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U.S. AGENCY FOR INTERNATIONAL DEVELOPMENT
COMMITTEE ON FOREIGN RELATIONS
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Introduction

Chairman Risch, Ranking Member Menendez, and Distinguished Members of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee: Thank you for the opportunity to testify on behalf of the U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID). It is an honor to be here with you today. USAID is grateful for your ongoing, bipartisan support for our work in Latin America and the Caribbean, and especially our response to the Venezuela regional crisis.

Eighteen months ago, the Trump Administration, along with nearly 60 other governments around the globe, recognized Juan Guaidó as the legitimate and legal Interim President of the Bolivarian Republic of Venezuela, in accordance with the Venezuelan Constitution. President Trump recognized Guaidó's interim presidency on January 23, 2019. The United States and the international community based our swift recognition of Guaidó upon respect for the rule of law.

Since 2019, USAID has coordinated with Interim President Guaidó to implement democracy and governance programs, to support the interim government and the National Assembly structurally operate as best as possible under these challenging circumstances. In 2019, we formally established our cooperation when then USAID Administrator Mark Green signed a Development Objective Agreement (DOAG) with the Interim Government. However, USAID began our support for democracy in Venezuela long before this Agreement. For the past several years, with your bipartisan support, we have been assisting human-rights defenders, independent media, and civil society inside Venezuela. The United States, along with several other governments, has provided technical and financial support to the National Assembly, which helps this body remain operational as the sole source of legitimate, democratic, citizen-responsive governance in Venezuela.

Since January 2019, Interim President Guaidó and other democratic actors have faced innumerable challenges in their fight for freedom. Compounding factors that have complicated their struggle are the depths of the Maduro-made humanitarian and economic crisis; the radical steps the illegitimate regime has taken to oppress the Venezuelan people; and, most recently, the COVID-19 pandemic. Nicolás Maduro's use of repressive tactics and assistance from malign foreign actors further complicate the situation. This chaos has eroded Venezuelan citizens' ability to feel safe when leaving their homes to organize and stand up to the injustices and

corruption of the illegitimate regime. A weak and isolated population is precisely what the regime needs for it to appear that Venezuelans have lost their will or interest in change. As I am sure the Committee will agree, based on your own engagement with them, the Venezuelan people have neither lost their will nor desire for freedom and prosperity. Millions of brave men and women in Venezuela continue to demand and advocate for transparent elections, a respect for human rights, and a restoration of democracy.

This prolonged crisis has been manufactured by Maduro's inability to govern and his corruption, which has resulted in an economic collapse with severe humanitarian consequences and the culture of repression that the regime uses to jail, torture, and even murder the Venezuelan people. This situation, and other sinister steps taken by the illegitimate Maduro regime to undermine democracy and rule of law, have prolonged the effort needed for a democratic transition.

Because of the dire realities within Venezuela, more than five million Venezuelans have fled the tyranny and deprivation in their homeland-- mostly into neighboring Andean countries like the Republics of Colombia and Perú. These desperate people have left their homes, families, and communities behind, often with nothing but the clothes on their bodies. The United States is cognizant of the burden this places on our hemispheric allies and host communities, and the emotional burden it has on those who have fled and the family members they left in Venezuela. COVID-19 has only complicated this tragic situation. Until Maduro departs, many of these Venezuelans either will not or cannot return home; their country will need them to rebuild as a democratic and prosperous state.

Humanitarian Assistance: Addressing Maduro-Made Crisis inside Venezuela and Across the Region

Mr. Chairman, I know this Committee cares deeply about the humanitarian crisis that is facing millions of Venezuelans, so I would like to talk specifically about our response. Inside Venezuela, USAID has provided nearly \$44 million in humanitarian assistance since 2017. With this funding, our partners have served more than 1.4 million hot meals to vulnerable Venezuelans--especially women and children--across nearly 100 community kitchens and schools. Our assistance has helped save lives through primary health care, immunizations against infectious diseases, treatment for malaria, and training health care workers. We have also brought safe drinking water to health facilities and schools, which has benefited more than 7,000 Venezuelans. USAID has helped provide women and children with safe spaces and protection against violence and exploitation, as well as coordinated with the humanitarian community to improve the effectiveness of the response to the economic collapse in Venezuela.

