

CORONASHOCK | n°2

Coronashock and the Hybrid War against Venezuela



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We carry on resisting. San Juan, Caracas. 2010.
Comando Creativo

CoronaShock is a term that refers to how a virus struck the world with such gripping force; it refers to how the social order in the bourgeois state crumbled, while the social order in the socialist parts of the world appeared more resilient.

This is the second in a multiple-part series of studies on CoronaShock. It is based on a number of articles researched and written by Ana Maldonado (Frente Francisco de Miranda, Venezuela), Paola Estrada (Secretariat of the International Peoples Assembly and member of the Brazilian chapter of ALBA Movements), Zoe PC (Peoples Dispatch), and Vijay Prashad (director of Tricontinental: Institute for Social Research).

*But even the president of the United States
sometimes must have to stand naked.*

[Bob Dylan, *It's Alright, Ma, 1965.*]

The Folly of Hybrid War

Swiftly moves the Coronavirus and COVID-19, dashing across continents, skipping over oceans, terrifying populations in every country. The numbers of those infected continue to rise, as do the numbers of those who have died. Hands are being washed, tests are being done, physical distance is being observed. It is unclear how devastating this pandemic will be or how long it will last.

On 23 March, twelve days after the World Health Organisation declared a global pandemic, the UN Secretary General António Guterres said, ‘The fury of the virus illustrates the folly of war. That is why today I am calling for an immediate global ceasefire in all corners of the world. It is time to put armed conflict on lockdown and focus together on the true fight of our lives’. Secretary General Guterres talked about silencing the guns, stopping the artillery, and ending the airstrikes. He did not refer to a specific conflict, leaving his plea to hang heavily in the air. After six weeks of deliberation and delay caused by Washington, in the first week of May, the United States government blocked a vote in the UN Security Council on a resolution that called for a global ceasefire.

The United States blocked this resolution, but even this resolution did not turn its attention to the kind

of war that the US is prosecuting against Cuba, Iran, and Venezuela – among others. Instead, it has imposed a hybrid war. The US military complex has advanced its hybrid war programme, which includes a range of techniques to undermine governments and political projects. These techniques include the mobilisation of US power over international institutions (such as the IMF, the World Bank, and the SWIFT wire service) in order to prevent governments from managing basic economic activity; the use of US diplomatic power to isolate governments; the use of sanctions methods to prevent private companies from doing business with certain governments; the use of information warfare to render governments and political forces to be criminals or terrorists; and so on. This powerful complex of instruments is able – in the plain light of day – to destabilise governments and to justify regime change (for more on this, see the Tricontinental: Institute for Social Research dossier no. 17, *Venezuela and Hybrid Wars in Latin America*).

During a pandemic, one would expect that all countries would collaborate in every way to mitigate the spread of the virus and its impact on human society. One would expect that a humanitarian crisis of this magnitude would provide the opportunity to end all inhumane economic sanctions and political blockades against certain countries. On 24 March, the day after UN Secretary General Guterres's plea, UN High Commissioner for Human Rights Michelle Bachelet

agreed that ‘at this crucial time, both for global public health reasons, and to support the rights and lives of millions of people in these countries, sectoral sanctions should be eased or suspended. In a context of [a] global pandemic, impeding medical efforts in one country heightens the risk for all of us’.

A few days later, Hilal Elver, the UN Special Rapporteur on the right to food, said that she was gratified to hear both Guterres and Bachelet call for an end to the sanctions regime. The problem, she indicated, lies with Washington: ‘The US, under the current administration, is very keen to continue the sanctions. Fortunately, some other countries are not. For instance, the European Union and many of the European countries are responding positively and easing sanctions during this time of the coronavirus. They are not completely lifting sanctions but interrupting them, and there are some communications going on, but not in the US, unfortunately’.

On 6 May, three other UN Special Rapporteurs – Olivier De Schutter (on extreme poverty and human rights), Léo Heller (on human rights to safe drinking water and sanitation), and Koumbou Boly Barry (on the right to education) – said that ‘in light of the coronavirus pandemic, the United States should immediately lift blanket sanctions, which are having a severe impact on the human rights of the Venezuelan people’. Nevertheless, the Trump administration has

brushed aside all concern and continued with its agenda of hybrid war towards regime change.

Habits of Regime Change

As COVID-19 moved toward South America, the US government increased pressure on the Venezuelan government. In February 2020 at the Munich Security Conference, US Secretary of State Mike Pompeo said that the US seeks to 'oust Maduro'. The following month, on March 12, the US tightened sanctions against Venezuela, and then the US Treasury Department put pressure on the International Monetary Fund not to allow Venezuela access to emergency funds to tackle the global pandemic. None of this worked. Despite the lack of support from the IMF, the Venezuelan government mobilised the people to break the chain of infection, with international assistance from China, Cuba, and Russia, as well as the World Health Organisation.

At this point, the US government shifted its focus. It suggested that President Nicolás Maduro and his senior leadership are involved in narco-trafficking. No evidence was offered for this hallucinatory claim, although there is substantial evidence of the culpability of senior Colombian politicians in the drug trade. US President Donald Trump authorised a naval detachment to sit off the coast of Venezuela, threaten its government, and intimidate its population. On April 30, to increase

pressure on Venezuela, the Trump administration activated parts of the Selected Reserve of the Armed Forces to assist the US armed forces in a mission named ‘Enhanced Department of Defense Counternarcotic Operation in the Western Hemisphere’. All signs point to mischief by the US and its Colombian allies against the Venezuelan people.

