



## **Tom Lantos Human Rights Commission Briefing**

### **Venezuela: Economic Sanctions and Human Rights**

**Tuesday, July 23, 2019**

**11:30 – 12:30 p.m.**

**2172 Rayburn House Office Building**

#### **As prepared for delivery**

Good morning and thank you for joining us today for this briefing on economic sanctions and human rights in Venezuela.

The ongoing crisis in Venezuela is a life-and-death matter for many of its people and a critical concern for countries throughout the hemisphere, as millions of Venezuelans have fled repression and economic insecurity with no end in sight.

I have been a strong defender of the premise that human rights should be at the center of United States foreign policy since before I was elected to Congress.

As many of you know, I cut my teeth on human rights as a senior aide to the late Congressman Joe Moakley when he asked me to lead the congressional investigation into the 1989 murders of six Jesuit priests, their housekeeper and her daughter committed at the Central American University in San Salvador.

As a member of Congress, I've led many bills seeking to redress human rights violations, including the Russia-specific and the Global Magnitsky laws that authorize the president to impose visa and financial sanctions on individuals responsible for grave human rights abuses and grand corruption.

The logic behind that legislation is that when countries can't or won't hold their leaders accountable for the crimes they commit, at a minimum we should make sure that those people do not benefit from traveling to and doing business in our country.

So I believe that economic sanctions have a place in U.S. foreign policy and U.S. human rights policy. I believe sanctions can and should be used to shape incentives in an effort to change bad behavior on the part of foreign leaders.

But I do not believe that sanctions should be used to punish whole populations for the actions of their leaders or to bludgeon an adversary into submission. Sanctions that seek to cripple a country's entire economy for political ends are both misguided and immoral.

"Misguided" because we know from experience that they won't work. Sanctions are most effective when they are part of a multifaceted, **multilateral** diplomatic package of carrots and sticks, when they "enrage but also engage" those targeted. To be effective, sanctions must offer a path forward.

"Immoral" because broad sanctions are cruel and further undermine the human rights of people who are already suffering. I simply do not believe that United States policies should make a bad economic situation worse, contribute to continued forced migration and condemn future generations to even deeper poverty.

And that's where I'm afraid we have now arrived in regard to Venezuela.

As we will hear today, U.S. policy did not cause the current humanitarian crisis in Venezuela.

But at this point the dynamics are such that U.S. sanctions are exacerbating the pain. There seems to be a concern that the sanctions are not alleviating suffering or contributing to a solution.

And although the U.S. has offered humanitarian assistance, we have done so under conditions that politicize it and create huge obstacles to delivery.

One thing I have learned from many years of tracking entrenched conflicts is that humanitarian assistance only gets through when providers honor the principles of independence, neutrality and impartiality. Those principles exist for a reason.

True humanitarians are guided by the well-being of the people they are trying to help, not the opportunity for political messaging.

I am not here today to say there is no political or human rights crisis in Venezuela – serious abuses have been widely documented over a long period of time by many credible human rights bodies, including most recently the Office of the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights.

What I am here to say is that we must not violate the economic and social rights of the Venezuelan people in the name of restoring their civil and political rights. We must find ways to protect and defend all the human rights of the Venezuelan people.

I believe it is time for a course correction in U.S. policy and I look forward to hearing recommendations along those lines today.

I will turn now to Rhoda Margesson, Specialist in International Humanitarian Policy for the Congressional Research Service, who will introduce our panelists and moderate this morning's discussion.