



Testimony for the record of

Laura Cristina Dib Ayesta

Director for Venezuela
Washington Office on Latin America

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Tom Lantos Human Rights Commission

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Chairman McGovern, Chairman Smith, and Members of the Commission:

My name is Laura Cristina Dib, and I am the Director for Venezuela at the Washington Office on Latin America (WOLA), a leading human rights research and advocacy organization founded in 1974 to advance human rights in the Americas. I respectfully submit this statement for the record on the human rights situation in Venezuela.

I. Background and context

Over the past two decades, Venezuela's governing authorities have gradually dismantled the country's democratic institutions. Judicial independence has been eliminated through the packing and political capture of the courts; electoral authorities operate under executive control; and the offices meant to keep the government in check—prosecutors, ombudsman, comptroller—have been converted into instruments of abusive power¹. This institutional capture has enabled a sustained policy of politically motivated persecution: arbitrary detentions, enforced disappearances, torture, and the criminalization of journalists, human rights defenders, humanitarian workers, and opposition members, a pattern so widespread and deliberate that it has been found by United Nations (UN) Independent Fact-Finding Mission on Venezuela to constitute crimes against humanity². The International Criminal Court has an ongoing investigation regarding these alleged crimes in Venezuela³.

The July 2024 presidential election marked a turning point: authorities declared victory without ever producing the precinct-level results required by law, while independently published tally sheets indicated an opposition win by a wide margin. Both the Carter Center and the UN Panel of Electoral Experts, the two international bodies invited to observe the process, concluded that the election could not be considered democratic⁴. The response to citizen protest was the most intense wave of repression in recent memory—more than two thousand detentions, including of children, and the forced exile or imprisonment of much of

¹ See generally Inter-American Commission on Human Rights, *Annual Report*, chap. IV (Venezuela), 2002–2025, <https://www.canalcidh.org/informes-anuales>. See also Report of the Working Group on the Universal Periodic Review: Venezuela (Bolivarian Republic of), UN Docs. A/HRC/19/12 (2011), A/HRC/34/6 (2016), and A/HRC/50/8 (2022), <https://www.ohchr.org/en/hr-bodies/upr/ve-index>.

² UN Independent International Fact-Finding Mission on the Bolivarian Republic of Venezuela, reports 2020–2024, <https://www.ohchr.org/en/hr-bodies/hrc/ffmv/index>.

³ "Venezuela I," International Criminal Court, accessed July 21, 2026, <https://www.icc-cpi.int/venezuela-i>.

⁴ United Nations. "Venezuela: Guterres Calls for 'Complete Transparency' Following Disputed Presidential Election," July 29, 2024, <https://news.un.org/en/story/2024/07/1152606>. The Carter Center, "Carter Center Statement on Venezuela Election," July 30, 2024, <https://www.cartercenter.org/news/pr/2024/venezuela-073024.html>.

the opposition leadership and actors viewed as opposition by the government⁵. Far from an episodic crisis, this was the consolidation of an authoritarian system in which no independent institution remains capable of protecting citizens' rights or holding power accountable.

I want to start by acknowledging the dimensions of the human rights situation and the impossibility of fully addressing here all the issues that afflict the Venezuelan population today. WOLA's statement, however, is the result of an effort to amplify the voices of human rights defenders, activists, and journalists from Venezuela.

II. Since January 3, 2026: What has and hasn't changed?

After months of military buildup in the Caribbean, on January 3, 2026, U.S. forces struck multiple targets across Venezuelan cities and military installations and captured and extracted Nicolás Maduro and his wife, Cilia Flores. The operation was conducted without congressional authorization, in violation of constitutional limits on the president's war powers, and without any credible claim of self-defense, contravening the UN Charter's prohibition on the use of force against territorial integrity⁶.

While this operation set a dangerous precedent and undermined the international system of peace and security⁷, it also broke the political stagnation that followed the 2024–2025 crackdown, creating openings that have not yet translated into a genuine and credible democratic transition.