The United States government has been entirely candid about its goal to overthrow the Venezuelan government, currently led by President Maduro, and to reverse the Bolivarian Revolution. In August 2017, Trump spoke openly about the ‘military option’ at the same time as the United States, Canada, Colombia, and a list of other countries governed by the far-right and subordinated to Washington formed the Lima Group. The Lima Group tried to maintain a liberal patina around their objective, stating in their declaration that they wished to ‘facilitat[e] ... the restoration of the rule of law and constitutional and democratic order in Venezuela’. Trump ripped aside the fig leaf of this kind of liberal language and interpreted the phrase ‘restoration of democratic order’ quite rightly as a call for a military coup or an armed intervention to overthrow the government.

In January 2019, the United States government deepened its hybrid war with a clever diplomatic manoeuvre. It declared that Juan Guaidó, an insignificant politician, was the president of Venezuela

and turned over substantial Venezuelan assets outside the country to him. An attempted uprising led by Guaidó and the far-right in Venezuela to oust Maduro and claim power failed to materialise, and Guaidó found himself with more friends in Washington, DC and amongst Colombia's oligarchy than at home in Venezuela. However, this failed attempt to overthrow the Venezuelan government did not deter the United States. In fact, the failure deepened US intervention in the region.

In May 2019, Senator Lindsey Graham took to the pages of the *Wall Street Journal* to make the case that the 'US must be willing to intervene in Venezuela the way we did in Grenada'. In 1983, the US marines landed in Grenada to overthrow the legitimate government and to uproot the New Jewel Movement. Should certain measures not be taken, Senator Graham wrote that the United States 'should move military assets to the region'. The United States attempted to create a phalanx of allies in the Brazilian and Colombian militaries to prepare for an invasion of Venezuela. Fortunately, at the Lima Group meeting in February 2019, Brazil's vice president Hamilton Mourão told the press that Brazil would not allow the US to use its territory for a military intervention into Venezuela. The plans of a full-scale invasion had to be put on hold.



'This is our great homeland.' / *Tenemos Patria Grande*. La Candelaria, Caracas. 2013. Passersby in front of a mural that references the vision of a free and united Latin America, following the vision of José Martí and the Bolivarian Revolution.
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Collective Punishment

On 10 March, Venezuela's Foreign Minister Jorge Arreaza told us that the 'illegal and unilateral coercive measures that the United States has imposed on Venezuela are a form of collective punishment'. The use of the phrase 'collective punishment' is significant; under the 1949 Geneva Convention, any policy that inflicts damage on an entire population is a war crime. The US policy, Arreaza told us, has 'resulted in difficulties for the timely acquisition of medicines'.

On paper, the unilateral US sanctions say that medical supplies are exempt. But this is an illusion. On 26 March, eleven US Senators sent a [letter](#) to US Secretary of State Mike Pompeo and US Treasury Secretary Steve Mnuchin to say: 'We understand that the administration has stated that humanitarian and medical needs are exempt from U.S. sanctions, but our sanctions regime is so broad that medical suppliers and relief organizations simply steer clear of doing business in Iran and Venezuela in fear of accidentally getting caught up in the U.S. sanctions web'. Neither Venezuela nor Iran can easily buy medical supplies, nor can they easily transport them into their countries, nor can they use them in their largely public sector health systems. The embargo against these countries – even more so in this time of COVID-19 – is not only a war crime by the standards of the Geneva Convention (1949); it is also a crime

against humanity as defined by the United Nations International Law Commission (1947).

In 2017, Trump enacted tight restrictions on Venezuela's ability to access financial markets. Two years later, the US government blacklisted Venezuela's Central Bank and put a general embargo on Venezuelan state institutions. If any firm trades with Venezuela's public sector, it could face secondary sanctions. The US Congress passed the Countering America's Adversaries Through Sanctions Act (CAATSA) in 2017, which tightened sanctions against Iran, Russia, and North Korea. The next year, Trump imposed a raft of new sanctions against Iran, which suffocated the country's economy. Once more, access to the world banking system and threats to companies that traded with Iran made it almost impossible for Iran to do business with the world. In particular, the US government made it clear that any business with the public sector of Iran and Venezuela was forbidden. The health infrastructure that provides for the mass of the populations in both Iran and Venezuela is run by the state, which means it faces disproportionate difficulty in accessing equipment and supplies, including testing kits and medicines.

Venezuela and Iran have relied on the World Health Organisation (WHO) to obtain medicines and tests. Nonetheless, the WHO faces its own challenges with sanctions, particularly when it comes to transportation. These harsh sanctions forced transportation companies

to reconsider servicing both Iran and Venezuela. Some airlines stopped flying there, and many shipping companies decided not to anger Washington. When the WHO tried to get testing kits for COVID-19 from the United Arab Emirates (UAE) into Iran, it faced difficulty ‘due to flight restrictions’, as the WHO’s Christoph Hamelmann put it. The UAE sent the equipment via a military transport plane.

Likewise, Arreaza told us, Venezuela has ‘received solidarity from governments of countries such as China and Cuba’. In late February, a team from the Red Cross Society of China arrived in Tehran to exchange information with the Iranian Red Crescent and with WHO officials. China has also donated testing kits and supplies. The sanctions, Chinese officials told us, should be of no consequence during a humanitarian crisis such as this; they are not going to honour them.

Meanwhile, the Iranians developed an app to help their population during the COVID-19 outbreak. Google decided to remove it from its app store, a consequence of the US sanctions.

What kind of moral fibre holds together an international system where a handful of countries can act in a way that goes against all the highest aspirations of humanity? When the United States continues its embargoes against thirty-nine countries – but with greater intensity against Cuba, Iran, and Venezuela – when there is a

global pandemic afoot, what does this say about the nature of power and authority in our world? Sensitive people should be offended by such behaviour, its mean-spiritedness evident in the unnatural deaths that it provokes.

When then-US Secretary of State Madeleine Albright was asked in 1996 about the half million Iraqi children who died because of US sanctions, she said that those deaths were ‘a price worth paying’. They were certainly not a price that the Iraqis wanted to pay, nor now the Iranians or the Venezuelans, or indeed most of humankind.

