

## What's going on in Venezuela? (Ruby Mellen, *Washington Post*)

Required Annotations		Student-Created Annotations		Summary / Questions / Reflection	
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The crisis in Venezuela escalated even further over the weekend as members of the opposition clashed with soldiers, police and government loyalists at the country's borders with Colombia and Brazil. As the nation's humanitarian, economic and political crises worsen, here are some answers to questions you may have while tracking events.

### **Why are two men claiming to be the president of Venezuela?**

Nicolás Maduro came to power in March 2013 after the death of former leader Hugo Chávez. Although Maduro pledged to carry on Chávez's popular socialist policies, Venezuela soon entered into a recession and his popularity tanked.

In response, Maduro began to **consolidate** power. He arrested and intimidated rivals, took power away from the opposition-controlled National Assembly and established a constituent assembly stacked with allies to rewrite the country's constitution. In May, Maduro won a new six-year term as president, but the international community largely viewed the election as a sham.

After Maduro's inauguration in January, opposition leader Juan Guaidó declared himself the interim president of Venezuela. Guaidó, 35, an electrical engineer and head of the National Assembly, argues that Maduro's re-election was **fraudulent**. Therefore, because of his position, Guaidó says he is the legitimate president under the country's constitution.

Guaidó has called for free and fair elections when Maduro steps down, and numerous countries now recognize him as Venezuela's rightful leader.

### **What is President Donald Trump saying?**

Trump has been watching Venezuela since his first week in office. *The Washington Post* reported at the time that Trump "surprised his national security team by calling for a briefing on the oil-rich country **veering** toward economic collapse."

After Guaidó's declaration last month, Trump swiftly backed the opposition leader, recognizing him as the country's president and pledging "to use the full weight of United States economic and diplomatic power to press for the restoration of Venezuelan democracy."

Other members of the administration have weighed in forcefully. Secretary of State Mike Pompeo called Maduro a "sick tyrant" for keeping aid from Venezuelan civilians, and national security adviser John Bolton called Maduro a "dictator" clinging to an "illegitimate claim to power."

### **What is Trump actually doing?**

Along with his recognition of Guaidó, Trump has hit Venezuela with sanctions targeting its oil exports. He has called on members of the country's military to defect, warning them about the consequences of remaining loyal to Maduro. "If you choose this path, you will find no safe **harbor**, no easy exit and no way out," he said in Florida earlier this month. "You will lose everything."

Trump has also said he won't "rule out a military option," although some in Congress have already said they oppose U.S. military intervention in Venezuela.

Pompeo has appointed Elliott Abrams as U.S. special representative for Venezuela. Abrams has a controversial foreign policy record in Latin America. *Washington Post* columnist Ishaan Tharoor wrote that "as a prominent State

Department official in the Reagan administration, Abrams led the American cover-up of a hideous massacre in the Salvadoran village of El Mozote."

#### **What are other countries saying about the crisis?**

More than 60 countries have recognized Guaidó as Venezuela's interim president. They include Argentina, Brazil, Canada, Colombia, Israel and the majority of Western Europe. They are all calling for an end to the chaos and trying to provide support to Venezuelans in the form of humanitarian aid.

#### **Who still supports Maduro?**

Dozens of countries are also standing behind Maduro, including China, Cuba, Iran, North Korea and Russia. Maduro has said Russian President Vladimir Putin is providing the country with aid and financial assistance.

Russia has a particularly large stake in the survival of Maduro's regime, not only financially but politically. As my colleague Anton Troianovski writes, "Maduro is a key ally of Russia in Venezuela, giving Moscow a geopolitical foothold a three-hour flight from Miami. Russia has extended billions of dollars in loans to Venezuela and in December dispatched nuclear-capable bombers to the country in a show of force."

#### **Why is Venezuela's economic situation so bad?**

Because of its massive oil wealth, Venezuela used to be Latin America's richest country per capita. Under Chávez's vision for the nation as a socialist paradise, industries were nationalized and government handouts increased. But after Chávez's death and a global collapse of oil prices, that vision no longer worked. Cash dried up, and the corruption-ravaged oil industry produced less and less. Runaway inflation set in.

In 2017, *The Post's* Anthony Faiola reported, "Venezuela hasn't released official inflation data since 2015. But last month, according to the Caracas-based statistical firm Ecoanalitica, the country slipped into hyperinflation and hit an annualized rate of nearly 2,000 percent.

