

Washington Plans Further Actions Against Venezuela

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The US government has been increasing aggressive actions against the Chavez administration in an attempt to isolate the major petroleum producing nation and aid in ousting the Venezuelan President

During a hearing last Friday, June 24, in the Foreign Relations Committee of the House of Representatives regarding "Sanctionable Activities in Venezuela", democrats and republicans requested the Obama administration take more aggressive actions against the government of Hugo Chavez. The head of the Sub-Committee on Foreign Affairs for the Western Hemisphere, Connie Mack, a Florida Republican, branded the Venezuelan government "terrorist", saying "it's time to act to contain the dangerous influence of Hugo Chavez and his relations with Iran".

Mack is known for his rabid anti-Chavez stance. But however "obsessed" he may seem with the Venezuelan President, the republican congressman does have influence in the legislature due to his high ranking in the Foreign Relations Committee. His efforts, along with those of the head of the Foreign Relations Committee, Florida republican Ileana Ros-Lehtinen, convinced the White House to impose sanctions against Venezuela's state oil company, Petroleos de Venezuela SA (PDVSA) last May 24. Mack has said that his only objective this year is "get Hugo Chavez".

Last Friday's hearing, devoted entirely to Venezuela, was attended by senior officials of the State Department, the Treasury Department and the Office of Foreign Assets Control. In testimony before the Committee, the Assistant Under-Secretary of State for Latin America, Kevin Whitaker, revealed the Obama administration is "seriously considering" labeling Venezuela a "terrorist state". "No option is off the table and the Department will continue to study any further action as may be necessary in the future", said Whitaker.

The unilateral sanctions imposed on PDVSA came under the US Iran Sanctions Act, and include the prohibition of entering into contracts with the US government, loans from the US Import-Export Bank and certain technological licenses and patents. Nonetheless, this hostile action towards Venezuela did not have any real economic impact against the South American country because it no longer has agreements with the US government or loans from US banks. Furthermore, the sanctions did not affect the important oil supply from Venezuela to the US or the operations of PDVSA's subsidiary in US territory, CITGO.

However, the sanctions had an impact on diplomatic relations between Caracas and Washington, which were already in a period of deterioration. After the latter's aggressive actions, the Venezuelan government declared relations with the United States "frozen".

DANGEROUS TO DO BUSINESS WITH PDVSA

According to the State Department, sanctions against PDVSA, while not impacting the country economically, “give a message to the world that it is dangerous to do business with Venezuela and PDVSA”, indicating that in the near future, Washington could act against those who enter into contracts or agreements with Venezuelan companies.

SANCTIONS AGAINST CONVIASA

The lawmakers also demanded the State Department impose sanctions against the Venezuelan airline CONVIASA because of what they consider “support for terrorism”, based on flights between Caracas, Syria and Iran. Without a shred of evidence, the congressmembers claimed the flight, which is no longer operating, was “carrying radioactive material, weapons, drugs and known terrorists of Hezbollah and Iran”.

To support this dangerous “accusation”, they cited a German newspaper, *Die Welt*, which had falsely published days before that Venezuela and Iran were building a missile base in western Venezuelan to “attack the United States”. In response to this misinformation, President Hugo Chavez showed footage of a windmill farm in same the location where “sources” had indicated the fictional Iranian military base was located.

MORE SANCTIONS

Congress also implored the State Department to consider applying more sanctions against Venezuela, including “a ban on US imports” and “transactions in dollars”. Representatives of the White House said that although they are considering further action against the government of Hugo Chavez, which they consider to be “an adversarial government”, they must take into account the significant supply of Venezuelan oil, which comprises 15% of US imports. Just days ago, President Barack Obama authorized oil exploitation in an environmentally protected area in Alaska, indicating that Washington is seeking to secure its energy needs before breaking the relationship with Venezuela.

SANCTIONS TO DATE

In addition to the sanctions imposed against PDVSA in May, Washington already has taken aggressive actions against the Venezuelan government. In June 2006, the US classified Venezuela as a country that “does not cooperate sufficiently with the fight against terrorism” and imposed sanctions prohibiting US arms sales to Venezuela or those from any company in the world using US technology.

Since 2005, Washington also has classified Venezuela as a country that does not “cooperate in the fight against drug trafficking,” which should carry a financial penalty against the South American country. Yet, Washington clarified that since Venezuela has no loans in the US, the only support that could be cut would be those millions of dollars given annually to opposition groups who work to undermine the Chavez government. In order to avoid reducing those funds, the US included an exception to this penalty, stating it “would not affect US economic support to “pro-democracy civil society organizations”, thus ensuring continued support for the destabilization of Venezuela.

In 2007, the US Treasury Department sanctioned three senior Venezuelan officials, accusing them of ties to terrorism and drug trafficking, though the allegations were unsubstantiated. The officials included the Director of Military Intelligence, General Hugo Carvajal, ex Director

of Bolivarian Intelligence (SEBIN), General Henry Rangel and ex Minister of Interior and Justice, Ramon Rodriguez Chacin.

The following year, the Treasury Department designated two Venezuelans of Syrian origin, Fawzi Kan'an and Ghazi Nasr al Din, as providing material support for terrorism based on alleged links to Hezbollah, considered a terrorist group by the United States.

All indications are that Washington will continue to increase aggression against Venezuela with future sanctions and attempts to demonize, isolate and discredit the Chavez administration.

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