



Integrated Country Strategy

VENEZUELA

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1. Chief of Mission Priorities

The Venezuela Affairs Unit priority is the restoration of democracy in Venezuela. To achieve this goal, we advocate for a negotiated solution among Venezuelans. A timely, negotiated solution between the democratic opposition and the autocratic regime of Nicolás Maduro that inaugurates a democratic transition and the restoration of the rule of law in Venezuela would be the most efficient way to advance key US security, migration, human rights, and humanitarian interests with respect to Venezuela. Until a negotiated solution to the Venezuelan crisis is achieved, the Venezuela Affairs Unit will continue to work closely with the Department and the interagency to maintain pressure on the illegitimate regime of Nicolás Maduro through sanctions, and to cooperate with Interim President Juan Guaidó and the legitimate National Assembly of Venezuela in support of their executive and legislative initiatives to bring about a democratic transition in Venezuela. We will also continue to support the unified efforts of the democratic opposition via the Unitary Platform as well as democratic actors from civil society, the private sector, and affinity groups to maintain domestic pressure to compel the regime to agree to a negotiated path towards a restoration of the rule of law in Venezuela. This includes conditions that meet international standards for free and fair presidential and legislative elections, a reform of the judiciary so it may regain its independence, the release of political prisoners, and respect for human rights –particularly to end torture, crimes against humanity and censorship, and hold those responsible for gross human rights violations accountable.

Consistent and in parallel with our goal of a restoration of the rule of law in Venezuela is my concern as Chief of Mission to work tirelessly for the freedom and welfare of all US citizens imprisoned in Venezuela, particularly those designated by the Department as unlawfully detained. There will continue to be no greater priority for me as COM than to continue to do everything within my power to see them reunited with their loved ones in the United States. While we have had some successes in obtaining the liberation of hostages, we will not desist in our efforts until all unlawfully detained US citizens return home.

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Since the suspension of operations of the U.S. Embassy in Caracas in 2019, the Venezuela Affairs Unit (VAU) has operated remotely from Bogota, Colombia, supporting the legitimate and democratic opposition, civil society, and the media to press for changes that will bring about a democratic transition in Venezuela. I am hopeful that we will achieve that goal soon. Until then, we will also continue to monitor and report on the activities of the regime and its relations with strategic competitors and malign actors in order to contain and confront their combined influence over vital US national interests, including the threat this poses to US national security.

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2. Mission Strategic Framework

Mission Goal 1: Restore democracy to Venezuela through free and fair presidential and parliamentary elections and the re-institutionalization of all governance structures.

- **Mission Objective 1.1:** Support a broad, diverse, and inclusive platform of Venezuelan democratic actors, including political parties and civil society, to press for a democratic transition.
- **Mission Objective 1.2:** In the face of severe censorship, increase access to information in Venezuela through independent media and civil society including messaging on U.S. policy.
- **Mission Objective 1.3:** Broaden Venezuelan understanding of and support for U.S. policies, values, and culture, particularly among youth, disenchanted Chavistas, minority groups, and other potential actors for democratic change.

Mission Goal 2: Maintain an international coalition to hold the Maduro regime accountable and apply pressure for a democratic transition.

- **Mission Objective 2.1:** Expand international cooperation to deny the Maduro regime resources and platforms that perpetuate its continuation and to pressure for free and fair elections.
- **Mission Objective 2.2:** Pursue diplomatic opportunities to hold the regime accountable for human rights abuses.

Mission Goal 3: Maintain economic pressure (including by leveraging economic incentives) on the Venezuelan regime to support a return of democracy to Venezuela.

- **Mission Objective 3.1:** Increase economic incentives to promote a full restoration of democracy and private sector-led economic growth.
- **Mission Objective 3.2:** Enhance food security through improved agriculture productivity, market access, and international trade capabilities, including increased trade with U.S. food and agriculture suppliers.
- **Mission Objective 3.3:** Support the Venezuelan people by advocating for their humanitarian and health needs.

Management Objective 1: Management practices are transparent and equitable, advance diversity and inclusion, and are compliant with all U.S. government requirements.

