

Venezuelan President Maduro charges right-wing opposition backed by Colombia with supposed assassination attempt

By Alexander Fangmann
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Two explosions occurred at a military parade in Caracas on Saturday as Venezuelan President Nicolás Maduro gave a speech commemorating the 81st anniversary of the creation of the Bolivarian National Guard. The explosions, which apparently injured seven soldiers and sent many others scattering for cover, left Maduro and other senior officials unharmed.

Regardless of the exact circumstances of the explosions, it is clear that Maduro and the Venezuelan government are using the incident as a pretext to clamp down on growing protests against the country's deteriorating economic conditions.

Although the sequence of events is somewhat murky, the explosion evidently caught Maduro, his wife Cilia Flores and other officials by surprise. Video clips show Maduro looking toward the sky as he makes his speech. The feed then switches to a wider shot which shows soldiers scattering, after which the video source was cut off. Reports state that Maduro was then shielded by bodyguards before being quickly whisked away.

According to an article in *El Pais*, the army has confiscated other footage from the private television company covering the event. Venezuela's National Union of Press Workers said that seven journalists covering the event were interrogated for hours after the incident, with some having their cameras taken from them.

The official government position, relayed by Jorge Rodríguez, the Venezuelan Communication, Culture and Tourism minister, is that the explosions were produced by drones loaded with explosives. Other reports claim that the explosion resulted from an exploding gas tank at a nearby apartment building, though those have been contradicted by others claiming

to be eyewitnesses.

Already by Sunday, in a televised press conference, Maduro claimed that the Venezuelan government has taken some of the "material authors" of the attack into custody, along with evidence. Maduro claimed, "It was an attack to kill me, they tried to assassinate me."

Maduro blamed the attack on the "ultra-right wing" in Venezuela, Colombia and Miami, and said, "I have no doubt that the name Juan Manuel Santos is behind this attack," referring to Colombia's president. He further said that preliminary investigations "indicate that various of those financing it live in the United States, in the state of Florida. I hope that President Donald Trump is ready to fight these terrorist groups."

The Colombian government issued a denial of any involvement in the affair, saying, "The suggestion that the Colombian president is responsible for this supposed attack against the Venezuela president is absurd and lacking in all foundation," while US National Security Advisor John Bolton claimed "there was no US involvement."

On Saturday evening, a group calling itself the National Movement of Soldiers in T-shirts apparently claimed responsibility for the incident, referring to it as "Operation Phoenix," through a statement passed to and read by Patricia Poleo, a US-based YouTube user with links to the right-wing Venezuelan opposition.

Whether that group had any involvement or not, the Venezuelan government is poised to initiate a further crackdown on political dissent as well as growing protests against Venezuela's deteriorating economic conditions. Attorney General Tarek William Saab said, "There will be a ruthless punishment." This threat was echoed by Maduro in his own speech calling for

“maximum punishment” and “no forgiveness.”

Indeed, the incident occurs amid a growing upsurge of the class struggle that the right-wing Frente Amplio is struggling to contain. During the last week, health workers at the University Hospital of Caracas, electricity workers, telecommunication workers and teachers have continued strikes, while more and more neighborhoods have been putting up roadblocks and protesting at the state utility companies over the lack of running water. On August 2, Maduro met with representatives of peasants who had marched hundreds of miles to Caracas to air grievances regarding corruption of the ruling PSUV (United Socialist Party of Venezuela) and to “reverse” in land reform in the countryside.

The representatives of Frente Amplio’s right-wing parties could be seen addressing some of these crowds. For instance, Carlos Julio Rojas and other operatives of the right-wing Vente Venezuela of the US-funded politician María Corina Machado were calling this morning on protesters outside of the water company Hidrocapital in Caracas to “leave” and wait for future protests, appealing for “civic unity,” to which no one applauded.

For almost two weeks they have called for new committees and consultations “with all sectors” about organizing a mass strike. The desperation was clear in a press conference Thursday by the regional Frente Amplio in Zulia, which described the situation as “unsustainable.” In announcing their preparations for a strike, their spokesperson said: “Everyday, the Conflict Laboratory reports one more strike, one more walkout, people have had it... Venezuela is a country in emergency. It’s sinking.”

According to the Venezuelan Observatory of Social Conflict, there were 9,787 protests in 2017. While the protests organized by Venezuela’s bourgeois political right have largely dissipated, 2018 numbers are set to exceed that amount. There have been over 5,300 so far this year. Of these, 80 percent are estimated to involve demands of the working class to social rights such as food, water and a living wage.

In the face of this increasing unrest and deterioration in the economy, the Maduro government has placed its confidence in the Venezuelan military to handle the situation. In May, it allocated a 2,400 percent pay increase to the armed forces, in contrast to the 103

percent granted to civilian workers.

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