In these past six months, hundreds of political prisoners—including journalists, human rights defenders, and opposition leaders—have been released; some exiled leaders have begun to return; civil society has cautiously reclaimed space in universities, unions, and the

⁵ Washington Office on Latin America (WOLA), *One Year Since the Presidential Election of July 28, 2024: The Venezuelan Crisis*, <https://www.wola.org/analysis/one-year-since-the-presidential-election-of-july-28-2024-the-venezuelan-crisis/>

⁶ WOLA, *Unilateral U.S. military intervention to remove authoritarian dictator Nicolás Maduro from power violates international law and sets a dangerous precedent for the region* (January 3, 2026), <https://www.wola.org/2026/01/military-action-venezuela-united-states-maduro-trump/>; PROVEA, *El camino a la transición democrática debe ser pacífico, garante de la justicia y refrendar la soberanía popular* (January 4, 2026), <https://provea.org/comunicados/propios/escalada-militar/>

⁷ "UN Chief Deeply Concerned over 'Possible Intensification of Instability' in Venezuela," UN News, January 5, 2026, <https://news.un.org/en/story/2026/01/1166701>.

available media; and an Amnesty Law was adopted, albeit one that offers no truth, justice, reparations, or guarantees of non-repetition for victims⁸.

At the same time, on January 3, hours after Maduro's capture, Venezuela's Supreme Court invoked a figure found nowhere in the Constitution—a "forced absence"—to install Delcy Rodríguez as acting president while deliberately declining to classify the vacancy as temporary or absolute, the latter of which would have required presidential elections within 30 days. Even under the most generous reading of that ruling, the Constitution caps a temporary absence at 90 days, renewable once: that outer limit of 180 days expired on July 3, 2026. Rodríguez now governs beyond any constitutional timeframe, with no election called and no legal basis remaining for her continued exercise of power⁹.

Delcy Rodríguez presides over the same repressive architecture as her predecessor, with between 368¹⁰ and 518¹¹ people still imprisoned on political grounds, depending on the source; the laws used to criminalize dissent remain in force; political parties remain under judicial intervention, and political disqualifications stand; the courts and the electoral authority remain captured; and no credible route to free, competitive, and verifiable elections has been established, beginning with the indispensable renewal of the National Electoral Council.

Some of Nicolás Maduro's closest allies have been replaced or moved within the same power structure, but the state's repressive apparatus, as well as the structures that facilitated grand corruption, remain unreformed¹². For example, the new Minister of Defense is Gustavo González López, who directed the SEBIN (National Bolivarian Intelligence Service) between 2015 and 2018, and then from 2019 to 2024¹³, when some of the most heinous atrocities were committed as part of an attack on members of the opposition or

⁸ WOLA, *Two Months Without Maduro in Venezuela: Democratic Transition or Authoritarian Adaptation?* (March 2026), <https://www.wola.org/analysis/two-months-without-maduro-in-venezuela-democratic-transition-or-authoritarian-adaptation/>

⁹ Acceso a la Justicia, *A 3 meses de la ausencia presidencial en Venezuela: ¿falta temporal o absoluta?* (April 2026), <https://accesoalajusticia.org/a-3-meses-ausencia-presidencial-venezuela-falta-temporal-o-absoluta/>; Constitutional Chamber of the Supreme Tribunal of Justice, Judgment No. 0001-2026 (January 3, 2026).

¹⁰ Foro Penal, "La represión en cifras," accessed July 21, 2026, <https://foropenal.com/represion-en-cifras#presos-politicos>.

¹¹ Justicia, Encuentro y Perdón, "Indicadores: Presos políticos" [Indicators: Political Prisoners], *JEP Venezuela*, <https://www.jepvenezuela.com/indicadores/presos-politicos/> (accessed July 8, 2026).

