against humanity committed by security forces and armed militias loyal to Maduro.

Organization of American States (OAS)

The OAS, a regional multilateral organization that includes all 35 independent countries of the Western Hemisphere (Cuba currently does not participate), has focused attention on Venezuela's political crisis. Since 2016, OAS Secretary-General Luis Almagro has issued a series of reports on the deteriorating situation in Venezuela, convened special

sessions of the Permanent Council to discuss regional responses to the crisis, and spoken out against Maduro. Member states remain divided on how to respond to the crisis, with countries in the Caribbean Community (CARICOM) particularly reluctant to intervene in Venezuela's internal affairs. Many of those countries had close ties with Venezuela under Maduro's predecessor, the late president Hugo Chávez, and, until recently, received significant amounts of subsidized oil from Venezuela. In 2017, Maduro denounced the OAS for meddling in his country's domestic affairs and began a two-year process to withdraw from the organization.

The OAS requires 18 votes to pass a resolution of the Permanent Council. In June 2018, 19 of 34 member states passed a resolution stating that the May 2018 presidential election in Venezuela lacked legitimacy and authorizing countries to take measures, including sanctions, necessary to hasten a return to democracy. In January 2019, the same 19 states approved a resolution that refused to recognize the legitimacy of Maduro's second term; called for new presidential elections; and urged all member states to adopt diplomatic, political, economic, and financial measures to facilitate the prompt restoration of the democratic order in Venezuela. After Maduro withdrew his OAS Ambassador, the Permanent Council welcomed the Venezuelan National Assembly's permanent representative to the OAS on April 9, 2019. Some observers have praised Secretary-General Almagro's activism on Venezuela, which has included calling for international intervention in the country. Others have asserted that he has sided too closely with the opposition, and is unlikely to help broker a diplomatic solution to resolve the current crisis.

Lima Group

In mid-2017, efforts to reach a consensus on how to respond to the crisis in Venezuela at the OAS appeared to be stalling. On August 8, 2017, 12 Western Hemisphere countries signed the Lima Accord, a document rejecting what it described as the rupture of democracy and systemic human rights violations in Venezuela. The signatory countries included Argentina, Brazil, Canada, Chile, Colombia, Costa Rica, Guatemala, Honduras, Mexico, Panama, Paraguay, and Peru. In 2018, Guyana and St. Lucia joined the Lima Group, which did not recognize Maduro's May 2018 reelection.

On January 4, 2019, 13 members of the Lima Group (excluding Mexico) signed a declaration urging President Maduro not to assume power on January 10, 2019. The countries resolved to reassess their level of diplomatic engagement with Venezuela, implement travel bans or sanctions on Maduro officials (as Canada and Panama have), suspend military cooperation with Venezuela, and urge others in the international community to take similar actions. Under leftist President Andrés Manuel López

Obrador, Mexico has pledged to remain neutral and is no longer participating in the Lima Group. El Salvador is likely to join the Lima Group after Nayib Bukele's June 1 inauguration.

On January 23, 2019, and in subsequent statements, 11 members of the Lima Group have recognized the Guaidó government and pledged to support a democratic transition in Venezuela. On February 4, 2019, the Guaidó government joined the Lima Group and signed its statement calling "for a peaceful transition ... without the use of force."

The group has denounced human rights violations by the Maduro government and urged Venezuelan armed forces to demonstrate their loyalty to Guaidó, but opposed U.S. or regional military intervention in the crisis. On May 3, 2019, the Lima Group issued a declaration signed by 12 countries (not St. Lucia or Guyana but including Venezuela) asking the International Contact Group (see below) to meet to coordinate efforts and pledging to seek Cuba's help in resolving Venezuela's crisis.

European Union (EU)

The EU has imposed targeted sanctions on Maduro officials and adopted an arms embargo against Venezuela. The EU Parliament and most member states have recognized the Guaidó government (with Norway a notable exception). At the same time, the EU has opposed military intervention and "any form of violence" in the country, most recently in a statement from April 30. Instead, the EU backed the formation of an International Contact Group (ICG).