Management Objective 2: The VAU management platform is properly staffed and supported by Embassy Bogota and WHA-EX to meet the Mission's strategic goals while in suspended operations.

3. Mission Goals and Objectives

Mission Goal 1 | Restore democracy to Venezuela through free and fair presidential and parliamentary elections and the re-institutionalization of all governance structures.

Description | Venezuela's woes stem from the dictatorial regime in charge of all real levers of power in the country. This regime has not only flaunted traditional democratic norms by hijacking and manipulating all electoral processes including the most recent presidential (2018) and parliamentary elections (2020), but it has also systematically dismantled institutions and norms in the country to the benefit of its continued grip on power. Restoring democracy via the specific benchmarks of new free and fair presidential and parliamentary elections is an essential step to addressing the host of other issues that stem from the current state of affairs in Venezuela that harm U.S. interests, from rapprochement with malign state and non-state actors to drug, mineral, human, and wildlife trafficking, to the migratory and humanitarian crisis that has left Venezuelans inside the country destitute and led to new challenges for all countries of the hemisphere, including the United States.

Objective 1.1 | Support a broad, diverse, and inclusive platform of Venezuelan democratic actors, including political parties and civil society, to press for democracy.

- **Justification** | Ensuring U.S. strategy engages the full range of democratic actors is not only reflective of U.S. values but is also essential to building the broad coalition of actors that will be required to promote democratic transition in the country and rebuild from the damage that the regime has inflicted. Diversity and inclusion via our diplomatic work reinforces our commitment and support for democracy in Venezuela and ensures we are hearing from the best ideas and the actors with the social credibility to help implement them.
- **Linkages** | JSP Objective 3.1; WHA JRS Objective 1.1

- **Risks** | Opposition and civil society actors risk repression for working to restore democracy to Venezuela. Failure to achieve this objective will prolong Venezuela's crisis and harm U.S. interests.

Objective 1.2 | In the face of incredible censorship, increase access to information in Venezuela through independent media and civil society including messaging on U.S. policy.

- **Justification** | As the result of decades of regime assault on the media and information infrastructure, more than 5 million Venezuelans live in an "information desert" with no access to accurate and independent news. In the midst of multiple economic, humanitarian, and political crises and declining popularity for Maduro, the regime has consolidated efforts to maintain control of the media including government-ordered blocking of independent websites and a massive weakening of the internet infrastructure by the regime's telecommunications regulator CONATEL. Venezuelan media have had their operating licenses revoked or not renewed, and those that survive are kept on a short leash. All nationally broadcast print, radio, online, and television outlets are under strict regime control. The censorship not only prevents Venezuelans from getting independent information but causes journalists to elect to publish less regime-critical content in a complex system of formal and informal self-censorship. Other regime tactics include taking over media outlets that are unlicensed (all outlets are formal and deliberately unlicensed), using intimidation campaigns from online Chavistas and bots in response to almost any anti-regime messages, and regime members regularly threatening individual reporters on broadcast programs. Furthermore, the regime produces enormous amounts of disinformation throughout Venezuela and the region.
- **Linkages** | JSP Objective 1.5; WHA JRS Objective 3.3 and 6.1
- **Risks** | Without access to accurate information, Venezuelans will be unable to report situations on the ground nor will the international community have an understanding of conditions inside Venezuela, enabling the regime to further distort public opinion domestically and globally.

Objective 1.3 | Broaden Venezuelan understanding of and support for U.S. policies, values, and culture, particularly among youth, disenchanted Chavistas, minority groups, and other potential actors for democratic change.