¹² Venezuela Investigative Unit, "What Does the Exit of Vladimir Padrino López Mean for Organized Crime in Venezuela?" InSight Crime, March 19, 2026, <https://insightcrime.org/news/exit-vladimir-padrino-lopez-organized-crime-venezuela/>.

¹³ Gustavo González López: From Key Man of Chavista Espionage to Venezuela's Defense Minister," *El País English*, March 19, 2026, <https://english.elpais.com/international/2026-03-19/gustavo-gonzalez-lopez-from-key-man-of-chavista-espionage-to-venezuelas-defense-minister.html>

people perceived by the government as opposition. González López was sanctioned by the U.S. in 2015¹⁴.

III. June 24, 2026: A natural disaster on top of a complex humanitarian emergency

The earthquakes of June 24, 2026, struck in the middle of a protracted complex humanitarian emergency, produced not by natural forces but by years of corruption, institutional dismantling, and state abandonment, and then aggravated by U.S. sectoral sanctions. Before the first tremor, the UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA) estimated that 7.2 million Venezuelans were in humanitarian need¹⁵, while independent monitoring estimated that 18.2 million Venezuelans needed humanitarian assistance—12.4 million of them with critical and severe needs—including 11.8 million people facing moderate or severe food insecurity¹⁶. Nearly 8 million Venezuelans¹⁷, among them the doctors, nurses, and engineers- professionals needed in a disaster response - had already fled the country.

By July 15, the authorities estimated 4,829 deaths, 16,740 people injured, and 17,907 displaced¹⁸. However, the government has not updated its demographic database since 2011¹⁹, and their data drastically contrast the estimations made by the U.S. Geological

¹⁴ Office of Foreign Assets Control, "Issuance of a New Venezuela-Related Executive Order; Venezuela-Related Designations," U.S. Department of the Treasury, March 9, 2015, <https://ofac.treasury.gov/recent-actions/20150309>

¹⁵ After the earthquake, the OCHA increased the number of people in need to 7.9 million. "Venezuela," United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs, accessed July 21, 2026, <https://www.unocha.org/venezuela>.

¹⁶ HumVenezuela, *2025 Follow-up Report on the Complex Humanitarian Emergency in Venezuela* (January 2026), <https://reliefweb.int/report/venezuela-bolivarian-republic/2025-follow-report-complex-humanitarian-emergency-venezuela-january-2026>

¹⁷ UNHCR, *Venezuela Situation* (emergency page), <https://www.unhcr.org/us/emergencies/venezuela-situation> (accessed July 8, 2026).

¹⁸ "La cifra de muertos por el doble terremoto en Venezuela ascendió a 4.829," Infobae, July 15, 2026, <https://www.infobae.com/venezuela/2026/07/15/la-cifra-de-muertos-por-el-doble-terremoto-en-venezuela-ascendio-a-4829/>.

¹⁹ Instituto Nacional de Estadística (Venezuela), "Censos," accessed July 14, 2026, <https://ine.gob.ve/censos/>. "El INE y la Encovi chocan sobre reducción de la población en Venezuela," Bitácora Económica, May 15, 2025, <https://bitacoraeconomica.com/ine-y-encovi-chocan-sobre-reduccion-de-la-poblacion-en-venezuela/>.

Survey, which estimates with a 42% probability that at least 10,000 people were killed in this natural event²⁰.

The response to the earthquakes was complicated by already-saturated, dilapidated hospitals, collapsed basic services, chronic blackouts, and an emergency management apparatus lacking basic rescue equipment. Years of government attacks on civil society, including a law criminalizing NGOs' receipt of international funding, diminished civil society's capacity; nonetheless, it was ordinary citizens and independent civil society organizations who carried out the majority of the response. Longstanding censorship, with over 200 internet domains blocked, obstructed the flow of life-saving information²¹.

International capacity, meanwhile, was already depleted: Venezuela's UN-coordinated humanitarian appeal of \$632.2 million for 2026²² was only 23 percent funded the day the earthquakes struck, and U.S. bilateral humanitarian assistance—though partially rebounding this year—remains far below 2024 levels following the dismantling of the U.S. government's dedicated disaster-response infrastructure.

