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## Venezuela: International Efforts to Resolve the Political Crisis

### Background

Venezuela, still under the authoritarian rule of Nicolás Maduro, is mired in a deep economic and humanitarian crisis worsened by the Coronavirus Disease 2019 (COVID-19) pandemic. Maduro—narrowly elected in 2013 after the death of Hugo Chávez (president, 1999-2013)—and the United Socialist Party of Venezuela (PSUV) took de facto control of the National Assembly, the last independent branch of government, in January 2021. Maduro has resisted U.S. and international pressure to step down. Meanwhile, international support for opposition leader Juan Guaidó, the former National Assembly president once regarded as interim president by the United States and nearly 60 countries, appears to have stagnated.

Maduro has consolidated political control over Venezuela, but the country's economy and social conditions continue to deteriorate. Since April 2021, the Maduro government has made gestures that some observers say demonstrate a willingness to negotiate with the opposition in exchange for relief from U.S. sanctions. Maduro allowed the World Food Program to begin operating, released six U.S.-Venezuelan oil executives to house arrest, and backed the legislature's selection of an electoral commission with two of five rectors from the opposition. On May 11, 2021, Guaidó called for, and Maduro appeared to agree to, resuming Norway-led negotiations suspended in September 2019. Guaidó seeks foreign aid and COVID-19 vaccines, as well as a broad electoral accord leading to free and fair elections.

The international community remains divided over how to respond to the political crisis in Venezuela. Although the United States still recognizes Guaidó as interim president, many European Union (EU) member states and Western Hemisphere countries do not. Biden Administration officials have backed Guaidó's call for negotiations but remain wary of Maduro's intentions and appear unlikely to lift U.S. sanctions in the short term. EU member states strongly support a resumption in negotiations. Russia, China, and Cuba have remained silent on the possible resumption in negotiations. Without pressure to make concessions from Maduro's external backers and unity in the opposition, negotiations could again prove unsuccessful.

### United Nations

In 2019-2020, the U.N. Security Council discussed the situation in Venezuela, but divisions among U.N. members blocked resolutions in response to the crisis. Russia and, to a lesser extent, China support Maduro; the United States supports Guaidó. Despite that polarization, U.N. agencies are increasing humanitarian relief in Venezuela after securing approval in April 2019 from Maduro and Guaidó. The U.N. High Commissioner for Refugees and the International Organization for Migration are coordinating to

serve some of the roughly 5.6 million Venezuelans who had left the country as of May 2021 and their host communities. An independent fact-finding mission of the Office of the U.N. High Commissioner for Human Rights has documented state human rights abuses against civilians that it describes as amounting to "crimes against humanity."

### Organization of American States

The Organization of American States (OAS), a regional multilateral organization that includes all 35 independent countries of the Western Hemisphere (Cuba currently does not participate), has focused attention on Venezuela's political crisis. Since 2016, OAS Secretary-General Luis Almagro has issued reports on Venezuela, convened special sessions of the Permanent Council to discuss regional responses to the crisis, and spoken out against Maduro. In 2017, Maduro denounced the OAS for meddling in his country's domestic affairs and began a two-year process to withdraw from the organization.

The OAS requires 18 votes to pass a resolution of the Permanent Council. In January 2019, 19 of 34 member states approved a resolution refusing to recognize the legitimacy of Maduro's second term and urging all member states to adopt measures to facilitate the prompt restoration of democratic order in Venezuela. After Maduro withdrew his OAS ambassador, the Permanent Council welcomed the Venezuelan National Assembly's permanent representative to the OAS in April 2019. The United States and 11 other OAS member states that are parties to the Inter-American Treaty of Reciprocal Assistance have imposed targeted sanctions and travel bans on Maduro government officials.

Some observers praise Almagro's activism on Venezuela; others assert he has sided too closely with the opposition and is unlikely to help broker a diplomatic solution to the crisis. The OAS General Secretariat praised the interim government's recent negotiation initiative but dismissed the "influence in these [and past] negotiations of collaborationist actors, both from inside and outside the [Maduro] dictatorship."

### Lima Group

In mid-2017, efforts to reach consensus on an OAS response to the crisis in Venezuela appeared to stall. On August 8, 2017, 12 Western Hemisphere countries signed the Lima Accord, which rejected the rupture of democracy and systemic human rights violations in Venezuela; signatory countries included Argentina, Brazil, Canada, Chile, Colombia, Costa Rica, Guatemala, Honduras, Mexico, Panama, Paraguay, and Peru. In 2018, Guyana and St. Lucia joined the Lima Group, which did not recognize Maduro's May 2018 reelection.

On January 23, 2019, and in subsequent statements, 11 members of the Lima Group recognized the Guaidó government and pledged to support a democratic transition in Venezuela. On February 4, 2019, the Guaidó government joined the Lima Group and signed its statement calling for a peaceful transition in Venezuela. Although Mexico and Argentina have left the Lima Group, El Salvador and Ecuador have joined the group as observers.