- **Justification** | Venezuelans with a memory of the pre-Chavez era, typically 30 years old and over, tend to have a positive image of the United States. Their experiences traveling between the two countries for business, shopping, and tourism are still alive and relevant to them. Many from those generations still look to their northern neighbor as a cultural point of reference for everything from entertainment to fashion. However, Venezuela's millennial generation, who have grown up under Chavez and Maduro, do not regard the United States as favorably as their parents do. They have been exposed to a constant barrage of anti-imperialist and anti-American rhetoric. The worldview of most millennials, with exception of some youth from wealthier families who have traveled to the U.S., has been largely shaped by a government that blames their condition on outside forces – predominantly the United States. The Venezuelan regime's mismanagement of the economy means that there are ever-fewer dollars to devote to its now dwindling social programs. Youth and disaffected Chavistas are essential components to the broad coalition that will be required to provide a path out from dictatorship.
- **Linkages** | JSP Objective 1.5; WHA JRS Objective 3.3 and 6.1
- **Risks** | Failure to enhance the foreign public's understanding of and support for the values and policies of the United States will bolster regime anti-U.S. propaganda and reduce support for a democratic transition.

Mission Goal 2 | Maintain an international coalition to hold the Maduro regime accountable and apply pressure for a democratic transition.

Description | International and diplomatic unity is essential to holding the Maduro regime accountable. The USG will work with diplomatic allies to create international pressure to achieve a democratic transition.

Objective 2.1 | Expand international cooperation to deny the Maduro regime resources and platforms that perpetuate its continuation and to pressure for free and fair elections.

- **Justification** | The Department has made it a priority to marshal international cooperation in support of pressuring the Maduro regime to hold free and fair elections, and to rebuild Venezuela's institutions
- **Linkages** | JSP Goal 1.4; WHA JRS Objs. 1.1, 1.2, 6.2
- **Risks** | Absence or failure of international cooperation gives breathing room for the regime; differences of positions among international actors can be an opportunity for the regime to shirk accountability and sustain its illegitimate rule.

Objective 2.2 | Pursue diplomatic opportunities to hold the regime accountable for human rights abuses.

- **Justification** | Holding the regime accountable for human rights abuses is in line with our national values and it serves as a pressure mechanism to (1) stave off additional repression against Venezuelans and (2) promote transition in Venezuela to a government that respects human rights.
- **Linkages** | JSP Goal 3.1; WHA JRS Objs. 1.3, 6.2
- **Risks** | Pursuit of these activities could result in losses that inadvertently provide a boost to the regime instead of promoting accountability for abuses. Failure to achieve this objective ensures impunity for the regime.

Mission Goal 3 | Maintain economic pressure (including by leveraging economic incentives) on the Venezuelan regime to support a return of democracy to Venezuela.

Description | The regime seeks international investment to mitigate the effects of decades of economic mismanagement, and also seeks sanctions relief. The VAU will continue to explore sanctions relief and/or new sanctions in response to regime behavior to support a return of the rule of law and democracy to the country.

Objective 3.1 | Increase economic incentives to promote a full restoration of democracy.

- **Justification** | The regime is presently supported by a number of international and domestic actors who are charged with evading sanctions and entrenching existing power structures. The USG should continue to support political and private sector actors to pressure for a democratic transition.
- **Linkages** | JSP Goal 3.1; WHA JRS Objs. 1.1, 6.3
- **Risks** | Sanction policies are sometimes mischaracterized as causing the hardship on the Venezuelan people.

Objective 3.2 | Enhance food security through improved agriculture productivity, market access, and international trade capabilities, including increased trade with U.S. food and agriculture suppliers.

- **Justification** | Venezuela was once the largest market in South America for U.S. agricultural exports at \$1.7 billion in 2012. By 2019, U.S. exports had fallen to \$174 million due to state intervention in the market and gross economic mismanagement by the Maduro regime. During this period of economic contraction, inflation soared and reached 7,374 percent in 2019. Food consumption dropped by over 50 percent from its peak in 2012. With limited access to capital and deteriorating purchasing power, economic activity slowed. Venezuelan agricultural production also declined, lacking seeds, fertilizers, agrochemicals, and fuel. The Maduro regime supplies

inputs to farmers, though they remain insufficient. In August 2019, the Maduro regime relaxed controls on imports of food and agricultural products, allowing the private sector to assume control of imports including seeds and agrochemicals. U.S. agriculture and related product shipments to Venezuela spiked to over \$600 million in 2021.