The IMF Takes Orders from the US Treasury

On 16 March 2020, the chief of the International Monetary Fund (IMF) Kristalina Georgieva wrote a [blog post](#) on the Fund’s website; it represents the kind of generosity necessary in the midst of a global pandemic. ‘The IMF stands ready to mobilize its \$1 trillion lending capacity to help our membership’, she wrote. Countries with ‘urgent balance-of-payments needs’ could be helped by the IMF’s ‘flexible and rapid-disbursing emergency response toolkit’. Through these mechanisms, and against its own history of structural adjustment conditions, the IMF said that it could provide \$50

billion to developing countries and \$10 billion to low-income countries at a zero-interest rate – without the usual strings attached.

The day before Georgieva made this public statement, Venezuela's foreign ministry sent a letter to the IMF asking for funds to finance the government's 'detection and response systems' for its efforts against the coronavirus. In the letter, President Nicolás Maduro wrote that his government is 'executing different highly comprehensive, strict and exhaustive control measures ... to protect the Venezuelan people'. These measures require funding, which is why the government is 'turning to your honorable [organisation] to request your evaluation about the possibility of granting Venezuela a financing facility of USD 5,000 million [5 billion] from the emergency fund of the Rapid Financing Instrument (RFI), resources that will contribute significantly to strengthen our detection and response systems'.

Georgieva's policy to provide special assistance to countries should have been enough for the IMF to provide the assistance that the Venezuelan government had requested. But, very quickly, the Fund declined the request from Venezuela.

It is important to underline the fact that the IMF made this denial at a time when the coronavirus had begun to spread in Venezuela. On 15 March, the day that Venezuelan President Nicolás Maduro's government

sent the letter to the IMF, Maduro also met with senior government officials in Caracas. The state-owned Venezuelan pharmaceutical body (CIFAR) and the Venezuelan medical equipment companies said that they would be able to increase the production of machines and medicines to stem the crisis; but, they said, they would need key raw materials that have to be imported. The Venezuelan government went to the IMF in order to be able to pay for these imports. The denial of the loan directly impacted the Venezuelan health apparatus and impeded Venezuela from properly tackling the coronavirus pandemic.

‘This is the most dire situation we have ever faced’, said President Maduro as he put new measures in place. The Venezuelan government imposed an indefinite national quarantine and has implemented processes to distribute food and key supplies, building on the local self-government (communes) that developed with the Bolivarian Revolution. All of the institutions of the state are now involved in doing their part to help ‘flatten the curve’ and ‘break the chain’ of contagion. But, because of the IMF loan denial, the country has had a harder time producing testing kits, respirators, and key medicines for those infected with the virus.

Venezuela is a founding member of the IMF. It has, despite being an oil-rich state, come to the IMF several times for various forms of assistance. The cycle of IMF interventions in Venezuela in the 1980s and early

1990s led to an uprising in 1989 that delegitimised the Venezuelan elite; it was on the back of the popular protests against the IMF that Hugo Chávez built the coalition that propelled him to office in 1998 and that started the Bolivarian Revolution in 1999. By 2007, Venezuela paid off its outstanding debts to both the IMF and the World Bank; the country cut its ties to these institutions, hoping to build a Bank of the South – rooted in Latin America – as an alternative. But before this Bank could be set up, a round of crises struck Latin America, forced by a fall in commodity prices from 2014-15.

Venezuela's economy relies upon foreign oil exports to generate the revenue necessary to import goods. With the fall in oil prices between 2014 and 2018 came a directed attack on Venezuela by the United States, who imposed a new round of unilateral sanctions. These sanctions prevented oil companies and transportation firms from doing business with Venezuela; international banks seized Venezuela's holdings in their vaults (including \$1.2 billion in gold in the Bank of England) and stopped doing business with Venezuela. This sanctions regime, tightened further by Donald Trump's administration, deeply hurt Venezuela's ability to sell its oil and buy products, including supplies for its state health sector.

In January 2019, after the US supported Guaidó's attempt to usurp power, US banks hastily seized the Venezuelan state assets that they held and turned them over to the

self-proclaimed president. Then, in a startling move, the IMF said that the Venezuelan government would no longer be allowed to use its \$400 million in special drawing rights (SDRs), the currency of the IMF. It said that it had taken this action because of the political uncertainty in Venezuela. In other words, because of the attempted coup – which failed – the IMF said that it would not ‘take sides’ in Venezuela; by not ‘taking sides’, the IMF refused to allow the government of Venezuela to access its own funds. Strikingly, Guaidó’s adviser Ricardo Hausmann, a former IMF development committee chair and Guaidó’s representative at the Inter-American Development Bank, said at that time that he expected that when the regime change occurs, the money will be available to the new government. This is the IMF directly interfering in Venezuelan politics.

Neither at that time nor now has the IMF denied that the government of Nicolás Maduro is the legitimate government in Venezuela. The IMF continues to acknowledge on its website that the representative of Venezuela in the IMF is Simón Alejandro Zerpa Delgado, the minister of finance in Maduro’s government. One of the reasons why this is so is that Guaidó could not prove that he had the support of most of the member states of the IMF. Since Guaidó could not prove his standing, the IMF – again, extraordinarily – has instead denied the Maduro government its legitimate right to its own funds and to borrow against facilities provided by the Fund to its members.



History is watching us. Bellas Artes, Caracas, 2011.
Comando Creativo

Normally, the IMF takes time when it gets a request for funds. The request must be studied by the analysts, who look at the situation in the country and see whether the request is legitimate. In this case, the IMF responded immediately. It said no.

A spokesperson for the Fund, Raphael Anspach, would not answer specific questions about this denial; in 2019, he had been similarly cautious about saying anything about the denial of access to the \$400 million in SDRs. This time, Anspach sent us a formal statement that the IMF had released to the media. The statement said that, while the IMF sympathises with the predicament of the Venezuelan people, 'it is not in a position to consider this request'. Why is this so? Because, the IMF says, its 'engagement with member countries is predicated on official government recognition by the international community'. 'There is', the statement says, 'no clarity on recognition at this time'.

