

Trump issues new threats as Iranian tankers approach Venezuela

By Bill Van Auken
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In a telephone conference with right-wing Hispanic supporters in the United States Wednesday, President Donald Trump issued new threats against Venezuela, bragging about the US military siege that has been mounted against the embattled South American country.

Referring to Venezuelan President Nicolás Maduro, Trump declared, “We have surrounded him at a level that no one knows, but they know it.” He added, “Something is going to happen because we won’t be able to bear it,” without specifying what “something” he had in mind.

The threat comes just weeks after the failed May 3-4 abortive invasions of Venezuela by mercenary forces organized and led by ex-US special forces troops, and amid increasing tension over Iran’s shipment of fuel products to revive a paralyzed Venezuelan refinery and ease a severe gasoline shortage.

Five Iranian tankers are presently en route to Venezuela carrying \$46 million worth of gasoline and petroleum products, including diluents needed by Venezuela to turn its crude oil into gasoline. The fuel is reportedly being paid for by Venezuela in gold, which is badly needed by Iran.

The five ships, the Clavel, Fortune, Petunia, Forest and Faxul, all flying Iranian flags, departed after taking on their cargo at the Persian Gulf Star Refinery near the Iranian port of Bandar Abbas. From there they sailed around the Arabian Peninsula, through the Suez Canal to the Mediterranean and past Gibraltar into the Atlantic Ocean. They are expected to arrive in Venezuelan waters as early as next week.

The dispatch of the tankers from Iran to Venezuela, both of which are the targets of crippling “maximum pressure” US sanctions regimes that are tantamount to a state of war, has provoked outrage in Washington. At

the center of the unilateral US sanctions imposed upon both countries are measures aimed at strangling their economies by preventing their export of oil.

Washington has only intensified the punishing economic measures as both countries, and the entire planet, struggle with the ravages of the coronavirus pandemic. The US economic blockades have prevented both Iran and Venezuela from importing medicines and medical supplies desperately needed to save lives.

Iran has faced the highest death rate in the Middle East, with an official toll of over 7,000 fatalities. While Venezuela has confirmed only 10 COVID-19 deaths, the number of confirmed infections has risen, driven in large part by the return to the country of workers who had gone elsewhere in Latin America in search of work as Venezuela’s economic crisis deepened.

A senior official in the Trump administration, speaking on condition of anonymity, told Reuters last week that the dispatch of the fuel-laden ships from Iran to Venezuela “is not only unwelcome by the United States, but it’s unwelcome by the region, and we’re looking at measures that can be taken.”

While no one in Washington has specified what “measures” are being contemplated, the Iranian Foreign Ministry issued a swift warning that any US military action against its ships would result in “a quick and decisive response.” Iranian officials have warned that if their tankers are not allowed to ship oil, then no country’s will, suggesting a possible closing of the strategic Strait of Hormuz, through which roughly 30 percent of all crude and other oil products traded by sea pass.

Iran also lodged a formal complaint with the United Nations, charging that the US has deployed warships with the aim of blocking its export of oil to Venezuela.

At the beginning of last month, Trump used a White

House briefing that had supposedly been called to deal with the spiraling COVID-19 crisis in the United States to announce that the Pentagon was dispatching a naval task force to the Caribbean for the alleged purpose of stopping narcotics trafficking, in particular from Venezuela.

With 90 percent of the world's cocaine supply coming from Colombia, a country ruled by Washington's closest right-wing ally, President Iván Duque, and passing through the Pacific and Central America, also governed by right-wing US allies, the claim that the naval deployment was for the purpose of drug interdiction was a transparent pretext.

The task force, the largest US military deployment in Latin America since the 1989 US invasion of Panama, is composed of US Navy destroyers and littoral combat ships, vessels ill-designed for catching drug smugglers.

Venezuela's defence minister, Vladimir Padrino, said yesterday that his country's Armed Forces would send out ships and planes to escort the five Iranian oil tankers as soon as they enter Venezuela's economic zone, which extends 200 nautical miles from the country's shores.

Meanwhile, the US puppet Juan Guaidó, who proclaimed himself "interim president" in January of last year and was immediately recognized by Washington and its allies, signaled his support for any US attack upon the Iranian vessels threatening to break the blockade that is starving Venezuela of resources in the midst of the coronavirus pandemic.

"We are very concerned for the safety of Venezuelans, and of Latin America as well, due to this attempted Iranian presence on Venezuelan soil," said Guaidó. He accused the Maduro government of using "blood gold" to pay for the Iranian gasoline.

Guaidó's concern over foreign presence on "Venezuelan soil" does not extend to US mercenaries invading the country. In fact, he signed a contract with the military contractor and ex-Green Beret Jordan Goudreau and his Silvercorp USA, a deal brokered through the White House, to pay \$213 million for an operation designed to capture or kill President Maduro and install a US puppet regime in Caracas. The "blood money" that was to pay for this deal consisted of Venezuelan assets stolen by the US government.

The *Wall Street Journal* published an editorial Wednesday urging military action to halt the Iranian

tankers, warning of the "risk to U.S. interests in doing nothing."

"President Trump has the legal power to declare an emergency and interdict the tankers," the *Journal* stated. "They might be turned around or their cargo seized depending on the legal arguments that the Administration uses. But in either case the U.S. would have to be prepared for a response from Iran, perhaps in the Persian Gulf or Strait of Hormuz."

What is being proposed is the consummation of the kind of maritime confrontation that was narrowly avoided during the so-called Cuban Missile Crisis of October 1962, when the US and the Soviet Union came to the brink of nuclear war.

The open advocacy by the principal mouthpiece of US finance capital of US piracy on the high seas—and the potential triggering of a new global war—is the clearest confirmation that the COVID-19 pandemic has only intensified US imperialism's drive to assert its global hegemony by means of military aggression.

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