

Venezuela: The standoff continues

Three months since Juan Guaidó declared himself interim president of Venezuela and won official recognition from over 50 countries, his standoff with Nicolás Maduro continues, as the Chavista regime steps up its pressure on the opposition. The outcome is uncertain, but some progress has been made on the humanitarian front.

The situation remains unchanged

After having repressed the opposition-led [attempt](#) to bring humanitarian aid to Venezuela, Nicolás Maduro allowed [Juan Guaidó](#) – who had been forbidden from leaving by the [Supreme Court of Justice](#) – to re-enter the country freely following his exit to [Colombia](#) and his [tour of several countries](#) in the region. He now seems to be targeting Guaidó's close entourage, arresting his chief of staff [Roberto Marrero](#) on charges of fomenting an insurrection. Guaidó has also been targeted directly and was recently [attacked](#) by a group of people outside the Venezuelan Parliament. Soon afterwards, the [auditor general](#) barred him from holding public office for 15 years, a ruling dismissed by Guaidó as illegal. On 2 April 2019, the Maduro-controlled National Constituent Assembly – established by the regime as a de facto parallel parliament in order to strip the legitimate National Assembly of its powers – deprived Guaidó of his [parliamentary immunity](#) on petition of the Supreme Court of Justice. Maduro has also expelled the [German ambassador](#) – who was among those who met Guaidó at [Caracas airport](#) – for allegedly meddling in Venezuelan affairs. In an attempt to rally popular support, Guaidó has embarked on a tour of the country under the banner of '[Operation Liberty](#)', calling for [mass demonstrations](#). These started on [6 April 2019](#) in 358 places all over Venezuela and are being [harshly repressed](#) by the Venezuelan government, which still retains its strong [military backing](#).

Repeated [power cuts](#) that have affected the whole country – the longest lasting over [five consecutive days](#) – are blamed by Maduro on presumed sabotage, while the opposition puts the blame on the government, accusing it of underinvestment and poor maintenance of energy infrastructure. This has obliged Maduro to activate a [30-day plan](#) of electric power 'rationing', to [replace his energy minister](#) and to announce a '[deep restructuring](#)' of his government. The National Assembly declared a '[state of alarm](#)' over the five-day power blackout. According to the World Bank, gross domestic product (GDP) has fallen by 51 % since Maduro came to power, the economy – which contracted by 17.7 % in 2018 – looks set to contract by an additional 25 % in 2019, and hyperinflation reached 1 370 000 % in 2018. Venezuela's oil production – which accounts for 95 % of national export revenues – has kept falling from a peak of over 3 million barrels per day (bpd) in 1997 to just around 740 000 bpd in March 2019; it could sink to [500 000 bpd](#) by the end of the year.

On the international front, the arrival of [Russian military personnel](#) in Venezuela is viewed with concern by the [US](#) and its allies. The [US government](#) and [opposition leaders](#) have recently denounced the strong [Cuban influence](#) on [Venezuela](#) – which has been repeatedly denied by the Cuban authorities.

Humanitarian aid: in search of less politicised solutions

As the [humanitarian crisis](#) worsens, Maduro is still hindering the arrival of humanitarian aid in the country, and Venezuelans are continuing to emigrate. The arrival of international humanitarian aid is still a priority for both Guaidó and much of the international community. Although the opposition's February [attempt to bring aid](#) to the country was thwarted by Maduro, new, less politicised mechanisms are quietly being planned to achieve this goal. The [Red Cross](#) recently announced that it has received permission from both Maduro's government and the opposition to deliver aid to Venezuela. Delivery of medical supplies could begin in mid-April, reaching around 650 000 vulnerable Venezuelans. [UN agencies](#) have also been scaling up activities in Venezuela to meet urgent health, nutrition and protection needs. As regards emigration, which has already hit [3.4 million](#), a pioneering refugee and migrant response plan (RMRP) has been launched, coordinated by the UN Refugee Agency (UNHCR) and the International UN Observatory on Migration, focusing on direct emergency assistance, protection, socio-economic and cultural integration and efforts to strengthen capacity in the receiving countries. The plan is targeting 2.7 million people in 16 countries.