But there is clarity. The IMF listed the Venezuelan minister of finance on its website at least until mid-March. The United Nations continues to recognise the Venezuelan government, led by President Nicolás Maduro. That should be the official standard for the IMF to make its determination. But it is not. It is taking dictation from the US government. In April 2019, US Vice President Mike Pence went to the UN Security Council, where he said that the UN should

accept Juan Guaidó as the legitimate president of Venezuela; he turned to the Venezuelan ambassador to the UN, Samuel Moncada Acosta, and said, ‘You shouldn’t be here’. This is a moment of great symbolism, the United States acting as if the UN is its home and that it can invite and uninvite whomsoever it wants. The IMF denial of the \$5 billion request from Venezuela follows Pence’s sentiment. It is a violation of the spirit of international cooperation that is at the heart of the UN Charter.

There are signs of weakness in the US position. On 18 December 2019, the United Nations General Assembly adopted – without a vote – a resolution that accepted the credentials of the diplomats appointed by Maduro’s government. The fact that there was no vote taken reveals that the United States does not want to reveal in plain sight the minority support in the world for its position of isolating the government of Venezuela. The US would rather forego a vote in the interest of fabricating and upholding a smoke and mirrors narrative allegedly held by the ‘international community’ than allow the actual international community to vote openly and show that it accepts the Maduro government as the legitimate government of Venezuela.

The Hallucinatory Accusations of Narco-Trafficking

At a press conference on 26 March, it was almost comical how little evidence the US Department of Justice provided when it indicted Venezuela's President Nicolás Maduro and several of the leaders of his government of narco-trafficking. The US offered \$15 million for the arrest of Maduro and \$10 million for the others. Maduro, US Attorney Geoffrey Berman said dramatically, 'very deliberately deployed cocaine as a weapon'. Evidence for this? Not presented at all. An indictment is not a verdict of guilt, merely a note – in this case – prepared by the US government against an adversary; there is nothing in the indictment that proves the case that any of the individuals mentioned in it have anything to do with narcotics smuggling. It was apparent from the press conference at the US Department of Justice that this was political theatre, an attempt to further delegitimise Maduro's government.

It is surreal that the United States – during the COVID-19 global pandemic – chooses to put its efforts into this ridiculous, evidence-free indictment against Maduro and other members of the government. Already, there is pressure on the United States to lift the sanctions not only against Venezuela but also against Iran (even The New York Times came out on 25 March to call for an end to sanctions on Iran). The World

Health Organization has made it clear that this is just not the time to hamper the ability of countries to get precious supplies in to tackle the pandemic. Out of desperation, the US tried to change the conversation – no longer about COVID-19 and sanctions, but about narco-terrorism.

When asked about these indictments during the COVID-19 pandemic, US Attorney General William Barr tried to say that the fault lay not in Washington but in Caracas. He said, absent any evidence, that Venezuela is blocking aid from coming into the country. Nothing could be further from the truth, since Venezuela has welcomed medical supplies and medical personnel from China, Cuba, and Russia, as well as from the WHO. In fact, the WHO has pressed the US to allow it freer rein to bring goods into the country – a request that the US has not allowed. Barr can so easily say the very opposite of truth because none of the media outlets at the press conference would challenge him based on matters that are clearly in the public record.

In 1989, the US used the accusation of narco-trafficking – specifically cocaine trafficking – to taint the reputation of its former asset, then-president of Panama Manuel Noriega. Based on this accusation and an indictment in Florida, the US eventually invaded the country, seized Noriega, planted Washington's puppet in Panama City, and threw Noriega into a Florida prison. The shadow of how the US dealt with Noriega hangs over Caracas.

The bounty on the heads of Maduro and his leadership suggests that the US government has essentially put a mafia-type hit out on these Venezuelans. This is a very dangerous move by the United States. It essentially gives gangsters a green light to attempt assassination inside Venezuela. The refusal to allow Maduro to travel outside of Venezuela is a violation of a series of international conventions that promote diplomacy over belligerence. But, given the lawless way that the US has formulated its regime change strategy against Venezuela – and throughout history – it is unlikely that anyone is going to criticise this move.

A few hours before the announcement in Washington, word began to spread that the United States was going to place Venezuela's government on the 'state sponsor of terrorism' list – the very highest condemnation of a government. But they had to pause. And the pause itself came for absurd reasons. If the US government accused Maduro's government of being a 'state sponsor of terrorism', then it would be tacitly acknowledging that the Maduro government is indeed the government of Venezuela. Since January 2019, one of the attempts at destabilisation had been to deny that Maduro's government is the legitimate government of Venezuela, indeed, to deny that it is any kind of government. It would be impossible to say that the Maduro government is a 'state sponsor of terrorism' without acknowledging that it is the government of Venezuela. So, the United States had to stay its hand, caught out by its own logic.

The statement released by the US Department of Justice reads like a thriller, and the lack of evidence lends it to comparison with fiction. It lists names and accusations, makes constant references to ‘narco-terrorism’, and claims that the Venezuelan government wants to ‘flood’ the United States with cocaine. It would take a superhuman effort of blindness to believe this baseless ranting and raving. But the problem is that the people of Venezuela must take this seriously, since it is a deepening of the United States government’s belligerence. The people of Venezuela are aware of the dangers of a Panama-type situation. It’s hard to blame them. This is the track record of the United States government.

The comparison to a Panama-type situation cannot be written off as paranoia. On April’s Fools Day, Trump gave a press conference in which he announced a new ‘counter-narcotics effort’ by US Southern Command. ‘We’re deploying additional Navy destroyers, combat ships, aircrafts and helicopters; Coast Guard cutters; and Air Force surveillance aircraft, doubling our capabilities in the region’, he said. The point of this mission – which will be joined by other countries – is to ‘increase surveillance, disruption, and seizures of drug shipments’. ‘We must not let the drug cartels exploit the pandemic to threaten American lives’, he added.

