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Security Council Update No. 1: Situation in Venezuela

It has been over a year since civilian protests broke out in the eastern district of Caracas, the Venezuelan capital. As the country struggled with major food shortages, political corruption, and a crippling economy, deadly clashes between police and opposition protestors resulted in widespread looting and rioting, leaving at least 125 dead.¹ “The tipping point came in March when the pro-Nicolas Maduro Supreme Court essentially took over functions of the opposition-led National Assembly...it was a trigger and rallying cry for the opposition, which began a campaign of street protests that ran from April to July”² in 2017. Since the protests, the economic condition of Venezuela continues to worsen. According to a UN report published in September of 2018, “more than 3.7 million Venezuelans, or 12 percent of the population, are undernourished.”³ Further, according to the United Nations Migration Agency (IOM), the mass exodus of Venezuelans into neighboring Member States has become equivalent to that experienced in the Mediterranean and is being deemed as a “crisis moment.”⁴ With a virtually useless currency and massive civic unrest in its wake,⁵ the world has taken notice of the deteriorating conditions in the Latin American Member State, and the international community now looks to strategies for alleviation.

Background on Recent Events

On March 31, 2017 the Venezuelan Supreme Court stripped the National Assembly of all powers, and vested them within itself, effectively gutting Venezuela’s legislative branch of government..⁶ The National Assembly was mostly comprised of opposition leaders, while the Supreme Court contained many Maduro loyalists.⁷ The citizens of Venezuela saw this pro-Maduro move as a cheap attempt at grabbing governmental power and the reaction was largely negative. There was immediate condemnation abroad, especially within the Americas who perceived the move to be an erosion of any remaining democratic principles.⁸ Even the President of the United States, Donald J. Trump, toyed with the idea of a U.S. led intervention in the form of an invasion.⁹ Within the region, various Member States also denounced Maduro’s bold move. Peru, for example, severed all diplomatic ties with Venezuela immediately.¹⁰ Argentina, Brazil, Chile, Colombia, Costa Rica, Guatemala, Mexico, Panama, and Paraguay also

¹ “Deadly election day in Venezuela as Protestors Clash with Troops” CNN,

<https://www.cnn.com/2017/07/30/americas/venezuela-on-edge-vote/index.html> (Accessed September 19, 2018).

² “Years of Protests and Crisis in Volatile Venezuela” Reuters, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-global-pov-venezuela/year-of-protests-and-crisis-in-volatile-venezuela-idUSKBN1DU1KQ> (Accessed September 19, 2018).

³ “Venezuela outrage: Leader Gorges at Top Foreign Restaurant as Citizens Go Hungry” Express, <https://www.express.co.uk/news/world/1019819/venezuela-latest-news-Maduro-Salt-Bae-istanbul> (Accessed September 19, 2018).

⁴ “U.N. Agency sees Venezuelan Exodus Nearing a Crisis Point” Reuters, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-venezuela-migration-un/venezuelan-exodus-approaching-crisis-moment-u-n-agency-idUSKCN1L91E3> (Accessed September 19, 2018).

⁵ “Life in Venezuela, One Year After the Protests,” *Bloomberg*, August 04, 2018, <https://www.bloomberg.com/news/features/2018-08-04/venezuelan-protesters-remake-lives-in-aftermath-of-2017-uprising> (accessed August 8, 2018).

⁶ “Venezuela’s High Court Dissolves National Assembly,” *CNN*, March 30, 2017, <https://edition.cnn.com/2017/03/30/americas/venezuela-dissolves-national-assembly/> (Accessed July 30, 2018).

⁷ “Venezuela’s High Court Dissolves National Assembly,” *CNN*.

⁸ “Deadly Election Day in Venezuela as Protestors Clash with Troops” *CNN*.

⁹ “Trump repeatedly suggested Venezuela invasion, stunning top aides – report,” *The Guardian*, July 5, 2018, <https://www.theguardian.com/us-news/2018/jul/04/trump-suggested-invading-venezuela-report>. (accessed August 2, 2018).

