

AN OPERATION OF CONCERTED FORCES IS URGENTLY NEEDED TO STOP THE TRAGEDY IN VENEZUELA

To the Western democratic governments and citizens;

The accelerated deterioration of the situation in Venezuela impels us to raise an urgent alert. While the world is dealing with the crisis caused by the COVID-19 pandemic, the Nicolás Maduro regime takes advantage of this delicate situation to increase social control over the population, despite simultaneously losing control over the criminal gangs that the regime itself created, financed, and armed.

To postpone the resolution to the Venezuelan crisis would be a huge mistake which will lead to a very high cost in Venezuelan lives and in destabilization for other countries of the hemisphere. It has been proven time and again that the human tragedy that we endure, as well as the criminal dynamics that have caused it, cannot be contained within our borders. And its perpetrators will not rest until they destabilize all democracies in the region.

For every minute that passes, Venezuela dramatically deepens its already overwhelming status as a failed state: total absence of the rule of law, incremental loss of control over the territory and the absolute impossibility of guaranteeing a minimum of human security in any of its dimensions.

Our nation traverses hours that are as dark as they are dangerous. The successful effect of international sanctions has closed off the sources of financing for drug trafficking operations and the smuggling of fuel and gold. This, in turn, has exacerbated the fight for territorial control over the areas where these activities take place. In different areas of the country, criminal gangs use these moments of uncertainty and shock to consolidate their power.

These groups take full advantage of the difficulties that the regime which once championed and protected them is currently going through. The deep deficiencies that Venezuelans suffer from in general, the vicissitudes heightened by pandemic-related confinement, and the regime's decomposition, are taken advantage of by these paramilitary groups to subdue the civilian population, to challenge all other authority and to establish themselves as de facto governments in their respective areas. In the midst of an arms race between gangs, a deadly turf war is taking place, with the consequent risk to the lives of thousands of innocent bystanders.

In the case of urban areas, such as Caracas, we are seeing an all out battle in various poor neighborhoods. Since the end of April in Petare -one of the largest slums in Latin America with a population of half a million, and hundreds of neighborhoods- citizens have been living in utter anguish due to the confrontation between criminal gangs that have taken control of the area. The government and its repressive forces have been completely overwhelmed in their attempt to stop these groups, causing the deepening and proliferation of Human Rights violations in these operations. This dynamic is repeated in other cities in Venezuela where these groups operate with impunity.

While the regime claims to have the capacity to contain these gangs, the gangs know full well that the regime lacks the means to stop them. For years, these groups were allowed to act with impunity, and the regime's forces no longer represent a threat that can hold them in check. Even more seriously, the armed paramilitary groups created by the regime for the purpose of political repression have begun to associate with military sectors to smuggle fuel, expand their areas of control and, along the way, terrorize and kill innocent citizens who today protest on the streets because of hunger and lack of services-even at the risk of contracting Covid-19. The average citizen then has to choose between protecting their health and wellbeing by staying at home or going out to protest for the most basic of rights: safety food, shelter, electricity, gas, running water.

For years, the regime has allowed our territory to become progressively fragmented into smaller areas that are under the control of different local criminal groups, including foreign paramilitaries and terrorists dedicated to illegal activities. Now this regime is experiencing the loss of the monopoly on terror that for years it set out to establish.

Simultaneously, the Armed Forces are being dismembered and we run the risk of finally losing the main institution needed to reestablish national sovereignty. Lured by the incentives of better benefits and greater operational capacity, our military personnel is migrating to disruptive groups that end up forming a criminal network of armies without a centralized command, bringing together guerrilla elements, narco bosses, paramilitaries, foreign terrorists and traffickers.

Today we call for urgent action from the international community. The attention of the pandemic cannot hide the reality that Venezuelan lives are caught in the crossfire. What we see in Petare today could be extended to the entire country, and the entire region.. The democratic governments of the Americas must finally internalize what it means to have a failed and criminal state of the proportions of Venezuela in the heart of our continent.

We once again invoke the Inter-American Treaty of Reciprocal Assistance (TIAR in Spanish) -Treaty of Rio-, and the principle of Responsibility to Protect (R2P), originally approved by the United Nations. To the Venezuelan National Assembly, we reiterate the urgency of the approval of article 187, numeral 11 of the Constitution, as an unequivocal sign that we Venezuelans are ready to do our part too. In this context, a multifaceted peace operation is indispensable, which should not necessarily be under the aegis of a single organization.

There are many successful experiences in which coalitions of allied organizations and countries have been formed, and prevailed in achieving results.

The member states of the Treaty of Rio have the legitimacy to act with the urgency that this case merits and to integrate the aspects of security, control over the territory, and disarmament in a peace operation, which could join forces with the OAS, the UN and the rest of the Inter-American System for health, food, infrastructure reconstruction, Human Rights monitoring, general advice and electoral observation. Venezuelans have appealed and will continue to appeal to all means of struggle to rescue our sovereignty, our freedom and the rule of law.

Many times in history, the international community has acted too late in these scenarios of massive terror. Venezuela is rapidly approaching a point of no return, a situation of total fragmentation of its territory, its sovereignty and even its cultural identity as a nation.

Let's not let it happen this time.

Caracas, May 11, 2020.



María Corina Machado

National Coordinator of Vente Venezuela