

Washington escalates military threats as Venezuela regime change falters

By Bill Van Auken
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Three weeks after the January 23rd US-orchestrated self-swearing-in of the right-wing opposition legislator Juan Guaidó as “interim president” of Venezuela, Washington’s regime change operation appears no closer to installing its puppet in the Miraflores presidential palace.

As a result, the White House, the Pentagon and the CIA are steadily escalating threats of US provocations and military intervention.

The current focus of the attempt to oust the Venezuelan government of President Nicolas Maduro is a cynical charade over the delivery of USAID relief supplies across the country’s borders.

Guaidó announced at a mass rally in Caracas on Tuesday that February 23 would be the day that food and medicine the US has stockpiled across the border in Colombia would be brought into Venezuela by “caravans” of “volunteers.”

“Here is a direct order to the armed forces: allow in the humanitarian aid once and for all (and) end the repression,” Guaidó proclaimed.

The Venezuelan military, however, has shown no inclination to follow the orders of Guaidó, a US-trained and funded operative of the extreme right-wing Voluntad Popular (Popular Will) party who was a virtual political unknown before Washington recognized him as Venezuela’s “legitimate” president.

The command of the armed forces issued a statement declaring that it does not “recognize any lackey of US imperialism as its leader, much less accept the orders of a cowardly usurper of the constitutional rights of the people. The only commander in chief of the FANB (Bolivarian National Armed Forces) is Nicolas Maduro, elected by the people ...”

Guaidó’s postponement of a choreographed provocation on the Venezuelan-Colombian border until February 23 is undoubtedly designed to provide time for US attempts to blackmail and bribe a section of the military command to desert the government and support the regime change operation.

The pretext that Guaidó is championing the Venezuelan people by attempting to bring in food and medical supplies trucked in by USAID (an agency that has repeatedly served as an instrument of CIA operations) is obscene. His aim is to provoke a bloody confrontation that would serve as a pretext for US intervention.

The amount of food and medicine that is being stored in a warehouse in Cucuta, Colombia, across the border from Venezuela is less than a drop in the bucket in terms of meeting the needs of

the Venezuelan population, whose increasing impoverishment is a result of the global economic crisis and falling oil prices. The crisis has been compounded by US sanctions and the pro-capitalist policies of the Maduro government, which has continued paying off the country’s debt, while defending the interests of international and domestic finance capital.

The supplies on the border are a small fraction of the \$20 million worth of aid pledged by Washington as part of the regime change operation. This total amount, meanwhile, is considerably less than the \$30 million that the oil embargo imposed by Washington last month is expected to cost the Venezuelan economy each and every day.

The purpose of this embargo is to starve the Venezuelan population into submission, creating such abysmal social conditions as to render the country ungovernable. In this context, the demand to allow in the piddling supplies stored at the warehouse in Colombia is farcical.

Virtually every major aid organization, including the Red Cross and the Catholic Church-affiliated Caritas, have refused to participate in the US aid provocation, stressing that humanitarian assistance cannot be manipulated for political aims.

This has not stopped the US and Western media, however, from engaging in a relentless propaganda campaign based on the narrative that the evil dictator Maduro is deliberately starving his own people by refusing to accept the aid offered by a beneficent US government.

Leading Democrats have also jumped on this bandwagon, using the aid provocation to justify their support for the Trump administration’s regime change operation. Former Vice President Joe Biden issued a bellicose statement, declaring “Only a tyrant would prevent the delivery of food and medicine to people he claims to lead. The international community must support Juan Guaido ... It is time for Maduro to step aside and allow a democratic transition.”

Similarly, Democratic House Speaker Nancy Pelosi declared her support for Guaidó, adding, “Maduro’s regime of repression and impoverishment for his personal enrichment continues to gravely violate human rights, and must be condemned ... His recent decision to block bridges and cut off channels of food and supplies imperils the health and futures of the Venezuelan people, and must be immediately reversed.”

The supposed decision to “block bridges” is a propaganda invention. The Tienditas bridge linking Venezuela and Colombia

was built in 2015 and never opened because of border tensions between Colombia and Venezuela, with both governments having long ago installed fences and barriers on their respective sides.

