

## **Unilateral U.S. military intervention to remove authoritarian dictator Nicolas Maduro from power violates international law and sets a dangerous precedent for the region**

January 3, 2026

After months of military buildup in the region, on January 3, 2026, the U.S. armed forces conducted strikes on multiple targets in Venezuela, and President Trump announced the capture and extraction of Nicolás Maduro and his wife, Cilia Flores. The number of people injured and killed during this operation is yet unknown. The Trump administration carried out the strike without the authorization of the U.S. Congress and in violation of limits on the president's constitutional war powers. The U.S. actions also violate international law. There appears to be no legitimate claim of self-defense on the part of the U.S.

For years, the Washington Office on Latin America (WOLA) has promoted a U.S. policy towards Venezuela based on human rights principles, while condemning the abuses of Nicolás Maduro's authoritarian government. On July 28, 2024, Venezuelans overwhelmingly voted for a democratic change, but their will was ignored by Nicolás Maduro, who unlawfully remained in power and launched an extensive campaign of repression. Venezuela remains the only country in the Americas with an open investigation before the International Criminal Court for crimes against humanity, and there are dozens of investigations into grand corruption. The country continues to experience a complex humanitarian emergency. Venezuelans deserve a peaceful transition to democracy and respect for their fundamental rights. Nonetheless, unilateral U.S. military action, in violation of standards that have guided the international order for nearly a century, is reckless and dangerous.

Since the September 2, 2025, strike on a boat alleged to be smuggling drugs, WOLA has denounced the 32 U.S. military attacks and at least 115 deaths in the Caribbean and Eastern Pacific, which amount to extrajudicial killings and to unjustified unilateral use of lethal force. We have provided evidence-based information that debunks many of the claims made by the Trump administration to justify these actions as part of a counter-narcotics operation.

The most recent U.S. actions create a worrisome precedent for the region. The UN Secretary-General, the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights, and multiple governments worldwide have raised alarm about the actions of the Trump administration, which could further generate regional polarization and unrest. It is essential that efforts from Venezuelans and the international community now focus on de-escalating tensions, protecting civilians, and producing a peaceful and democratic transition. Venezuelan de facto authorities must respect the lives and integrity of Venezuelan civil society, respect the right to peaceful protest, and respect the physical integrity—and release unconditionally—the hundreds of political prisoners held in government custody.

The Trump administration's return to gunboat diplomacy and disregard for international law damages U.S. standing globally and alienates important allies. WOLA calls on the administration to end these unilateral actions and support a negotiation process centered on the rights of Venezuelans and on democracy. The U.S. Congress should reassert its power to authorize the use of lethal force and demand immediate answers about the implications of the administration's military actions for human rights, democracy, and the future of U.S. foreign policy in the region.