Worsening human rights situation

In its [2018 Annual Report](#), the Inter-American Commission for Human Rights (IACHR) stressed, among other things, the 'persistence of structural situations' with a 'detrimental impact on the human rights of Venezuelans, resulting in a serious political, social and economic crisis' and 'the absence of the rule of law'. The IACHR remarked that the principle of the separation of powers was not observed. The report also noted serious meddling by the National Constituent Assembly and the National Electoral Council in the May 2018 presidential elections, as well as a 'persistent deterioration of political rights and participation in public life', and a 'worsening situation in the access to economic, social and cultural rights'. In the context of the March 2019 repression of social protests in Venezuela, the [IACHR](#) also expressed deep concern over the lack of electricity and drinking water in the country, urging the state to guarantee the human rights of the population. On 20 March 2019, UN High Commissioner for Human Rights, Michelle Bachelet, issued an [oral update report](#) on the situation of human rights in Venezuela, expressing her deep concern about the repercussion of the current crisis on human rights in Venezuela and the need to reach an agreement on a political solution. She also welcomed the presence of a UNHCHR technical team in the country as a first positive step. Alarm has also been raised over the expansion of [censorship measures](#).

The EU and Venezuela

On 28 March, the HR/VP Federica Mogherini made a [statement](#) condemning 'the illegal decision' by Venezuela's auditor general to disqualify Guaido from holding public office for 15 years. Regarding the arrest of Mr Guaido's head of cabinet, Roberto Marrero, on 21 March the HR/VP's spokesperson demanded his immediate and [unconditional release](#). Federica Mogherini had already condemned at the beginning of March the expulsion of the [German ambassador](#) to Venezuela and stressed that the solution to the crisis must be political, democratic and peaceful, [warning](#) against any government measure against Guaido. In February, she had called on Venezuelan law enforcement to avoid the use of force and to allow the [entry of aid](#). In January, she had condemned the indiscriminate [use of force](#) by the authorities against demonstrators and regretted that Maduro had ignored the [EU's call](#) for 'fresh presidential elections in accordance with internationally recognised democratic standards'. The EU recently boosted its [emergency aid](#) to help Venezuelans inside and outside the country by €50 million. Total EU assistance since 2018 amounts to €117.6 million. On 6 November 2018, the EU renewed its [targeted sanctions](#) for one year. Over two thirds of [EU countries](#) have officially recognised Guaido as legitimate President.

The International Contact Group

The [International Contact Group](#) on [Venezuela](#) (IGC), established on the initiative of the EU with the agreement of some Latin American countries, is the [most credible initiative](#) (and the [most promising alternative](#)) supported by the international community so far to help resolve the Venezuelan conflict, as it has [access](#) to all different stakeholders inside and outside Venezuela. The [IGC](#), aimed at [facilitating conditions](#) for a political and peaceful process leading to new presidential elections, held its [inaugural meeting](#) in Montevideo (Uruguay) on 7 February 2019 and, after sending technical missions to the country, held its second meeting in [Quito](#) (Ecuador) on 28 March 2019, co-presided by [HR/VP Mogherini](#). It has agreed to meet again in Costa Rica in May. The [IGC](#) is also working to enable the rapid delivery of humanitarian aid.

The **European Parliament** has adopted two resolutions on Venezuela since the beginning of 2019: one on [31 January 2019 recognising Guaido as the legitimate interim president of Venezuela](#); and another on [28 March 2019 on the emergency situation in Venezuela](#), condemning the repression and violence, reiterating concern at the humanitarian situation, condemning the detention of Roberto Marrero and calling for his release, and recommending additional sanctions against illegitimate state authorities.

Outlook

The political situation in Venezuela remains uncertain, as Nicolás Maduro ratchets up the pressure on Juan Guaido. Nevertheless, progress is gradually being made in the distribution of humanitarian aid. In this context, the facilitation work initiated by the EU-led International Contact Group could prove very useful in unlocking the situation and paving the way for a negotiated transition to democracy in the country.