IV. Conclusions and recommendations

The earthquakes have underscored the need to return to the rule of law in Venezuela and develop robust, functioning, and rights-respecting institutions that can effectively protect the country's citizens. Given the current government's lack of legitimacy, it is important to uphold Venezuelans' right to freely elect their officials and to rebuild the rule of law.

At the same time, the current humanitarian crisis will likely to be a push factor for forced migration and demand greater international solidarity. The humanitarian response should not be politicized, and it should be guided by principles of humanity, neutrality, impartiality, and independence. Given the context of systemic corruption in Venezuela²³, all

²⁰ U.S. Geological Survey, "M 7.5 – 28 km SE of Yumare, Venezuela: PAGER," Earthquake Hazards Program, event us6000t7zp, accessed July 14, 2026, <https://earthquake.usgs.gov/earthquakes/eventpage/us6000t7zp/pager>.

²¹ Espacio Público, *Censura digital en Venezuela: bloqueos, delaciones y detenciones* (April 29, 2026), <https://espaciopublico.org/censura-digital-venezuela-bloqueos-delaciones-detenciones/>; VE Sin Filtro, *Monitor de bloqueos en Venezuela*, <https://bloqueos.vesinfiltro.org/> (accessed July 8, 2026).

²² UN OCHA Financial Tracking Service (FTS), *Venezuela Humanitarian Response Plan 2026: Funding Summary*, <https://fts.unocha.org/plans/1517/summary> (accessed July 8, 2026). After the earthquake, OCHA updated its response plan; to see the data prior to the earthquake, see: Financial Tracking Service, *FTS Monthly Report: June 2026* (United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs, 2026), https://fts.unocha.org/sites/default/files/reports/FTS%20Monthly%20Report_June2026.pdf.

²³ "2025 Corruption Perceptions Index: Venezuela," Transparency International, 2025, <https://www.transparency.org/en/cpi/2025/index/ven>.

humanitarian and reconstruction funds should have robust transparency and accountability safeguards.

WOLA respectfully asks the U.S. Congress to call on the Trump administration²⁴ to use its engagement with the Venezuelan authorities to support the following concrete, verifiable steps:

1. Unconditionally release all political prisoners, nationals and foreigners, deprived of their liberty for political reasons. This includes putting an end to all forms of arbitrary detention and enforced disappearance, as well as unfair judicial proceedings.
2. Repeal or declare unconstitutional laws, regulations or resolutions used to criminalize individuals perceived as political opponents or human rights defenders, among them the Law on the Oversight, Regulation, Operation and Financing of Non-Governmental and Non-Profit Social Organizations (known as the “Anti-NGO Law”).
3. Adopt urgent measures to disarm, dismantle, and withdraw all structures, security forces or armed groups that engage in illegitimate acts of intimidation, persecution or repression against the civilian population for exercising their human rights.
4. Provide full, safe and independent access to Venezuelan territory for international human rights protection mechanisms, including the Inter-American Commission on Human Rights and the UN Independent International Fact-Finding Mission on Venezuela.
5. Support independent local organizations providing assistance to people affected by the earthquakes, guaranteeing the right to receive humanitarian aid without restrictions or conditions incompatible with the humanitarian principles of humanity, impartiality, neutrality, and independence.
6. Adopt appropriate legal and administrative measures to ensure that oil proceeds, which constitutionally belong to the Venezuelan people, currently in the Foreign Government Deposit Funds (created under Executive Order 14373 on January 9, 2026), are used to address the emergency resulting from the multiple and prolonged deprivations suffered by the population. This should prioritize the effective reconstruction of infrastructure, services, livelihoods and essential goods, through universal, non-discriminatory social protection systems and investment plans, managed by institutions operating with transparency and accountability.
7. Protect human rights and humanitarian organizations, journalists and independent media, social leaders, activists and opposition political parties, as well as

²⁴ An Open Letter to the Government of the United States on the Humanitarian Response to the June 24 Earthquakes in Venezuela," Washington Office on Latin America, July 8, 2026, <https://www.wola.org/2026/07/an-open-letter-to-the-government-of-the-united-states-on-the-humanitarian-response-to-the-june-24-earthquakes-in-venezuela/>

guaranteeing the rights to dissent, peaceful assembly and democratic participation in public affairs.

