

Venezuela Talking Points for Local Leaders

January 4, 2026

I. EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Early in the morning of January 3, 2026, U.S. forces executed “Operation Absolute Resolve,” a series of air strikes in Venezuela that resulted in the capture and extraction of Nicolás Maduro and his wife, Cilia Flores. While the dictator has been removed, the regime remains. We are entering a period of significant volatility that will impact energy markets, migration flows, and perhaps your local constituencies.

Bottom Line for Local Leaders: Maduro was an oppressive dictator and many Venezuelans feel a warranted huge sense of relief from him being gone. However, this unauthorized act of war sets a dangerous precedent. The administration’s strategy raises more questions than it answers, including uncertainty over the timing of and intent for a democratic transition. The U.S. must now help immediate restoration of democracy and put leadership in the hands of Venezuelan people—not focus on the profits of oil and gas interests.

II. BACKGROUND AND SITUATION REPORT

1. How We Got Here

Venezuela was once Latin America's wealthiest democracy, but under the 25+ year rule of presidents Hugo Chávez and Nicolás Maduro, it collapsed into an authoritarian state, driving nearly 8 million refugees (25% of the population) out of the country.

- **The Breaking Point:** In July 2024, opposition candidate Edmundo González won the presidential election by a landslide. The regime refused to concede, launching "Operation Tun Tun" (Knock-Knock) to arrest dissenters, forcing González into exile in Spain.
- **The Stalemate:** Until the morning of January 3, 2026, the country was in a volatile deadlock, with the U.S. indicting Maduro for narco-terrorism and blowing up alleged drug smuggling boats of the coast to exert pressure.

2. Operation Absolute Resolve

- **The Strike:** In the early hours of January 3, 2026, U.S. forces utilized heavy bombers and special operations teams to target regime command nodes in Caracas.
- **The Capture:** Special forces successfully extracted Nicolás Maduro and First Lady Cilia Flores. They are currently in U.S. custody. **The Intent:** In a press conference on Jan 3, President Trump explicitly stated the U.S. intends to "run the country" during the transition and noted that U.S. oil companies will "tap into" Venezuelan reserves. Marco Rubio later said the plan was to exert diplomatic and financial pressure against the Maduro-aligned government that remains in place.

3. Current Status on the Ground: Power Vacuums and Uncertainty

- **The Regime Has Not Fallen:** While Maduro is gone, the military chain of command remains intact in Caracas. Vice President Delcy Rodríguez is reportedly in communication with the U.S. and taken up leadership, although publicly her tone has been defiant. Hardliners like Interior Minister Diosdado Cabello and Defense Minister Vladimir Padrino López have not surrendered and still command the armed forces.
- **Armed Groups:** The country remains awash with non-state actors—including ELN guerrillas and *colectivos* (armed gangs)—who may now fight for territory, echoing the potential for chaos following the fall of Saddam Hussein in Iraq.
- **Power Transfer and U.S. Role:** María Corina Machado (MCM), leader of the opposition who recently won the Nobel Peace Prize, has called for Edmundo González, to be recognized as the rightful leader of the nation. Others have discussed the possibility of MCM herself being the new leader. President Trump expressed skepticism regarding MCM's viability, citing her lack of domestic support. Consequently, he announced that the U.S. will 'run the country' indefinitely with the help of an unspecified advisory group. The full scope and participants of this power transfer remain unclear.

4. Legal and Constitutional Reality

Domestically (Illegal):

- **No Authorization:** Congress has not declared war or passed an Authorization for Use of Military Force (AUMF) for Venezuela.

- **War Powers Violation:** Deploying bombers to seize a head of state is an Act of War, not a police action. Framing this as a "law enforcement arrest" based on a 2020 indictment is a legal fiction that bypasses Congressional oversight.

Internationally (Illegal):

- **UN Charter Violation:** The operation violates Article 2(4) of the UN Charter, which prohibits the use of force against the political independence of a state.
- **Sovereignty Precedent:** Kidnapping a sitting head of state without a UN Security Council mandate sets a standard that adversaries like Russia and China may use to justify their own aggressions against sovereign leaders (e.g., Zelenskyy in Ukraine, Lai in Taiwan).

III. MESSAGING AND TONE GUIDANCE

As a local leader, here are some ways to think and communicate about the complex issues as the situation in Venezuela develops.

DO:

- **Validate the Relief:** Acknowledge that Maduro was a tyrant. For many Venezuelan and Venezuelan-American constituents, today feels like a liberation. "Venezuelans deserve a future free from repression."
- **Focus on Democracy, Not Oil:** Pivot immediately to the democratic solution. "The U.S. should not 'run' Venezuela; the Venezuelan people should. They elected Edmundo González in 2024 to be their President."
- **Highlight the Cost to Taxpayers:** Connect foreign adventurism to local needs. "We cannot afford to spend billions in a military operation against a country twice the size of Iraq when our own bridges, schools, and housing and medical care are underfunded."

DON'T:

- **... Celebrate "Victory":** It is too early. If the country devolves into civil war, a celebratory statement today will age poorly.