Coming less than a week after the US indictment, it became clear that the point is not actually to disrupt

the cocaine trade, but to put pressure on Venezuela. No evidence was provided during the Department of Justice press conference when the United States charged Maduro with narco-trafficking, and no evidence was presented at Trump's press conference when he announced that a naval carrier group would enter the Caribbean. There was no evidence presented at either high-profile event, because no evidence is either available or necessary. It is not available because even the US government's own agencies say that Venezuela is neither the originator of narcotics nor the trafficker of narcotics; it is not necessary because the United States has consistently used its position to invent increasingly hallucinatory stories about the Venezuelan government in order to delegitimise and overthrow it.

In December 2019, the US Drug Enforcement Agency (DEA) released its 'National Drug Threat Assessment'. This study offers the most detailed look at the movement of drugs into the United States. At several points in the study, the DEA says that Colombia is the 'primary source for cocaine seized in the United States'. According to the DEA's Cocaine Signature Program, in 2018 'approximately 90 percent of cocaine samples tested were of Colombian origin, six percent were of Peruvian origin, and four percent were of unknown origin'. As far as the US government's own drug agency is concerned, there is no cocaine or any other narcotic that comes from Venezuela.

Both at the US Department of Justice press conference and at Trump's press conference, maps were shown that indicated cocaine traffic from Venezuela to the United States. This is simply not true, based on the information from the US DEA: 'The majority of the cocaine and heroin produced and exported by Colombian TCOs [Transnational Criminal Organizations] to the United States is transported through Central America and Mexico', write the DEA officials in their 2019 report. However, there are suggestions in the report that Colombian narco-traffickers sometimes 'store large quantities of cocaine in remote areas of Venezuela and Ecuador until maritime or aerial transportation can be secured'.

It is important to recognize that the cocaine and heroin are hidden in 'remote areas' of Colombia's neighbours, with Colombia being the focus of the entire drug trade. At no point in the entire 146-page DEA document, and in documents from previous years, do the US drug officials make any statement that implicates the Venezuelan government in either the production, storage, or transportation of the cocaine and heroin. The only time Venezuela enters the picture is when Colombian narco-traffickers hide their cocaine and heroin in 'remote areas' of Venezuela before they traffic them into Central America and Mexico and then onwards to the United States.

There is significant evidence, however – as presented by the Colombian journalist Gonzalo Guillén in *La Nueva Prensa* on 3 March 2020 – that Colombia’s president Iván Duque and his patron, the former president Álvaro Uribe, had close ties with the narco-trafficker José Guillermo Hernández Aponte, alias Ñeñé. The previous day, Duque was in the Oval Office as Trump chided him for not doing enough to eradicate cocaine production in Colombia. ‘Well, you’re going to have to spray’, Trump told Duque. ‘If you don’t spray, you’re not going to get rid of them. So, you have to spray, with regard to the drugs in Colombia’.

Trump was talking about glyphosate-based fumigation, which the government of Colombia halted in 2015 because the WHO said that such sprays caused cancer. Despite this, Duque said that he will restart spraying. There was no mention of the accusations that Duque himself is linked to the narco-traffickers; since he is pliant towards Washington, his own alleged crimes do not amount to much. Duque’s patron Uribe, the former Colombian president and current Senate member, is currently implicated in more than 270 legal cases in Colombia with charges including illegal wiretapping, organised crime, selective assassinations, and forced disappearances. Uribe and members of his family have proven links with the paramilitary group *Bloque Metro* (‘Metro Block’) of Antioquia, which was responsible for thousands of assassinations of Colombian civilians and was deeply involved in the narco-trafficking.

Strangely, in that press conference, both Trump and Duque talked about Venezuela, but neither of them mentioned drugs or narco-trafficking. It was all about regime change.

On 31 March, US Secretary of State Mike Pompeo announced that Venezuela must have a transitional government; this itself is bizarre because Pompeo is neither Venezuelan nor a United Nations official, and yet he felt emboldened to speak for the Venezuelan people. His plan, 'Democratic Transition Framework for Venezuela', called upon President Maduro to resign and for Washington's favoured replacement Juan Guaidó to continue his imaginary claim to power. Members of the four main parties, including Maduro's Socialist Party, would form a council and be led by an 'interim president'. If this plan is accepted, Washington would lift its unilateral coercive sanctions that it had imposed from 2014.

The previous weekend, Guaidó announced on Twitter that Venezuela needed an 'emergency government' that had the participation of all parties and would govern until new elections could be held. After Pompeo's announcement, Guaidó took credit for it and thanked Pompeo publicly. Other far-right politicians, such as Leopoldo López, Carlos Vecchio, and Julio Borges, saluted Pompeo's plan and thanked the United States for backing Guaidó's 'emergency government'. When



'This is our homeland' / *Tenemos patria*. Macuro, Sucre. 2014.
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she heard that gunboats are coming towards the Venezuelan coast, Maria Corina Machado of the Vente Venezuela Party tweeted, ‘That’s the way to build a credible threat’. It is credible because the gunboats have done this before.

The Organization of American States (OAS), which behaved as the long-arm of the US State Department during the coup against the government of Evo Morales in Bolivia last November, joined in the chorus begun by Pompeo and Guaidó. In a statement, the OAS declared that it ‘considers that the plan presented constitutes a valid proposal for a path to end the usurping dictatorship and restore democracy in the country’.