8. Effectively lift all blockades on social media, media outlets, and VPN services, and order and carry out the full restitution of media outlets affected by arbitrary measures, including the return of confiscated headquarters, transmission equipment, antennas, and furnishings, as well as the automatic renewal or restoration of radio and television broadcasting licenses that were arbitrarily revoked, including those that lapsed due to the regulator's failure to respond.
9. Develop a clear and credible roadmap, with diverse participation from civil society, for the re-institutionalization of public authorities of the Venezuelan State, in compliance with constitutional obligations, rules, and timelines. This is particularly urgent for those in the electoral branch, the judiciary, and the citizen power²⁵, as well as those responsible for defense and security, in order to restore constitutional order and the effective operation of a democratic state governed by the rule of law. This includes the election of the President of the Republic in accordance with constitutional provisions.

We further call on the U.S. Congress to:

1. Continue to provide and increase funding for human rights and democracy in Venezuela. Funds, such as the \$50 million appropriated through the National Security Investment Program account for FY2026, should prioritize support for programs in Venezuela to restore democratic institutions and the rule of law, as well as support for civil society, including human rights organizations and independent media.
2. Exercise its oversight authority over the Executive branch in the use of funds appropriated for human rights and democracy, as well as over humanitarian aid and reconstruction funds provided by the U.S., making sure that resources are used in accordance with congressional directives and with the proper measures of transparency and accountability.
3. Understanding that grand corruption has been a pillar of support for the authoritarian government in Venezuela, Congress should exercise its oversight authority over the custodial account holding the proceeds from oil and make transparent to the public the uses of the Fund. The custodial mechanism should be temporary, and its end must be tied to the restoration of the rule of law and democracy in Venezuela.
4. Uplift human rights concerns in Venezuela and the findings from international independent human rights bodies, such as the Inter-American Commission on Human Rights and the UN Fact-Finding Mission on Venezuela.

²⁵ Under Venezuela's Constitution, the Citizen Power is exercised by the Republican Moral Council, made up of the Defender of the People (Ombudsman), the Prosecutor General, and the Comptroller General.

5. Consider carrying out a hearing specifically on the issue of illegal mining in Venezuela and its human rights impacts, and assess the role of licenses 51B, 54A and 55, issued by OFAC to authorize activities and transactions in the critical mineral sector in Venezuela.
6. Call on the Secretary of the Department of Homeland Security to again designate Temporary Protected Status for Venezuelans on the basis of the Immigration Act of 1990 and halt deportation flights to Venezuela, in the context of the humanitarian emergency caused by the earthquakes and the ongoing repression, in keeping with the obligation to respect the rights of migrants and refugees in the United States.
7. Call on the Executive branch to suspend the campaign of lethal boat strikes of alleged drug traffickers in the Caribbean and Eastern Pacific, which have killed over 200 citizens of Venezuela and elsewhere without due process and have violated U.S. domestic and international law²⁶.

²⁶ "US War on 'Narco-Terrorists' Violates the Right to Life, Warn UN Experts after Deadly Vessel Strike," Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights, September 16, 2025, <https://www.ohchr.org/en/press-releases/2025/09/us-war-narco-terrorists-violates-right-life-warn-un-experts-after-deadly>. WOLA, "TO DATE: U.S. Maritime Attacks in the Caribbean and Eastern Pacific," Washington Office on Latin America, November 7, 2025, accessed July 15, 2026, <https://www.wola.org/2025/11/us-military-strikes-trump-drugs-caribbean/>.