

US Sanctions Venezuelan State Airline, Threatens Russian Oil Giant

Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov rejected the sanctions regime as “outrageous.”

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The US government has sanctioned Venezuela’s state-owned airline CONVIASA, claiming it is being used to “shuttle corrupt officials.”

While already subject to previous US unilateral coercive measures, the latest sanctions add the airline and 40 of its planes to the US Treasury’s Office of Foreign Assets Control’s Specially Designated Nationals List so as “to ensure strengthened compliance.”

The [move](#) incorporates the airline into Washington’s executive order 13884, which applied a [wide-reaching embargo](#) on the country in August last year.

It paves the way for punitive measures to be taken against any US or non-US citizen or firm dealing with the airline, possibly affecting plane maintenance, refuelling, insurance, and a host of other operations. Passengers may also be sanctioned under the measure. Passengers may also be sanctioned under the measure.

Unveiling the measure Friday, US Treasury Secretary Steven Mnuchin told reporters that

“The illegitimate Maduro regime relies on CONVIASA to shuttle corrupt regime officials around the world to fuel support for its anti-democratic efforts.”

The sanctions were met with a defiant response from Caracas, with a range of government officials joining CONVIASA workers in rejecting the sanctions.

Foreign Minister Jorge Arreaza described the sanctions regime as “the diplomacy of the absurd” and promised to “raise our protest to international organisms.”

Likewise, Venezuelan Economy Vice President Tareck El Aissami assured the firm’s 2000 workers that their jobs were safe on Saturday.

“Nothing will stop us, nothing will demoralise us, to the contrary, we will continue to grow in the spirit of struggle, and now CONVIASA will become an ambassador for Bolivarian peace in the skies of the world,” he told reporters.

El Aissami stressed that apart from affecting passengers, the measure will also hurt a range of social programs, including the Return to the Homeland program which has provided free

flights for a reported 20,000 Venezuelan immigrants to return to the country, and the [Miracle Mission](#) which brings patients from across the region to Venezuela for free ophthalmological surgery.

Venezuelan social movements and progressive parties organised a march on Monday to reject the latest sanctions and support the nationalised company.

The Venezuelan Consortium of Aeronautical Industries and Air Services ([CONVIASA](#)) was created in 2004 to replace the national airline VIASA which was liquidated in 1997. It currently offers a multitude of domestic routes, as well as international destinations including Cuba, Mexico, Panama, Dominican Republic, Ecuador, Nicaragua and Bolivia, with plans to open routes to the Middle East and Europe in 2020. With several foreign airlines ceasing to fly to Venezuela in recent years, CONVIASA has become the only one serving a number of Latin America destinations.

The airline had already felt the bite of US sanctions, denouncing last September that the threat of secondary sanctions caused Peruvian authorities [to block](#) the refuelling of one of its planes used in the Return to the Homeland program.

US unilateral coercive measures against Venezuela targeted a number of specific industries in 2019, including [oil](#), [gold](#), and the [banking sector](#). They were expanded to a wide-reaching [embargo](#) in August.

The August embargo also authorised secondary sanctions to be applied against third parties dealing with the Caracas government. Despite Washington refraining from applying this measure so far, US Special Envoy for Venezuela Elliott Abrams raised the threat once again of action last week.



Vice President Tareck El Aissami addresses a press conference alongside the president of the state-run CONVIASA airline and representatives of the workforce. (MINCI)

Speaking in a press conference on Thursday, Abrams specifically highlighted Russia's involvement in Venezuela, warning that

“The Russians may soon find that their continued support of Maduro will no longer be cost-free,” while pledging to “demonstrate the seriousness of our intentions in Venezuela.”

Likewise, an anonymous senior White House official was [quoted](#) by Reuters warning Russian, Spanish, Indian and US oil giants Rosneft, Repsol, Reliance and Chevron to “tread cautiously.”

The companies continue to play significant roles in Venezuela’s oil industry, with Rosneft reported to currently be purchasing around 60 percent of the output, much of which is rerouted to other markets, including the US. Repsol and Reliance have also increased their dealings with state oil company PDVSA in recent months, reportedly exchanging crude for fuel and diluents so as to avoid sanctions. For its part, Chevron is involved in a joint oil venture and has been granted successive sanctions waivers by the US Treasury Department.

The threat of secondary sanctions coincided with a visit to Venezuela by Russia’s Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov, who described Washington’s sanctions regime as “illegitimate” and “outrageous.”

“We have agreed to deepen our economic, commercial and investment cooperation [with Venezuela] in several areas despite the illegitimate sanctions,” he told reporters Friday, adding that “It is outrageous that unilateral actions by the United States affect social and humanitarian projects.”

Caracas and Moscow have strengthened [ties](#) in recent months, with bilateral agreements signed on a host of areas, including agriculture, industry, mining and defense.

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