The Venezuelan government led by President Maduro rejected the plan. But it was not alone. Maduro’s main opponent in the 2018 presidential election, Henri Falcón of the *Avanzada Progresista* (‘Progressive Advance’) party, also rejected the Pompeo–Guaidó plan and the deployment of US warships off the Venezuelan coast. The removal of Maduro, he wrote, ‘is a process and not an imposition; it requires agreements between adversaries for it to be successful. The solution in Venezuela is between Venezuelans’. ‘The pandemic’, he wrote, ‘is wreaking havoc in the world. Venezuela is one of the most vulnerable. It would be humanitarian and very great if ships came with aid and medicine, and it would be very inhumane if they came loaded with weapons and threats’.

Most of the opposition in Venezuela, like Falcón, did not approve of Guaidó's submission to Trump and Pompeo. Claudio Fermín of the *Partido Soluciones para Venezuela* ('Solutions for Venezuela Party') attacked the 'irresponsible and fanciful thesis' of Guaidó and his supporters, which is reliant upon the 'fantasy cloud of instructions sent to them by their bosses Elliot Abrams, Pompeo, and Trump'. Henrique Capriles Radonski, who twice ran unsuccessfully to be president, said that Maduro has 'internal control' while Guaidó's people have 'international alliances'.

So much of this is déjà vu. On 7 October 1963, US President John F. Kennedy gathered his advisors in the White House to discuss how to overthrow the democratically elected government of João Goulart in Brazil. Kennedy asked frankly, 'Do you see a situation coming where we might be – find it desirable to intervene militarily ourselves?' His ambassador in Brazil, Lincoln Gordon, said that he had worked on a plan with US Southern Command – then based in Panama – and with his contacts in the Brazilian military. A US invasion, Gordon told Kennedy, would require a 'massive military operation', which 'all depends on what the Brazilian military do'. Any coup without major military support would lead to 'the beginnings of what would amount to a civil war'.

Rather than risk a civil war, Gordon said the military had to act, and the United States had to provide them

with diplomatic and military support. By March 1964, Gordon said that the ‘most significant development is the crystallizing of a military resistance group under the leadership of General Humberto Castelo Branco’. Washington gave the green light. Operation Brother Sam was put in motion, which included egging on the Generals and sending a massive naval task force to sit off the coast of southern Brazil. An aircraft carrier, two guided missile destroyers, and other support vessels left Aruba and made their very public journey to Brazil. General Castelo Branco moved against Goulart; that coup created a military dictatorship – backed by Washington – that lasted 21 years and killed, detained, and tortured tens of thousands of people.

The US carrier group that sits off the coast of Venezuela seems to be mimicking Operation Brother Sam of 1964. Rather than focus attention on the pressing problem of controlling the coronavirus in the United States – or even amongst its military forces – Trump has begun manoeuvres that could very well lead to a serious and dangerous clash in the Caribbean Sea.

The Colombian People Reject the Hybrid War Against Venezuela

On 21 November 2019, the Colombian people took to the streets in massive numbers to reject the policies

of the government led by President Iván Duque. In particular, the people voiced two main demands. First, they wanted Duque's right-wing government to advance the 2016 Peace Accords between the government and the left-wing FARC (Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia). These Accords, negotiated in good faith, would have ended a war that has lasted for six decades (70 percent of Colombian society has been born during this war). Second, the people wanted to end the harsh austerity policies driven by Duque's government, which includes cuts to public universities, the pension system, and broad social spending. The main trade union federation, the Central Trade Union of Workers in Colombia (CUT), called for that protest, which then broadened into a mass uprising against Duque and the system of Colombian politics.

The general secretary of the CUT and spokesperson of the People's Congress (*Congreso de los Pueblos*), Edgar Mojica, was on the barricades daily helping shape the mass upsurge that suggested that Colombian society no longer wanted to be held hostage to the whims of its sclerotic oligarchy and to the United States government. This was the mood. It was clear in the slogans and graffiti that emerged in Bogotá, the capital of Colombia, and then outwards to its smaller cities and towns. The two demands – to implement the Peace Accords and to end austerity – are related. The Colombian oligarchy fears that if it contributes to building a comprehensive and genuine peace, the arrival of the FARC onto

the political stage will strengthen the left, and a stronger left will have the power to annul not only the austerity agenda but also the pro-US orientation of the ruling classes of Colombia (for more on this, see the Tricontinental: Institute for Social Research dossier no. 23, *Peace, Neoliberalism, and Political Shifts in Colombia*).

The other left organization – the National Liberation Army (ELN) – has in good faith tried to negotiate with Duque’s government, but has seen the door slammed in its face repeatedly, as Pablo Beltrán, an ELN leader, told Argentine journalist and educator Claudia Korol last year. Duque has intensified the military campaign against the ELN. If the Peace Accords with the FARC and the talks with ELN deepen, it would undermine the power of the oligarchy and of Washington. As Olimpo Cárdenas of the People’s Congress said two years ago, ‘There is a sector of the Colombian oligarchy that benefits from the war’.

There are days when it seems as if President Duque cannot make decisions without consulting the US government and his mentor, Álvaro Uribe. The advice he gets is to burrow deeper into an alliance with the United States, even at the cost of public opinion in Colombia. It would be fitting to call Duque’s policy toward the United States a ‘doormat policy’ – a policy where he offers Colombia as the doormat for the United States to wipe its feet before it marches into neighbouring Venezuela. When we spoke to Mojica recently, he

said, ‘The Colombian government is a submissive government. It is inclined toward the decisions of the North American government’.

This is not a new development. At the start of the 20th century, Colombia’s foreign policy was defined by the principle of *Respicium Polum* (‘Look toward the North’). More recently, in the 1990s, US foreign policy shifted its gaze from Central America to Colombia; Plan Colombia, developed in 1999, drove a militarised agenda of the US and the Colombian oligarchy in the ‘War on Drugs’, which was in essence a bid to defeat any revolutionary insurgency and consolidate control over the Andean-Amazon territory. What is indeed new, Mojica says, is that Duque has done everything to facilitate both the blockade against Venezuela and the potential military intervention into Venezuela.