It is noteworthy that a corporate media and a Democratic Party leadership that has made relentless and unsubstantiated allegations over “Russian meddling” the focus of their opposition to the Trump administration have accepted without question the lies of this administration as it engages in a form of “meddling” that has every possibility of producing a bloodbath in Venezuela.

Underlying this bipartisan unity lies not concerns over democracy or humanitarianism, but rather the strategic interests of US imperialism, in particular the control of Venezuela’s oil reserves, the largest in the world, and denying them to both Russia and China, which have extensive trade and investments with the country.

The threat of direct US military intervention in support of these aims has been steadily ratcheted up as the “interim president” Guaidó has proven incapable of asserting control over anything more than the Venezuelan assets stolen by the US government.

Trump Wednesday met at the White House with Colombia’s right-wing President Ivan Duque to discuss the drive to overthrow the Venezuelan government. He reiterated the refrain that “all options are on the table,” and refused to discuss the disclosure of a note by his National Security Adviser John Bolton about sending 5,000 troops to Colombia, declaring “I never talk about that.”

Meanwhile, the head of US Southern Command (SOUTHCOM) Adm. Craig Faller, spent two days this week in Brazil meeting with the country’s military brass and officials of government of Jair Bolsonaro, the fascistic former army captain who assumed the presidency at the beginning of this year.

Venezuela was also the central topic in these discussions. Brazil has strongly backed the regime change operation in Caracas, and leading officials have publicly mooted the possibility of a military intervention. On Wednesday, the Ministry of Justice and Public Security announced a 60-day extension of the deployment of Brazilian army troops in the state of Roraima bordering Venezuela, where Brazil has agreed to set up a staging point for the US “humanitarian” aid provocation.

In Washington, the Republican chairman of the Senate Armed Services Committee, James Inhofe, told reporters on Tuesday that the US military would have to intervene in Venezuela if Russia established a military presence in the country.

“You’ve got a guy down there that is killing everybody,” he said. “You could have him put together a base that Russia would have on our hemisphere. And if those things happen, it may be to the point where we’ll have to intervene with troops and respond.”

Moscow has stated that Venezuela has made no request for military assistance.

In testimony on Capitol Hill on Wednesday, the Trump administration’s special envoy on Venezuela, Elliot Abrams was asked whether the US had increased its troop deployments in South America in response to the Venezuelan crisis and responded, “I don’t believe so.” He added that direct US military intervention was not Washington’s “preferred route.”

Asked by a member of the House Foreign Affairs Committee whether the US was funneling arms to Venezuela’s right-wing

opposition, Abrams said that his answer was “a simple and unequivocal no.”

The committee’s Democratic chairman, Eliot Engel, introduced Abrams citing his posts in the Reagan and Bush administrations and his positions in various think tanks. Unmentioned was the fact that he pleaded guilty in 1991 to lying to Congress about the illegal funneling of money and guns to the CIA-backed “contras” in their terrorist war against Nicaragua and avoided jail only because of a pardon by Bush senior.

One member of the committee, Minnesota Democrat Ilhan Omar, challenged Abrams, citing his guilty plea in the contra affair, stated, “I don’t understand why members of this committee or the American people should find any testimony that you give today to be truthful.” She went on to detail his defense of the El Mozote massacre of some 800 civilians in El Salvador and similar genocidal acts by the dictatorship in Guatemala.

Abrams treated the questioning with contempt, interrupting Omar and declaring that her questions were an “attack” that did not merit an answer.

That the same kind of operations that Abrams defended in Central America are ongoing in Venezuela was indicated by the Venezuelan government’s interception of a shipment of 19 assault rifles, 118 explosive charges, 90 military-grade radio antennas and six latest generation smartphones on a Boeing 767 cargo flight by the 21Air company to the Valencia airport.

“This materiel was destined for criminal groups and terrorist actions in the country, financed by the fascist extreme right and the government of the United States,” a spokesman for the Venezuelan military charged.

The air cargo company, 21 Air, had previously run flights between US cities, but in recent months had shifted its operations to Venezuela, with stop-offs in Colombia.

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