



Tom Lantos Human Rights Commission Briefing

Human Rights in Venezuela: Status and Opportunity

Wednesday, July 15, 2026

12:00 pm – 2:00 pm

H-313, The Capitol

James P. McGovern, Co-Chair

As delivered

Good afternoon and welcome to the Commission's hearing on human rights in Venezuela.

The people of Venezuela have experienced years of crisis and deprivation in their daily lives. Millions of Venezuelans fled repression and economic insecurity. Many made their home in the United States. Many wish to return.

Their suffering was compounded by the devastating twin earthquakes on June 24. Official statistics show some 4,500 people killed, with 16,700 injured.

Our hearts go out to those affected by this terrible natural disaster. I encourage our government to continue to provide aid. I hope our witnesses will update us on how their families and neighbors are faring.

For too long, the people of Venezuela have been denied the ability to enjoy their universal human rights. Their own government repeatedly fails in its obligations to respect their rights. But theirs is not the only government complicit in rights violations. I believe ours is too.

Nine years of harsh U.S. economic sanctions have had a demonstrably negative impact on the livelihoods of Venezuelans. Politicians in Washington arrogantly tell Venezuelans they

must suffer violations of their economic and social rights as the *only* way to restore their civil and political rights. This is an insult to their dignity. This is wrong.

Our policy must protect and defend all the human rights of the Venezuelan people.

On January 3, U.S. forces seized Nicolás Maduro. This military attack was illegal under the U.S. Constitution and the UN Charter. It should not have happened. Nevertheless, it is a fact.

Maduro ran one of the most repressive regimes in the hemisphere. The International Criminal Court is investigating possible crimes against humanity committed under his rule. The UN Fact-Finding Mission has documented such crimes.

Maduro faces narco-trafficking charges in the U.S. But where is the human rights accountability? Will the U.S. send him to the Hague for these crimes? Will the Venezuelan people get the justice they demand and deserve for the crimes committed against them?

This is the key question. Who will decide the future of Venezuela – the Venezuelan people or politicians in Washington?

President Trump said the United States would “run” Venezuela for the foreseeable future. As the New York Times reports, based on dozens of interviews, Secretary Marco Rubio “effectively controls Venezuela’s finances, the distribution of its natural resources and its government.” Officials call him the “viceroy” – a term used in the imperial period.

Secretary Rubio has laid out a three-phase plan – stabilization, economic recovery, transition.

Who remembers the China PNTR debate in 2000? The Clinton Administration said political reform would flow from economic changes. It didn’t. Co-Chair Smith and I agreed on that.

Now it appears that the Trump Administration is following this same discredited path in Venezuela.

Congress should press the Administration not to repeat the mistakes of the past. Demand a roadmap for democratic transition, with transparency. Insist on clear benchmarks. Restore constitutional order.

Promises of elections are hollow without systemic reform. Venezuelans have seen how their votes can be hijacked without it. This will require dismantling of the security state, an

independent judiciary, electoral reforms, lifting restrictions on civil society, respecting freedom of the press and expression, and transitional justice. This work should have already started.

The United States has *immense* leverage right now. But is our government using it to improve the lives and liberties of the Venezuelan people? Or are U.S. officials using it to enrich oil executives, Qatari financiers and themselves?

Will the American politicians who spoke so righteously about democracy and human rights when Maduro was in power help the Venezuelan people attain these freedoms? Or will they stay silent while Trump and Rubio cut deals with the same regime they once called illegitimate?

At its core, our policy toward Venezuela must address the aspirations of the Venezuelan people. They have suffered for too long under their own corrupt government, the economic sanctions of a vindictive U.S. government, and now a national disaster.

The path forward must put human rights first – all human rights.

I look forward to the testimony of our witnesses. I'm happy to yield to the distinguished Co-Chair of this Commission, Congressman Chris Smith,