International Contact Group (ICG)

The EU-backed International Contact Group, composed of several European countries (France, Germany, Italy, the Netherlands, Portugal, Spain, Sweden, and the United Kingdom) and Latin American countries (Costa Rica, Ecuador, and Uruguay), first convened on February 7, 2019. The group aimed to "establish necessary guarantees for a credible electoral process, within the earliest time frame possible" and to hasten the delivery of humanitarian aid into Venezuela. U.S. officials have expressed skepticism at the proposal, noting that Maduro has used past attempts at dialogue (brokered by the Vatican and others) as a delaying tactic. ICG supporters maintain the "necessary guarantees" include naming a new electoral council, releasing political prisoners, and ending all bans on political parties and candidates.

Since February, the ICG has met twice, most recently on May 6 and 7 in Costa Rica. At that meeting, also attended by Chile from the Lima Group and representatives from CARICOM and the Vatican, the ICG decided to send a political mission to Caracas and to work with the Lima Group to hasten a political solution to the crisis. China is supporting that effort and has pledged to work with the EU and others for a political settlement to the Venezuela crisis.

Implications for U.S. Policy

The 116th Congress has closely followed developments in Venezuela, Trump Administration policy responses, and international efforts to broker a solution to the crisis. Congress has held hearings on the political crisis in Venezuela and U.S. policy responses; the humanitarian

crisis in Venezuela; the regional migration crisis that Venezuela's unrest has wrought throughout Latin America and the Caribbean; the influence of Russia and China in Venezuela; and the role of Congress in authorizing possible use of U.S. military force in Venezuela. The role of international actors and U.S. coordination with them may influence congressional consideration of legislative initiatives to require, authorize, or constrain certain Administration actions regarding Venezuela (e.g., H.R. 920, H.R. 1477, S. 1025, H.R. 1004, and S.J.Res. 11).

International perspectives, particularly from UNHCR, IOM, and the Lima Group, may influence oversight of the \$213 million in U.S. humanitarian assistance dedicated to help support Venezuelans in the region. They may also inform decisions about the amounts and types of U.S. funds most needed to support international organizations and U.N. agencies working inside Venezuela, both now and in the future. The Administration's proposed FY2020 budget request asks for \$9 million in democracy aid through the Economic Support and Development Fund account and the authority to transfer up to \$500 million to support a transition or respond to a crisis in Venezuela. Should Maduro leave office, the Administration proposes that such funds could support international election observers, increased humanitarian assistance inside Venezuela, and/or a potential International Monetary Fund package.

While there generally has been international support for U.S. policy toward Venezuela, some U.S. actions have prompted concern among partners working to resolve the crisis. Most of these countries have supported U.S. targeted sanctions on Maduro officials, but some are concerned about the potential humanitarian impact of U.S. oil sanctions imposed in January 2019 that seek to prevent Maduro from benefitting from Venezuela's oil revenue. Some countries also have expressed concern about repeated U.S. threats to use military force in Venezuela despite opposition from neighboring countries (such as Brazil and Colombia), the Lima Group, and the European Union.

Threats of U.S. military action have occurred alongside denunciations of reported Russian and Cuban military assistance to Maduro. Some observers caution that the Trump Administration could lose support from some partners because of the U.S. decision to impose strong sanctions on Cuba because of its support for Maduro. Several U.S. partners on Venezuela have commercial ties with Cuba. Many also have urged the United States to engage in diplomacy with Russia and prevent the situation from turning into a proxy conflict for regional and global influence.

For related information, see CRS In Focus IF10230, *Venezuela: Political Crisis and U.S. Policy*; CRS Insight IN11116, *The Inter-American Treaty of Reciprocal Assistance and the Crisis in Venezuela*; CRS In Focus IF11029, *The Venezuela Regional Migration Crisis*; CRS In Focus IF10715, *Venezuela: Overview of U.S. Sanctions*; and CRS Report R44841, *Venezuela: Background and U.S. Relations*.

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