When the governments of Canada and the United States urged their partners in Latin America to create a platform against Venezuela, which became the Lima Group in 2017, Colombia was an eager participant. In February 2019, Duque welcomed the Lima Group to Bogotá during a high-stakes gamble by the United States to overthrow the Venezuelan government of President Maduro. At that time, Mojica and other social movement leaders criticised the way their country was being used by the Colombian oligarchy and the United States for narrow purposes, against the interest of the Colombian people. Mojica told us, ‘We have

been denouncing this for the past year, beginning when President Duque lent himself to legitimise Guaidó and to legitimise the positions that the Lima Group has had with respect to Venezuela'. Heightened military tension with Venezuela suits the Duque government's agenda. It means that it can put off any talk of full implementation of the Peace Accords and cast aside any criticism of its austerity policies. Since 2016, hundreds of social movement leaders have been assassinated across Colombia; this violence is obscured by the attention being paid by the media to the Colombian-Venezuelan border.

With the US government absurdly saying that Venezuela is the source of narco-trafficking – even though all evidence pointing to narco-trafficking is rooted in Colombia – the pressure on Colombia to deal with its drug problem is now lifted. Indeed, the intimate links between the oligarchy and the narco-traffickers are now hidden by the hallucinatory claim that Maduro is himself involved in this trade.

Mojica told us that the entire narco-policy is a 'distraction' because it fails to grasp the real problem. 'We reject the policies of crop dusting and the blackmailing of the Colombian government' by the US, he said, which uses its international power to force policy changes on the country. Mojica explained that, because the production of coca leaves by small farmers is the 'first step of production', and because

the farmers have no other source of revenue to support their families, the farmers serve as ‘the weakest link in the chain’ and an easy target for cocaine eradication programs.

These small farmers, whose farms and bodies will be saturated by toxic chemicals, are not the main culprits behind the drug trade, nor is their wellbeing the main concern of Duque’s government; but they do provide a convenient scapegoat to mask the actions of those who really pull the strings. The responsibility for the colossal drug trade about which the Trump administration and his cronies are allegedly so concerned instead lies mainly with the large Colombian narco-cartels, who traffic the drugs through Mexico and Central America to North America; the drug mafia in North America itself; and the immense demand – largely in the US and Europe – by consumers for South American cocaine.

But none of the main culprits face the brunt of the drug eradication policy, reserved instead for the ‘weakest link’ – coca growers. ‘The coca growers and their families’, Mojica said, ‘are not presented with any alternative in terms of financial support for the eradication of their crops’. Despite this, they have unfairly become the frontline of the war. The 2016 Havana Peace Accords did provide a mechanism to assist farmers in transitioning from the cultivation of illicit crops. However, as with much else in the peace process, the protocol has not been respected; peasant communities



Morale and lights. Chapellín, Caracas. 2014.
Comando Creativo

have repeatedly denounced incidents of forced eradication by the army. The assassination of the leaders of these communities is often carried out by paramilitary groups, cartels, and a section of the armed forces known as the *Fuerza Pública* ('Public Force').

The US and the Duque administrations, Mojica says, are using the question of drugs to move an agenda for regime change in Venezuela. Matters are so grave that the Colombian government has allowed US troops to enter its territory – both on the Caribbean coast and on the Venezuelan-Colombian border, such as in the area of Catatumbo. 'We think that from there they are preparing a land invasion', says Mojica. These are tense times, with the imminent possibility of military manoeuvres turning into a war.

The Colombian Senate has been vocal in its opposition to the use of Colombian territory to destabilise Venezuela. In April 2020, a group of Colombian congressmen wrote a public letter to Duque saying that their country must not participate in regime change in Venezuela. If Duque wants to pursue any such agenda, he must seek permission from Congress. Mojica told us that the Colombian social movements 'completely reject' Trump's agenda. 'We are not its backyard', he said of the United States, and therefore not its doormat either. 'We do not condone its anti-drug policies; we do not condone its policies of looting our natural resources and our environment'.

The Bay of Piglets

In the early morning hours of Sunday, 3 May, speedboats left the Colombian coastlines and headed toward Venezuela – though they had no authorization to cross the maritime border – and landed on the Venezuelan coastline at La Guaira. This was clearly a hostile action, since the boats carried heavy weaponry, including assault rifles and ammunition. The people on the boats possessed satellite phones as well as uniforms and helmets with the flag of the United States of America. The incursion was intercepted by Venezuelan military (FANB), who fought them off; eight of the belligerents were killed, while two were intercepted, and several temporarily escaped. One of those who was arrested says that he is an agent of the US government's Drug Enforcement Agency (DEA). Early Monday May 4, Venezuelan security forces, aided by the fishermen and fisherwomen of the Bolivarian Militias in the coastal town of Chuao, arrested eight additional mercenaries on a speed boat who were attempting to enter the country. Two others were captured by Venezuelan Security Forces the same day in the town of Puerto Maya. During the arrests, more weaponry and military intelligence equipment was seized by Venezuelan security forces.

Néstor Reverol, the minister of internal affairs of Venezuela, told Venezuelan television stations hours

after the thwarted incursion that the government received information about the attack from sources in Colombia and from its own regular patrols of the Venezuelan coastline. ‘We cannot take any of their threats lightly’, said senior Venezuelan politician Diosdado Cabello. ‘What happened today’, he said, ‘is an example of the desperation’ of the United States and its allies.

