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The U.N. Can Save Venezuela - Really.

Officially recognizing Guaidó would weaken Maduro's finances and grip on the military.

By Jared Genser

It's extraordinary how quickly the fortunes have turned against Venezuelan strongman Nicolás Maduro. His dream of a second presidential term was interrupted last week when the National Assembly declared his re-election invalid and legally removed him from office. Since Jan. 23, the U.S. and 20 other countries have recognized National Assembly leader Juan Guaidó as Venezuela's interim president, and the Trump administration has attempted to drain the Maduro regime's lifeblood by imposing sanctions on the state-run oil company. Yet Mr. Maduro is clinging to power, calling the military to his aid rather than going gently.

What can compel Mr. Maduro to step down? A crucial first step for countries aligned against his regime is to kick his diplomats out of the United Nations and replace them with Mr. Guaidó's. Known as a "credentials challenge," the move would require a majority vote in the U.N. General Assembly. I've published a legal opinion explaining why this goal is so important, the precedents for such an action, and how committed countries can pull it off.

The impact of prevailing in a credentials challenge would extend far beyond the halls of the U.N. Once the world body recognized the new government, global banks would cut off Mr. Maduro's access to government assets and income streams. This process has already begun, with maneuvers like the Bank of England's decision to block the regime from withdrawing \$1.2 billion of gold reserves. But joint international recognition of the Guaidó government through the U.N. would accelerate the transfer of financial control in Venezuela. Mr. Maduro's last bits of support would vanish without money, and the new government needs resources to meet the desperate needs of the Venezuelan people.

Derecognition of the Maduro regime by the U.N. would devastate the dictator's claim to authority at home by showing the world, in a single act, has withdrawn its support. This could threaten Mr. Maduro by diminishing confidence within Venezuela's armed forces, which have historically played a crucial part in advancing democracy. The military installed Rómulo Betancourt, father of Venezuelan democracy, in 1945, and it played a key role in returning Hugo Chávez to office after he was displaced in a 2002 coup. Today Mr.

Guaidó is fighting in the streets for the hearts and minds of Venezuelan soldiers, handing out leaflets detailing an amnesty law that would protect them if they abandon Mr. Maduro. A U.N. endorsement would help convince soldiers that the Guaidó government is backed by much more than a mere claim of legitimacy.

Finally, with Mr. Guaidó's diplomats in place, his government could formally engage with the U.N.'s humanitarian missions. Agencies like Unicef and the World Food Programme could help raise international funds to help the Venezuelan people, and international aid groups would gain greater ability to work inside the struggling nation.

Even looking only at the legal merits of the dispute, the U.N. ought to send Mr. Maduro's diplomats packing. In previous credentials challenges, such as Haiti's in 1991 and Sierra Leone's in 1996, the U.N. transferred recognition from repressive regimes to democratic ones even before the new governments had secured control over their territories.

The vote on Venezuela would be more contentious, as Mr. Maduro is backed by powers including China, Russia and Turkey. Venezuela has an estimated \$140 billion in foreign debt, and these countries are owed billions. But there are good reasons to believe the Maduro regime's backers are fighting a lost cause.

The most important reason for faraway nations to doubt the old regime is the rapid spread of support for the new one within Venezuela's own neighborhood. The Organization of American States and the 12-member Lima Group strongly rejected Mr. Maduro's re-election, and key nations in the region such as Brazil, Argentina, Colombia and Chile have already recognized the new government. This reflects the commitment of these countries to uphold democracy in the region, and their firsthand witness to the impact of Mr. Maduro's reign, the effects of which have sent more than three million refugees fleeing Venezuela.

The U.N. General Assembly sometimes is cautious about choosing sides between rival factions, and generally defers to the consensus view of the regional group. That tendency can be frustrating for human-rights advocates who want to rally foreign governments to take action against state killings, for example. But in this case nonintervention plays in Mr. Guaidó's favor, as Latin America is overwhelmingly supporting his new government. He has democratic legitimacy in his role as interim president, and asks only that foreign nations recognize his representatives and follow the popular will of the region.

The historic clash in Venezuela emanates not from foreign intervention but from the courage and resilience of the Venezuelan people. After suffering for years under an authoritarian regime, living in a man-made humanitarian disaster, and sacrificing their lives to rescue their democracy, they are on the cusp of breaking free from the chains of dictatorship. It is time for the U.N. to stand with them.

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