Liberalized trade, market intelligence/promotion, and technical support to the Venezuelan agricultural sector will enhance food security by normalizing agro-food industry operations, improving access to agricultural inputs and capital, and supporting efforts to promote agricultural recovery in Venezuela.

- **Linkages** | JSP Goal 2.2; WHA JRS Objs. 4.1, 4.2, 4.3
- **Risks** | Consumer purchasing power, Venezuelan importer access to financing, and opaque import rules and regulations cause considerable uncertainty for U.S. companies looking to export to Venezuela. Venezuelan producers indicate that current fertilizer supplies will suffice for the winter planting cycle (May to August 2022). If the war in Ukraine extends beyond this period, price hikes will likely impact agricultural commodities and foods and could restart hyper-inflation in this sector. In turn, spiking food prices could lead the regime to reimpose price controls, which could chip away at the recent trade and productivity gains. Farmers' access to other inputs, such as diesel, has improved slightly but still presents a risk.

Objective 3.3 | Support the Venezuelan people by advocating for their humanitarian and health needs.

- **Justification** | The USG will maintain its commitment not to politicize humanitarian and health assistance, and to exclude humanitarian and health assistance from any sanctions. We will remain alert to ensure that economic and political pressure on the regime does not compound a humanitarian and health crisis created by the regime's mismanagement of the economy and corruption. We will continue to ensure that humanitarian and health assistance is exempt from any sanctions.

- **Linkages** | JSP Goal 1.3; WHA JRS Obj 3.1
- **Risks** | The regime may seek to politicize humanitarian assistance or otherwise create the perception that the United States is attempting to do so.

4. Management Objectives

Management Objective 1 | Management practices are transparent and equitable, advance diversity and inclusion, and are compliant with all U.S. government requirements.

- **Justification** | With the re-entry of the full workplace after two years of disruption due to COVID-19, combined with three years of suspended operations, policies and support operations need to be reviewed and adjusted in light of new work realities and new opportunities. This focus includes not only institutionalizing mandatory operational changes and new innovations resulting from the COVID-19 experience, but also incorporating DEIA principals within both policies and implementation.
- **Linkages** | The operational platform of the Mission underpins the work of all ICS goals. Under this objective, however, there will be a special focus on ensuring that the Mission's practices further the goals outlined in Executive Order 14035 on Diversity, Equity, Inclusion, and Accessibility (DEIA) in the Federal Workforce. Policies will also be reviewed in light of the Covid-19 Mitigation Process (CMP) guidance introduced in late 2021.
- **Risks** | Failure to adjust operations and policies to the new realities of a post-COVID-19 workplace will result in inefficiencies, potential risks to employees, and potential risk to the USG if not carefully rolled out to be in line with both USG and host government laws and regulations. Practices that fail to account for DEIA priorities can lead to unequal treatment between employees and represent a missed opportunity to recognize and benefit from a diversity of ideas and beliefs.

Management Objective 2 | The VAU management platform is properly staffed and supported by Embassy Bogota and WHA-EX to meet the Mission's strategic goals while in suspended operations.

- **Justification** | After three years of staff growth, VAU facilities in Bogota are at maximum capacity. Currently, the VAU space is two desks short, with no space to accommodate TDY or for growth. Although the VAU has grown by many reporting and PD officers, it has only grown by one management position to support operations. Having only one management officer is insufficient to maintain the pace of growth as well as training to maintain quality services. Professional development is a priority focus after almost two years of loss in training opportunities related to COVID-19 disruptions.
- **Linkages:** Ensuring the appropriate agency staffing and composition, in line with National Security Decision Directive 38 (NSDD 38) and available resources, underpins the accomplishment of all other ICS goals.
- **Risks** | Failure to contain growth will strain resources, create fire and safety problems through overcrowding of space beyond planned capacity, and increase demands on existing staff with impact to service levels. The result would be significant unexpected costs and/or employees working in unprotected offices or functional spaces without appropriate security waivers, exceptions, or approved mitigation. The lack of management professionals to provide oversight and management controls, increases the risk for fraud and malfeasance.