- ... **Predict Outright Disaster:** Avoid hyperbolic language like "guaranteed failure." Stick to the risks we face.
- ... **Conflate the Regime with the People:** Be careful to not demonize Venezuela itself; focus your critique on the unauthorized military process and the unclear and potentially dangerous logistics of the U.S. military operation

IV. CRITICAL UNKNOWNs: QUESTIONS WE MUST ASK

1. Will this Action Mark a Transition to Democracy?

Background:

The Administration claims the goal is a "judicious transition," but President Trump's declaration that the U.S. will "run" Venezuela does not instill confidence. The central question is whether the goal is to:

- Hold elections in the near future (within 30 days according to the Venezuelan constitution) to elect a new legitimate leader
- Install the democratically elected winner from 2024, Edmundo González (currently in exile) or the leader of the opposition, María Corina Machado
- Leave the remnants of the Maduro government in place
- Create a group running the country similar to the Coalition Provisional Authority and the Iraqi Governing Council following the 2003 invasion of Iraq, (and if so, who would be part of this group would be unclear)
- Have U.S. forces directly run the country for an indeterminate amount of time
- Some combination of the above

For all scenarios, the details of what has been agreed upon in this strategy and what has been set in motion will matter in determining whether Venezuela will become a functioning democracy again, and if so, how long and what means it will take to get there. In a worst case scenario, if the 2,000+ generals and Cuban intelligence advisors do not surrender, Venezuela risks devolving into a "Somalia-style" failed state where warlords and gangs (like the *Tren de Aragua*) carve up territory, creating a lawless hub for narcotics and terrorism just three hours from Miami.

Talking Points:

- **We broke it, but can we fix it:** We have decapitated the central government but the plans to replace it remain unclear. Without immediate stability, we risk trading a dictator for another, if not possible anarchy.
- **Democracy, not Imperialism:** The U.S. Constitution does not grant the President power to rule foreign nations. The only legitimate path forward is to bring back power to the hands of Venezuelans and support their transition to democracy, not to appoint an American viceroy. This also wastes taxpayer resources for something Americans largely oppose.
- **The Vacuum Threat:** Creating a power vacuum without a solid, detailed plan is a recipe for a failed state. We cannot allow Caracas to become a safe haven for terrorists because we failed to plan effectively for the day after the strike.

2. Is This a Rescue Mission or a Business Trip?

Background:

The Situation: President Trump has stated U.S. companies will "tap" Venezuela's oil reserves (303 billion barrels) and reports indicate a corporate investment delegation is planning a trip in March. This suggests the mission is prioritizing resource extraction over democratic transition.

The Legal Problems:

- **We Are Caretakers, Not Owners (The "Usufruct" Rule):** Under international law, an occupying army is a "usufructuary" (a trustee). We can use public funds to fix *their* roads or feed *their* people, but we cannot drain their assets to pay our own debts.
 - Source: [Hague Regulations, Article 55](#) (Occupying State shall be regarded only as administrator).
- **Taking Oil for Profit is Pillage:** Seizing resources for private gain or to reimburse the U.S. treasury is defined as pillage. It is not "spoils of war"—it is a war crime.

Talking Points:

- **We Don't Steal.** If you watch your neighbor's house while they're in the hospital, you don't get to sell their furniture to pay your own bills. We went there to help Venezuela get back on its feet, not to empty its pockets.
- **Taxpayers Shouldn't Guard Corporate Profits.** President Trump has [expressed openness to deploying troops](#). If so, we would be sending American troops to guard oil fields so private companies can make a profit, while you foot the bill. We cannot let our military become a private security force for big oil.
- **You Can't Build Democracy on a Crime Scene.** We can't walk into a country, break the law by taking their resources, and then try to teach them about democracy. If we do this, we aren't liberators—we're just looters.
- **The Golden Rule.** If a foreign country came here during a crisis, we wouldn't accept them taking our resources to pay themselves back. Doing this to Venezuela guarantees we turn the local people into enemies rather than allies.

3. How Does This Impact Our Communities (and Budgets)?

Background:

This military and intelligence operation, if it drags on and/or is poorly planned, will cost in the billions of dollars. Mayors are already seeing cuts to federal grants for housing, infrastructure, and health; there is a tangible risk that federal dollars will be further diverted to rebuild Caracas. Furthermore, while the Administration claims this strikes a blow against "narco-terrorism," history shows that decapitating cartels often leads to more violence as splinter groups fight for dominance, potentially increasing the flow of drugs and refugees to U.S. cities.

Talking Points:

- **Main Street, not Caracas:** As a Mayor, I struggle to find funding for our own bridges and schools. I cannot support a military adventure in Venezuela while my city needs resources.
- **The Refugee Reality:** If this transition is not handled perfectly, we will see a massive new wave of refugees that will destabilize the region and send more people to our border. We need a stability plan, not just airstrikes.

- **False Security:** Bombing a drug lord does not end the drug trade. We need to be honest with our constituents: this operation might destabilize the region further before it gets better.

4. Global Fallout: What Signal Are We Sending?

Background:

By normalizing the military abduction of a foreign head of state, the U.S. may have handed a "blank check" to our adversaries. This provides political topcover for Russia to attempt similar actions against President Zelenskyy in Ukraine again, or for China to move against Taiwan's leadership under the guise of "police actions." Additionally, if an occupation is what comes next, it would require an estimated 500,000 troops—a number we simply do not have without drawing down forces from Europe or the Pacific, effectively abandoning our allies to focus on a war of choice in South America.

Talking Points:

- **The Dictator's Playbook:** If we claim the right to kidnap foreign leaders we don't like, what stops Putin or Xi Jinping from doing the same to our allies? We are tearing down the international laws that protect us.
- **Overextended and Exposed:** This operation, which is diverting resources away from the rest of the world spreads our military dangerously thin.
- **Going at it Alone:** Our allies in NATO and the UN have not supported this. When the U.S. acts alone, the U.S. taxpayer pays alone. We are isolating ourselves on the world stage.

ALLIES will be updating this document as the situation progresses. If you have any additional questions or require specific guidance, please contact us at info@allies.net