¹⁰ “Venezuela’s High Court Dissolves National Assembly,” *CNN*.

denounced the move by issuing statements that varied in degree of condemnation;¹¹ some going as far as Peru by imposing both diplomatic and economic sanctions in order to persuade Venezuelan officials to reverse their actions.¹²

Within Venezuela, the outrage was channeled into violent street protests for weeks following the decision, leading to an aggressive military response meant to quell the demonstrations. Despite a reversal from the Supreme Court on 1 April 2017, demonstrations continued, with more lives lost in the process.¹³ On July 24th, Maduro celebrated heavily-criticized election results and as a direct outcome, the government formed a new National Assembly, referred to as the constituent assembly.¹⁴ Identical to a controversial move made in 1999 by former President of Venezuela and socialist leader, Hugo Chavez, Maduro knew that replacing the opposition-led National Assembly with the constituent assembly would grant his supporters the authority to discharge current officials and allow them to rewrite the constitution.¹⁵ Since President Maduro convened the constituent assembly, opposition leaders that were once a part of the former National Assembly have been put on trial for treason due to previously favoring U.S. sanctions.¹⁶

Following a very hostile year in 2017, the economic and political position of the Venezuelan people has continued to worsen, with hyperinflation continuing to rise.¹⁷ In June of 2018, the inflation rate hit an unprecedented 24,571 percent, with many blaming the shortcomings of Maduro's Socialist government.¹⁸ This hyperinflation has led to a current state of economic ruin. The population suffers from mass unemployment, 27.1 percent in 2018, with projections to hit over 33 percent by December 2018.¹⁹

"Government critics say nationalizations of businesses and more than a decade of price and currency controls have crippled private enterprise, but President Nicolas Maduro says Venezuela is a victim of an 'economic war' led by business leaders with US help²⁰." 2018 will mark three consecutive years where Venezuela's gross domestic product (GDP) has declined substantially.²¹

The people of Venezuela also suffer from malnutrition due to the inability of citizens to purchase sufficient quantities of food for themselves and their families. According to the United Nations Children's Agency (UNICEF) malnutrition of children is a rapidly growing issue for Venezuela moving through 2018. For instance, a study in 2009 conducted by the Venezuelan government set the malnutrition rate for children at a moderate 3.2 percent. As

¹¹ "Regional Reactions to Venezuela's Constituent Assembly: Liberals, Rouges, and Enablers Redux" Global Americans, <https://theglobalamericans.org/2017/08/regional-reactions-venezuelas-constituent-assembly/> (accessed September 19, 2018).

¹² "Regional Reactions to Venezuela's Constituent Assembly: Liberals, Rouges, and Enablers Redux" Global Americans.

¹³ "Venezuela's Supreme Court Rules against Stripping Congress of Its Powers," *The Independent*, April 01, 2017, Accessed, <https://www.independent.co.uk/news/world/americas/venezuela-supreme-court-crisis-congress-powers-nicolas-maduro-a7661936.html>. (accessed August 2, 2018).

¹⁴ "Venezuela's Maduro Celebrates New Assembly, Mocks U.S. Criticism," *Reuters*, July 31, 2017, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-venezuela-politics/venezuelas-maduro-celebrates-new-assembly-mocks-u-s-criticism-idUSKBN1AE0JO> (accessed August 2, 2018).

¹⁵ "Venezuela's Controversial New Constituent Assembly, Explained" *The Washington Post*, https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/monkey-cage/wp/2017/08/01/venezuelas-dubious-new-constituent-assembly-explained/?noredirect=on&utm_term=.39b22b36fe1a (Accessed September 19, 2018).

¹⁶ "What has Venezuela's Constituent Assembly Achieved" British Broadcasting Corporation, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-latin-america-41094889> (Accessed September 19, 2018).

¹⁷ "Life in Venezuela, One Year After Protests" *Bloomberg*. (accessed August 8, 2018).

¹⁸ Deutsche Welle, "Venezuela's Hyperinflation Soars to 24,571 Percent," *DW*, June 12, 2018, <https://www.dw.com/en/venezuelas-hyperinflation-soars-to-24571-percent/a-44172935> (accessed August 2, 2018).

