



Tom Lantos Human Rights Commission Briefing

Venezuela: Economic Sanctions and Human Rights

Tuesday, July 23, 2019

11:30 – 12:30 PM

2172 Rayburn House Office Building

Statement by Rep. Christopher H. Smith

I must say that the emphasis and tone of this briefing strikes me as being off-key: the problem here is not sanctions, but the conduct of the Maduro regime which precipitated sanctions in the first place.

While I agree with my colleague, Co-chairman Jim McGovern, on the importance of targeted sanctions, such as those contained in the Global Magnitsky Act, of which I was the lead Republican cosponsor, there are times when those in power mistreat their citizens so badly that more forceful measures are justified.

Recall the sanctions which were brought against the horrible apartheid regime in South Africa. I broke ranks with my fellow

Republicans then, who said that sanctions would hurt average citizens, because it was the right thing to do. It was because of sanctions, and the political leadership of Nelson Mandela, that the situation for the majority of South Africans changed for the better.

So too with Venezuela, now suffering under the regime of Nicolas Maduro.

This is a regime whose economic policies and corruption sent food production in a tailspin well before sanctions were in place.

This is a regime which has repeatedly weaponized food – withholding it from desperate citizens until they pledge political fealty to the State and to the person of Maduro. Maduro has blocked aid from coming into the country, closing the Tienditas International Bridge by the border of Colombia and Venezuela in stubborn insistence that there is no problem. And, on February 23 of this year, his soldiers opened fire on Pemon Indians near the town of Kamrakapay along the border with Brazil who were simply protesting the lack of food.

This crisis must be laid squarely at the feet of Nicolas Maduro and his regime, which routinely uses violence against hungry citizens who simply want to exercise civil and political rights.

This is not simply my observation, but that of Michelle Bachelet, the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights and I note, a socialist and woman of the political Left. In a damning report issued July 4, she catalogues how government forces and thugs known as “colectivos” bully those who simply are protesting. She also states: “The economy of Venezuela, particularly its oil industry and food production systems, were already in crisis before any sectoral sanctions were imposed.”

It is very important that we remember this when we seek to assign blame for this crisis.

I also want to take issue with some of the claims made by one of the witnesses today, Jeffrey Sachs. He has claimed that sanctions have resulted in 40,000 deaths. But as an authoritative report by the Brookings Institution has found, the methodology used by Dr. Sachs and his colleague in coming up with this figure is “unfit to estimate the causal effect of the 2017 sanctions on the Venezuelan economy, and thus their conclusions are invalid.”

Indeed in an interview with Democracy Now posted on YouTube, when asked about the 40,000 figure, Dr. Sachs conceded that “I don’t want anyone to believe there is any precision in these numbers.”

It would have been nice for sake of balance if we had heard from briefers such as the authors of the Brookings rebuttal, who would offer

a fuller perspective. In lieu of that, I ask that the May 2019 Brookings Policy Brief “Impact of the 2017 Sanctions on Venezuela” by Dany Bahar et al. be made available as part of the material posted for this briefing.

Thank you.

Brookings Policy Brief:

https://www.brookings.edu/wp-content/uploads/2019/05/impact-of-the-2017-sanctions-on-venezuela_final.pdf