The Lima Group has denounced human rights violations by the Maduro government but also has opposed U.S. or regional military intervention. On January 5, 2021, 13 Lima Group countries issued a declaration that the group does not recognize the legitimacy of the National Assembly seated in January 2021. Instead, it “recognizes the existence of a Delegated Commission headed by its legitimate board of directors, established by the National Assembly, presided by Juan Guaidó.” The Lima Group has yet to make a statement regarding negotiations.

### European Union

In 2017, the EU adopted an arms embargo against Venezuela; in 2018, it began to impose targeted sanctions on Maduro officials. The EU has opposed broad economic sanctions, military intervention, and “any form of violence” in the country. Instead, the EU has backed efforts by the International Contact Group (ICG) and Norwegian diplomats to broker a diplomatic solution to the crisis. In mid-2020, the EU backed former presidential candidate Henrique Capriles’s efforts to seek better conditions and a postponement of the December legislative elections rather than the preemptive boycott that Guaidó and the U.S. government had declared. By January 2021, the EU Parliament and most member states began referring to Guaidó as a “privileged interlocutor” rather than “interim president.” The EU backs a resumption in negotiations.

### International Contact Group

The EU-backed ICG, now composed of several European countries (France, Germany, Italy, the Netherlands, Portugal, Spain, Sweden, and the United Kingdom) and Latin American countries (Argentina, Bolivia, Chile, Costa Rica, Dominican Republic, Ecuador, Panama, and Uruguay) first convened in February 2019. It aimed to “establish necessary guarantees” for free, transparent presidential elections and to hasten the delivery of humanitarian aid to Venezuela through dialogue. ICG supporters maintain the “necessary guarantees” include naming a new electoral council, releasing political prisoners, and ending bans on parties and candidates. The ICG has met several times, including with Lima Group representatives; sent political missions to Caracas; and supported the Norway-led dialogue process.

### Dialogue Effort Led by Norway

In May 2019, the Norwegian government confirmed it had been facilitating talks between negotiating teams for Maduro and Guaidó. The negotiations’ goal was to establish conditions for free and fair elections. Points of contention included whether Maduro could remain in office during the convening of elections and whether he could run again. Skeptics asserted that, as in the past, Maduro was using negotiations as a delaying tactic. In August 2019, Maduro ended participation in the negotiations after new

U.S. sanctions were imposed on his government. Norwegian officials have maintained communication with Maduro and opposition leaders, even during the pandemic.

On May 11, 2021, Guaidó issued a call for the opposition to unite behind a “national salvation agreement,” possibly brokered by Norway. He seeks (1) an electoral accord, (2) a plan to distribute COVID-19 vaccines and foreign aid, (3) an agreement on political participation and the release of political prisoners, and (4) international support for lifting sanctions to incentivize the Maduro government. Maduro expressed a willingness to negotiate, but his government subsequently raided an independent newspaper and cracked down on foreign-funded civil society groups, leading some to question his sincerity.

### Implications for U.S. Policy

Congress has closely followed developments in Venezuela, U.S. policy responses, and international efforts to broker a solution to the crisis.

Although U.S. policy toward Venezuela generally has received broad international support, some U.S. actions have prompted concern among partners in addressing the crisis; such actions have included threats of military action in 2019, stronger sanctions on Cuba (an EU trade partner) related to its support for Maduro, and sanctions on Venezuela’s state oil company and government. Some observers hoped the Biden Administration would be willing to lift certain sanctions that may have exacerbated the humanitarian crisis, such as a 2020 prohibition on oil-for-diesel swaps. Some Members of Congress support all current U.S. sanctions, but others have concerns about the humanitarian effects of sanctions discussed in a February 2021 Government Accountability Office report.

Secretary of State Antony Blinken and other U.S. officials have pledged to implement a multilateral policy on Venezuela and are reviewing current sanctions. They have also stated that they are in no rush to lift sanctions, including on diesel swaps. Should negotiations progress, the EU, and potentially Guaidó, could advocate for a revised U.S. sanctions policy.

International perspectives and negotiations also may influence oversight of the more than \$1 billion in U.S. humanitarian assistance dedicated to support Venezuelans in the country and the region. For example, Guaidó reportedly has sought Astra-Zeneca vaccines from the United States for Venezuela, but Maduro has thus far opposed accepting that type of vaccine. Negotiations may inform decisions about the amounts and types of U.S. funds most needed to support entities working in Venezuela. Under certain circumstances, such funds might support international election observers, increased humanitarian assistance, or a potential International Monetary Fund package. See also CRS In Focus IF10230, *Venezuela: Political Crisis and U.S. Policy*; CRS In Focus IF10715, *Venezuela: Overview of U.S. Sanctions*; CRS In Focus IF11029, *The Venezuela Regional Humanitarian Crisis and COVID-19* and CRS Report R44841, *Venezuela: Background and U.S. Relations*.

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