¹⁹ CIEC Data, *Venezuela Forecast: Unemployment Rate*, 2018.

²⁰ "Job Losses, low wages add to Venezuela Economic Hardship" *Reuters*, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-venezuela-economy/job-losses-low-wages-add-to-venezuela-economic-hardship-idUSKBN16926M> (Accessed September 19, 2018).

²¹ "Half the Venezuelan Economy Has Disappeared" *CNN Money*, <https://money.cnn.com/2018/01/25/news/economy/venezuela-imf/index.html> (Accessed September 19, 2018).

of 2018, UNICEF reports that number has ballooned to a 15.5 percent, and sadly that number is not expected to improve for the foreseeable future.²² With at least 87 percent of Venezuelans living in poverty, many jokingly refer to the food shortages as the “Maduro diet.”²³ As food and medicinal shortages become the new norm, the World Health Organization (WHO) reports that 75 percent of Venezuelans were estimated to have lost ten kilos or 22 pounds in 2016 due to starvation.²⁴

It is apparent the current situation within the Member State is not poised to alter its course without assistance or political change, and these issues are not simply domestic in nature. The conflict extends outside the borders of Venezuela and into the regional community whose economies are also impacted by the nearby unrest. International institutions, such as the South American trade bloc Mercosur, have suspended any business with Venezuela indefinitely for violating the bloc’s democratic principles.²⁵ “Though members of the Mercosur customs union – Argentina, Brazil, Paraguay, and Uruguay – suspended Venezuela two years ago, they pledged to limit the consequences for the Venezuelan people.”²⁶ Despite suspension, due to their promotion of democracy throughout Mercosur Member States, the regional bloc vocally rejected foreign military intervention in Venezuela.²⁷

More recently, The United Nations High Commissioner of Refugees (UNHCR) released a report regarding the large amounts of asylum seekers, refugees, and migrants that have been leaving Venezuela throughout the year of 2017.²⁸ The report suggests numerous Member States, such as Brazil, Mexico, Panama, Costa Rica, and Colombia (which collectively harbors over 500,000 refugees from Venezuela) are suffering the brunt of the crisis.²⁹ Overall, the number of identified refugees by the UNHCR is 1,500,000 people for the year 2017 in total, not taking into consideration others who are not recognized under the “refugee” status.³⁰ “The exodus has placed public services in neighboring countries under strain, with governments in countries as far away as Chile having to adapt immigration regulations accordingly.”³¹ Nonetheless, recent developments throughout the region have reflected signs of progress; more than 440,000 migrant and refugee populations were granted residency and work permits as an act of good faith.³²

Apart from the Member State’s economic condition, and large immigration crisis, Venezuela continues to suffer social unrest. Most recently, on 5 August 2018 an alleged assassination attempt was made on President Maduro

²² “A Malnutrition Crisis is Growing in Venezuela, UNICEF officials say,” *NBC News*, January 26, 2018, <https://www.nbcnews.com/news/latino/malnutrition-crisis-venezuela-rises-unicef-officials-say-n841301> (accessed August 8, 2018).

²³ “Maduro Slammed for Dining on Pricey ‘Salt Bae’ Steaks as Venezuelans Starve” CNN, <https://www.cnn.com/2018/09/18/world/venezuela-maduro-salt-bae-steak-intl/index.html> (Accessed September 19, 2018).

²⁴ “Children Face Hunger Crisis in Venezuela As Malnutrition Soars” Caritas, <https://www.caritas.org/2017/05/children-face-hunger-crisis-in-venezuela-as-malnutrition-soars/> (Accessed September 19, 2018).

²⁵ “Mercosur Suspende a Venezuela Por Tiempo Indefinido Y Exige a Maduro Que Desmantele La Asamblea Constituyente,” *BBC News*, August 05, 2017, <https://www.bbc.com/mundo/noticias-america-latina-40839629> (accessed August 9, 2018).

