

NATION

U.S. indicts Venezuela's Maduro on narcoterrorism charges

BY JOSHUA GOODMAN and SCOTT SMITH
THE ASSOCIATED PRESS

MIAMI - Nicolás Maduro effectively converted Venezuela into a criminal enterprise at the service of drug traffickers and terrorist groups as he and his allies stole billions from the South American country, the Justice Department charged in several indictments made public Thursday against the embattled socialist leader and his inner circle.

The coordinated unsealing of indictments against 14 officials and government-connected individuals, and rewards of \$55 million for Maduro and four others, attacked all the key planks of what Attorney General William Barr called the "corrupt Venezuelan regime," including the Maduro-dominated judiciary and the powerful armed forces.

One indictment by prosecutors in New York accused Maduro and socialist party boss Diosdado Cabello, head of the rubber-stamping constitutional assembly, of conspiring with Colombian rebels and members of the military "to flood the United States with cocaine" and use the drug trade as a "weapon against America."

Criminal acts to advance a drug and weapons conspiracy that dates back to the start of Hugo Chavez's revolution in 1999 occurred as far afield as Syria, Mexico, Honduras and Iran, the indictment alleged. Barr estimated that the conspiracy helped smuggle as much as 250 metric tons of cocaine a year out of South America.

Maduro blasted back by accusing the U.S. and Colombia of "giving orders to flood Venezuela with violence." He called Donald Trump a "racist cowboy"

and warned that he is ready to fight by whatever means necessary should the U.S. and neighboring Colombia dare to invade.

His chief prosecutor announced an investigation against opposition leader Juan Guaidó after one of the individuals indicted on drug charges, retired army Gen. Cliver Alcalá, said in a radio interview Thursday that he signed a contract with the opposition leader and his American "advisers" to purchase U.S. assault rifles for a planned coup against Maduro. Guaidó's team said he has never met Alcalá, who has been living openly in Colombia since 2018 despite having been previously sanctioned by the U.S. for drug smuggling.

As the U.S. indictments were announced, Secretary of State Mike Pompeo said the State Department would offer cash rewards for information leading to the arrests or convictions of Maduro and his associates, including rewards of up to \$15 million for Maduro and up to \$10 million each for four others.

"The Maduro regime is awash in corruption and criminality," Barr said in an online news conference from Washington. "While the Venezuelan people suffer, this cabal lines their pockets with drug money, and the proceeds of their corruption. And this has to come to an end."

In Miami, prosecutors charged Supreme Court Chief Justice Maikel Moreno with laundering in the U.S. at least \$3 million in illegal proceeds from case fixing in Venezuela, including one involving a General Motors factory. Much of the money he spent on private aircraft, luxury watches and shopping at Prada, prosecutors allege.



Venezuela's President Nicolas Maduro (right) walks with his Defense Minister Vladimir Padrino Lopez as they review the troops during a military parade at Fort Tiuna in Caracas, Venezuela, on May 24, 2018.

Maduro's Defense Minister, Gen. Vladimir Padrino, was charged with conspiracy to smuggle narcotics in a May 2019 indictment unsealed in Washington.

The shock indictment of a functioning head of state is highly unusual and is bound to ratchet up tensions between Washington and Caracas as the spread of the coronavirus threatens to collapse Venezuela's health system and oil-dependent economy driven deep into the ground by years of corruption and U.S. sanctions. Maduro has ordered Venezuelans to stay home to try to stave off the spread of the virus

that officials say has infected 106 people.

Analysts said the indictments could boost U.S. President Donald Trump's re-election chances in the key swing state of Florida, which he won by a narrow margin in 2016 and where Venezuelans, Cubans and Nicaraguans fleeing authoritarian regimes have political muscle.

But its unclear how it brings Venezuela any closer to ending a 15-month standoff between Maduro, who has the support of Russia and China, and the U.S.-backed opposition leader Juan Guaidó. It also could fragment

the U.S.-led coalition against Maduro if European and Latin American allies think the Trump administration is overreaching.

"This kind of action does nothing to help a negotiated solution - something that's already really difficult," said Roberta Jacobson, who served as the State Department's top diplomat for Latin America until 2018.

Maduro, a 57-year-old former bus driver, portrays himself as an everyman icon of the Latin American left.

He's long accused the U.S. "empire" of looking for any excuse to take control of the world's largest oil reserves, likening its plotting to the 1989 invasion of Panama and the removal of strongman Gen. Manuel Noriega to face drug trafficking charges in Florida.

Barr and Elliott Abrams, the State Department's special envoy on Venezuela, are driving the hawkish U.S. stance toward Maduro much as they pushed for Noriega's ouster in the late 1980s - Barr as a senior Justice Department official and Abrams as assistant secretary of state for Latin America.

U.S. officials see other parallels as well. Noriega transformed Panama into a playground for violent, international drug cartels while the Trump administration has accused Maduro and his military henchmen of harboring drug traffickers, guerrillas from Colombia and even Hezbollah, a designated terrorist group.

They also have accused government officials together with well-connected businessmen of stealing hundreds of billions of dollars from the state coffers, much of it from state oil giant PDVSA, which has seen its production plunge to a seven-decade low.



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