Such plots surround Venezuela, the plotters a cast of characters from the seediest quarters of the military and the drug world, as well as of US intelligence and Colombian paramilitaries. The plot for a small invasion in 2019 that unravelled is now documented by Joshua Goodman of the Associated Press. That plot was led by Jordan Goudreau, who served in the US Army as a medic in Iraq and Afghanistan and then became a private security contractor; he worked with Cliver Alcalá, a former Venezuelan military officer, who brought together a few hundred Venezuelan military deserters to conduct the raid. Alcalá is now in prison in the United States for his involvement in the drug trade. Goudreau and Alcalá were backed by Trump’s bodyguard Keith Schiller and Roen Kraft of Kraft Foods. The entire operation sniffs of a madcap CIA adventure, akin to the 1961 CIA failed invasion of Cuba at the Playa Girón.

One of the ugliest aspects of the 2020 military incursion was that – in the name of combatting narco-trafficking – the entire operation seems to have been financed

by drug dealers. José Alberto Socorro Hernández (alias Pepero), who was captured during the invasion, admitted that the La Guajira cartel of Colombia offered them \$2 million for their actions. Pepero confessed that the operation was financed by Elkin Javier López Torres (alias *La Silla*, ‘The Chair’, or *Doble Rueda*, ‘Double Wheel’), a relative of Alcalá’s wife, Marta González.

It is likely that this most recent invasion in May 2020 emerged out of the military deserter camp set up by Alcalá in Colombia. One of the men involved in the raid was Captain Robert Levid Colina, also known as *Pantera* (‘Panther’). Colina had been involved in the attempted coup on behalf of Juan Guaidó on 30 April 2019 and is a close associate of Alcalá’s. Antonio Sequea, former Venezuelan National Guard member, who had last been seen on April 30, 2019 during the failed coup d’état led by Leopoldo López and Juan Guaidó, was among those arrested. Sequea is believed to have led the operation. The arrest of two US military officials from Texas, Luke Denman and Airan Berry, who are members of the US mercenary company Silvercorp was also noteworthy. The US government has denied all participation in the operation, and has largely ignored it, but, according to one of the detained mercenaries, the pair has a relationship with Trump’s head of security.

Silvercorp is the company of Jordan Goudreau, to whom Guaidó promised to pay \$212.9 million to ‘capture, detain, or “remove” President Nicolás Maduro

and install him in his place’, as reported by journalist Alan MacLeod. In February 2019, Goudreau and his company provided security to the Venezuelan right-wing during the provocative Humanitarian Aid concert. Videos and photos have also emerged on social media showing a contract signed between Goudreau and right-wing opposition leader Guaidó. The former US special operative expressed frustration because Guaidó did not hold up his end of the bargain, however, and Silvercorp has yet to receive payment for their work.

The operation, which has been under investigation by Venezuelan authorities for the past couple of months, is believed to be organised, planned, and financed by the Venezuelan opposition and its diverse allies with the objective of assassinating constitutional president Nicolás Maduro and other high-level leaders of the Venezuelan government. It is likely that the US government’s bounty on Maduro and on other leaders played a role in this attempted invasion.

However, as Hernán Vargas, a member of the *Movimiento de Pobladoras y Pobladores* (‘the Settlers’ Movement’) and the Secretary of ALBA Movements explained, it is likely that the mission of this group ‘was not to take over the country, it was not to take over the government. It was simply to carry out a series of activities that would be coordinated with other forces, which all depended on a chain of events that did not occur... They really expected maybe a response from

the Armed Forces, a street mobilisation, or that another armed group that was going to join, and that didn't happen'.

The mercenaries playing freedom fighters, however, 'did not expect the response of the people', Vargas said, and they vastly underestimated the skill of the Venezuelan intelligence. He explained that they likely had it in their heads that they could be 'received with applause and with cheers. They thought people were going to support this or an Armed Force was going to support this... but there are no people in Venezuela willing to do that. The majority of Venezuelans want it to be resolved in peace. There are no sectors that are willing to take that gamble or not enough for what they need at this moment'.

The threat, however, remains. Vargas calls for a close study of the Silvercorp contract with Juan Guaidó and Juan José Rendón – a right-wing political consultant and former advisor to Guaidó – where he states that there is, 'a whole series of clauses that allow or agree to actions of human rights violations, the execution of civilians, or the use of heavy weapons, which introduce another dimension. In other words, this is an equally dangerous situation because these groups can easily carry out terrorist actions, and they also set strategic civilian and military objectives in Venezuela'.

Vladimir Padrino López, the minister of defence of Venezuela, said that the government and the people had

defeated this attack and would remain vigilant against other such plots. One of the characteristic features of the Bolivarian process has been the mobilisation of the population to defend itself – from the attempted coup against Chávez in 2002 to today. ‘We declare ourselves in rebellion’, Padrino said, adding that Venezuela is now under a state of ‘permanent vigilance’. Despite the global pandemic, the old playbook of the CIA and the US government as a whole – currently led by the Trump administration – with their dirty coups and hybrid wars, remains operational. Much like the Cubans who thwarted the attempted US-backed invasion at the Playa Girón, or Bay of Pigs (1961), the Venezuelan people defeated this Bay of Piglets plot in La Guaira

The Weakness of US Power

Five Iranian tankers – each laden with gasoline – moved swiftly with their flags flying and their radar open to detection from Bandar Abbas (Iran) into the Caribbean Sea. One of them, serendipitously named ‘Fortune’, broke through the feverish US naval blockade to enter El Palito, Venezuela on 24 May. That the US was unable to force a confrontation with the Iranian vessels signals the weakness of the US position. A new sea bridge opens between two countries under immense US pressure; this demonstrates the limitations – but not the end – of US power and of the hybrid war.



Chávez lives. Puente Llaguno, Caracas. 2015.
Comando Creativo

About the pictures

The *Comando Creativo* ('Creative Command') is a collective that brings together workers from the fields of visual communication, social scientist specialists and researchers, and people who – from many other professions – see themselves as the producers of meaning, stories, and symbols. Since 2007, the *Comando Creativo* has been dedicated to the production of popular, counter-hegemonic communications. Currently, the collective is sharing its work on the platform utopix.cc



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