

Congress of the United States
Washington, DC 20515

July 28, 2017

The Honorable Rex Tillerson
Secretary of State
United States Department of State
2201 C Street, NW
Washington, DC 20520

Dear Secretary Tillerson:

We write to express our deep alarm regarding the escalating political, economic and social crisis in Venezuela and urge you to work with our regional partners to help prevent a civil war. We strongly recommend that you support negotiations mediated by respected external actors such as Pope Francis, who enjoys credibility with broad segments of Venezuela's government, opposition, and civil society. We further encourage you to abstain from implementing unilateral economic sanctions, which could deepen the country's economic and political crisis and undermine any movements toward dialogue and negotiations.

As you are well aware, Venezuela faces a dual economic and political crisis. Due to falling oil prices, corruption, and some of the worst economic mismanagement in the world, Venezuela is afflicted by widespread shortages of food, medicine and other basic goods, subjecting the population to avoidable hardships such as pervasive malnutrition and extremely high inflation.

This catastrophic economic situation has fed into an escalating political crisis. In early 2014, some opposition leaders called on Venezuelans to take to the streets in order to force an "exit" of President Maduro from office despite his six-year term, which began in 2013. These protests lasted for months, resulting in over 40 deaths of protesters, government supporters, state security agents and bystanders.

The Maduro government deepened tensions by jailing opposition leaders involved in the 2014 protests on dubious charges. Further, following the opposition's landslide victory in the country's 2015 legislative elections, the government and Supreme Court rejected the authority of the country's opposition-controlled National Assembly, claiming that three legislators had been illegally seated in defiance of a court ruling. In addition, Maduro announced on May 1 that he would convene a constituent assembly to reform the constitution, a highly unpopular move seen by many as a tactic to consolidate power.

The worsening institutional crisis has led to a fresh round of anti-government protests that have frequently been met with fierce repression by state security forces. In addition, small groups of demonstrators have engaged in violent actions targeting security agents while armed pro-government groups have reportedly killed and assaulted demonstrators. Nearly 100 people have been killed so far, and, in an additional blow to the rule of law, the government has been increasingly resorting to military courts to try detained protesters.

This cycle of escalation, retaliation and mob violence is raising the specter of a civil war. Such an outcome would be disastrous for Venezuela, for Latin America, and for U.S. interests in the region. The civil war in neighboring Colombia lasted over 50 years, led to hundreds of thousands of deaths, millions of displaced individuals, and contributed to political instability in much of the Andean region. In the case of Venezuela, an armed internal conflict would undoubtedly provoke an unprecedented humanitarian crisis and would also likely lead to major disruptions in oil production. For these and other reasons, the U.S. has a clear interest in supporting efforts to deescalate Venezuela's crisis and help the government and opposition reach a political compromise that allows for elections and a restoration of the stability and the rule of law.

We note with concern that on July 26, the Treasury Department announced new sanctions against 13 current and former Venezuelan government officials. President Trump and the State Department have threatened to take "strong and swift economic actions" in the event that the Venezuelan government follows through with its plan for a Constituent Assembly. We would point out that U.S. unilateral sanctions in effect since 2015 and have done nothing to improve the political situation in the country. Instead, they were successfully exploited by the government to stoke nationalist resentment against U.S. "imperialism," undermining U.S. credibility as an impartial arbiter among Venezuelans.

Prominent voices within the Venezuelan opposition warn that further U.S. punitive measures would backfire to an even greater degree. Moisés Naím—former Venezuelan Minister of Trade and Industry and a Distinguished Fellow at the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace—remarked that a U.S. oil embargo would be like "political manna from heaven for Caracas." Respected Venezuelan polling agency Datanalisis found that by a 63-to-26-percent margin, Venezuelans oppose U.S. economic sanctions on oil exports and would reject any effort on the part of Venezuela's opposition to promote such sanctions.

We believe that U.S. support for negotiations facilitated by respected external actors is the most viable path toward a peaceful solution to Venezuela's crisis. We note that the wife of opposition leader Leopoldo López, Lilian Tintori, met with President Trump at the White House to discuss López's imprisonment in Venezuela's notorious military prison. López's subsequent release to house arrest, authorized by the Maduro government, was facilitated through a discreet, months-long process of mediation involving the former prime minister of Spain, José Luis Rodríguez Zapatero, and the former presidents of the Dominican Republic and Panama, Leonel Fernández and Martín Torrijos, respectively. Nobel Peace Prize Laureate President Juan Manuel Santos of Colombia, who negotiated his own country's historic peace accord, is also actively pursuing efforts to resolve Venezuela's crisis.

It is critical that the United States build on this positive development and intensify diplomatic efforts to establish a formal negotiation process in which both sides are prepared to make important concessions. These negotiations should seek to address both the political crisis, with the objective of achieving a democratic, electoral solution within Venezuela's constitutional framework, as well as the country's economic crisis, for which foreign governments and multilateral institutions can be invited to contribute expertise and resources. Talks must take into account legitimate concerns of retribution against both supporters and opponents of the

government, and guarantee fundamental legal protections of both sides in the event of any political transition.

Finally, the United States should support the involvement of credible external actors that are respected across Venezuela's political spectrum. In addition to the former and current heads of state engaged on this issue, Pope Francis has made strong appeals for peace and reconciliation, as have the governments of Uruguay and the Caribbean Community, which also offered to participate in a mediated negotiation. These actors have all maintained constructive relations in recent years with both Venezuela's government and opposition. Their offers to serve as mediators deserve the full support and encouragement of the United States.

Sincerely,



John Conyers, Jr.

Member of Congress



Ro Khanna

Member of Congress



Mark Pocan

Member of Congress



Rosa L. DeLauro

Member of Congress



Ruben Gallego

Member of Congress



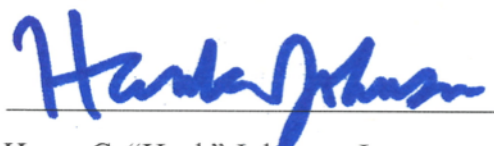
James P. McGovern

Member of Congress



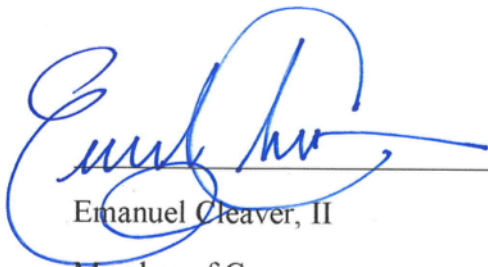
Barbara Lee

Member of Congress



Henry C. "Hank" Johnson, Jr.

Member of Congress

A handwritten signature in blue ink, appearing to read "Emanuel Cleaver, II", is written over a horizontal line. The signature is stylized with large, flowing loops.

Emanuel Cleaver, II

Member of Congress