"The cash-strapped government is now teetering on default, printing reams of bills to keep the economy afloat. That fuels inflation. . . .

"The nearly worthless bolívar means that imports - which are generally purchased in dollars - are prohibitively expensive and that Venezuelan businesses can't afford to buy foreign-made inputs, slowing their production."

As inflation soared, food and medicine became scarce and basic services broke down. Millions of Venezuelans have now fled the country in search of jobs and sustenance.

#### **What happened this weekend?**

Maduro has been blocking most aid from coming into Venezuela, saying that offers by outside groups to bring in assistance are just veiled attempts at foreign invasion.

Nevertheless, the opposition sent thousands of volunteers to the Colombian and Brazilian borders to defy Maduro's orders and bring in aid supplies. They hoped that the military wouldn't use force against unarmed civilians carting in humanitarian goods, and that many soldiers might defect.

They were wrong. As *The Post* reported from the scene, anti-Maduro crowds faced tear gas fired by Venezuelan units on the Colombian border.

"In all, 285 people were injured and 37 hospitalized on the Colombian side of the border, according to Colombia's foreign minister," *The Post* reported. "At least four were killed on the Venezuela-Brazil border after clashing with pro-government militias."

And although dozens of members of the Venezuelan military switched sides, events showed that Maduro is maintaining the support and strength of

his security forces.

**What will happen next?**

Guaidó is asking for more help. This weekend, he secretly crossed the border into Colombia despite having been banned from leaving Venezuela by the country's supreme court. Guaidó met with Vice President Mike Pence as well as Latin American leaders in Bogotá on February 25.

Amid Saturday's clashes, he seemed to hint that he is open to a military intervention. "Today's events force me to make a decision: to pose to the international community in a formal way that we must have all options open to achieve the liberation of this country that is fighting and will continue to fight," Guaidó tweeted on Saturday.

Michael Shifter, the president of the Inter-American Dialogue, a Washington-based think tank, told *The Post* that "Guaidó's insistence that 'all options are on the table' echoes President Trump's words, first uttered in August 2017 and widely interpreted as serious consideration of military action."

But even in the United States — which has taken a strong stance against Maduro — a military intervention has little support. Invading Venezuela could help Maduro "portray himself globally as a leftist martyr persecuted by the Trump administration," *The Post* reported February 24.

1. Read the following selection from the section "Who still supports Maduro?"

*Russia has a particularly large stake in the survival of Maduro's regime, not only financially but politically. As my colleague Anton Troianovski writes, "Maduro is a key ally of Russia in Venezuela, giving Moscow a geopolitical foothold a three-hour flight from Miami. Russia has extended billions of dollars in loans to Venezuela and in December dispatched nuclear-capable bombers to the country in a show of force."*

Which of the following conclusions can be drawn from the selection above?

- a) Russia values Venezuela's proximity to the United States.
  - b) Russia will use military intervention against Venezuela if necessary.
  - c) Russia will likely make a large profit by investing in Maduro's regime.
  - d) Russia sent bombers to Venezuela because Maduro requested them.
2. Evaluate the effectiveness of the author's support of the following claim: Maduro's re-election as president of Venezuela was most likely a sham.
    - a) The author very effectively supports the claim by identifying how many countries oppose Maduro's election and are willing to use force.
    - b) The author effectively supports the claim by describing tactics Maduro used to seize control of the government before the election.
    - c) The author supports the claim somewhat effectively by stating that 60 countries oppose Maduro, but the names of those countries are not given.
    - d) The author's support of the claim is very weak because no evidence is offered showing that Maduro is not the rightful president.
  3. According to the article, which of the following BEST explains how Venezuela has changed since Chávez's death and the global collapse of oil prices?
    - a) It has suffered due to the meddling of foreign governments like Russia and the U.S.
    - b) It has become less socialist and more capitalist, like the United States.
    - c) It has suffered through hyperinflation and economic and political turmoil.
    - d) It has become even more committed to socialist policies than in Chavez's time.
  4. Which of the following did the author develop the LEAST in this article about the current crisis in Venezuela?
    - a) what happened to people at the Colombian and Brazilian borders
    - b) the U.S.'s response to the crisis in Venezuela
    - c) how inflation has affected Venezuela
    - d) the reasons why people in Venezuela still support Maduro