²⁶ “Latin America Has an Open-Door Policy for Venezuelan Refugees” Foreign Policy, <https://foreignpolicy.com/2018/08/23/latin-america-has-an-open-door-policy-for-venezuelan-refugees/> (Accessed September 19, 2018).

²⁷ “Mercosur Bloc Rejects Use of Force in Venezuela” Reuters <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-venezuela-politics-mercocur/mercocur-bloc-rejects-use-of-force-in-venezuela-idUSKBN1AS0PM> (Accessed September 19, 2018).

²⁸ “Supplementary Appeal: Venezuela Situation.” United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees. <http://www.unhcr.org/en-us/partners/donors/5ab8e1a17>, (accessed August 4, 2018).

²⁹ “Supplementary Appeal: Situation in Venezuela,” United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees.

³⁰ “Supplementary Appeal: Situation in Venezuela,” United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees.

³¹ “Venezuela: the Region Feels the Impact” International Crisis Group, <https://www.crisisgroup.org/latin-america-caribbean/andes/venezuela/venezuela-region-feels-impact> (Accessed September 19, 2018).

³² “An Escalating Crisis in Venezuela: What Does a Regional Response Look Like and How Can We Best Support It?” Center for Global Development, <https://www.cgdev.org/blog/escalating-crisis-venezuela-what-does-regional-response-look-like-how-can-we-best-support-it> (Accessed September 19, 2018).

while at a rally in which he was speaking.³³ That same day, six people were arrested and ultimately charged with flying two drones armed with explosives, which detonated near Maduro's vehicle outside the event.³⁴ Some international sources have went as far as claiming it was an act of terror, instead, while the government of Venezuela has remained adamant on the opposite.³⁵ Theories as to who was responsible for the drone attacks vary in culprits, from Venezuelan opposition groups³⁶ to government allegations that blame Maduro critics in Miami, Florida and Bogota, Colombia.³⁷

In January and February 2018, respectively, Maduro banned "dissident parties" from participating in the 2018 presidential elections and announced he would be running in the race. Simultaneously, a poll revealed that 60 percent of Venezuelans sampled believed all candidates running, including Maduro, were not viable candidates for President.³⁸ Unsurprisingly, Maduro won the election by a landslide. However, independent sources (such as the European Council) decry massive electoral fraud and poor conditions surrounding the election, thus delegitimizing the election results for many.³⁹

Without an international response, the situation in Venezuela will likely not improve, leaving millions of Venezuelans at risk and the state of the region uncertain. Due to the delicate nature of the situation, the Security Council must be ready to intervene and ensure the safety of the Venezuelan people and security in the region.

³³ "Venezuela 'drone Attack': Six Arrests Made," *BBC*, August 05, 2018, <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-latin-america-45077057>. (accessed August 1, 2018).

³⁴ *BBC News, Venezuela Drone Attack*.

³⁵ "The Latest: 6 Arrests in Venezuela Drone Plot; More Likely," *The Washington Post*, August 05, 2018, https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/the_americas/the-latest-venezuelan-firefighters-dispute-official-version/2018/08/04/cb4f060e-9844-11e8-818b-e9b7348cd87d_story.html?utm_term=.b9c05ec33587.

³⁶ "Venezuela's Maduro Survives Assassination Attempt, Officials Say" National Public Radio, <https://www.npr.org/2018/08/06/635907935/venezuelas-maduro-survives-assassination-attempt-officials-say> (Accessed September 19, 2018).

³⁷ "Venezuela Drone Attack: Here's What Happened With Nicolas Maduro" USA Today, <https://www.usatoday.com/story/news/politics/2018/08/06/venezuela-drone-attack-nicolas-maduro-assassination-attempt-what-happened/913096002/> (Accessed September 19, 2018).

³⁸ "Venezuela in Crisis," Council on Foreign Relations, <https://www.cfr.org/backgrounder/venezuela-crisis>, (accessed August 1, 2018).

³⁹ Council of the European Union, *Venezuela: Council adopts conclusions*, May 28, 2018.