Humanitarian efforts in Venezuela face many challenges because of the ongoing repression, obstruction, and intimidation tactics of the regime. Maduro has created obstacles for

international non-governmental organizations (NGOs) that are seeking to provide assistance and reach places in need, such as impeding them from legally registering inside Venezuela and preventing their employees from obtaining visas. These restraints, coupled with NGOs' ongoing concerns for their safety to operate and logistical impediments, hinder the ability to respond at a scale that matches the needs created by this Maduro-made economic and political crisis. Another impediment to relief efforts is the continued harassment of humanitarian organizations and health workers by security personnel affiliated with the illegitimate Maduro regime.

USAID condemns any efforts to intimidate or threaten humanitarians who are working to save lives, and we know this Committee strongly supports us on this front. In Venezuela and everywhere else in the world, humanitarian organizations must have full and unhindered access to reach people in need.

Despite the obstacles to applying full-scale operations with qualified international staff, USAID continues to provide humanitarian assistance where possible. However, humanitarian efforts, while the right thing to do, are not a solution that will end the crisis in Venezuela. As the members of this Committee are aware, humanitarian assistance cannot, and is not intended to, address the root causes of Venezuela's instability and desperation. The only way to address these root causes is through political and economic change.

As this Committee knows, the U.S. government has made it a hemispheric, and even global, priority to support the communities that are generously hosting Venezuelans in their time of need. We understand that responding to this crisis is no easy task, and has put our neighbors under great strain. The influx of Venezuelans has especially affected countries across South America. To help address their needs, since Fiscal Year 2018 USAID has provided nearly \$297 million in humanitarian funding in Brazil, Colombia, Ecuador, and Peru and regionally, excluding coronavirus supplemental funding. Our assistance on the humanitarian side has included nutritious meals, health assistance, and clean water for approximately 943,000 Venezuelan refugees and migrants.

The U.S. government is working throughout the region to combat efforts that would seek to undermine international or regional support for Venezuelans who have had to flee their homeland because of the crisis caused by Maduro. Through close coordination, U.S. Department of State and USAID's combined humanitarian assistance has been vital in meeting life saving needs and supporting protection for those fleeing Venezuela. At the same time, neighboring countries, especially Colombia, Peru, and Ecuador, have welcomed Venezuelans, and State and USAID share the goal to work to ensure that other donors to provide new or increased assistance to address this regional crisis.

In addition to the pre-existing challenges, COVID-19 is exacerbating an already-difficult humanitarian situation, both inside Venezuela and across the region. More than 4.2 million cases of the disease have been reported in Latin America and Caribbean to date. That number, which we believe is likely low because of underreporting in places like Venezuela, continues to grow. In Venezuela and the rest of the region, economic distress, mass school closures, disruption of access to regular health care, and significant increases in gender-based violence have been compounded by the pandemic. As a result, many Venezuelans who have fled to neighboring countries are concerned about how they will afford rent, food, and other basic necessities during lockdowns related to containing the novel coronavirus, and more people than ever before are in need of humanitarian support to make ends meet. This is in addition to other challenges, such as lack of access to legal status. Also, to address the combined challenges presented by COVID-19 and the Venezuela regional crisis, the U.S. government's partners continuously are examining the impact of our existing programming to help ensure Venezuelans have the resources they need.

Due to job loss and general familial concerns during the COVID-19 pandemic, about 100,000 Venezuelans have made the tough choice to return to Venezuela, and our Department of State and USAID humanitarian partners have scaled up food, shelter, health, and sanitation assistance to help these Venezuelans on the move, as they face real vulnerabilities while in transit across borders. We are also working with our partners inside Venezuela to provide assistance to the COVID-19 pandemic. USAID and our partners have distributed nearly 4,500 hygiene kits and supplied personal protective equipment to 15 health facilities to prevent the spread of the virus.

Development Assistance: Promoting Democracy and Addressing Long-Term Challenges

As we monitor and respond to the immediate humanitarian needs of Venezuelans who have fled the chaos in their home country as well as the countries and communities that are hosting them, USAID recognizes that this prolonged regional crisis requires a balanced mix of medium- and long-term development assistance. In Colombia, Perú, the Federative Republic of Brazil, and the Republic of Ecuador, we are working alongside other parts of the U.S. government with a variety of partners, such as host-country governments, NGOs, civil society, and faith-based organizations, to help communities absorb the influx of vulnerable Venezuelans. In total, USAID has invested more than \$102 million in the region to address these longer-term needs since Fiscal Year 2017. Development initiatives in parts of the region include strengthening primary education and health care; improving government agencies' capacity to manage migration and socioeconomic integration; protecting human rights; expanding access to justice; and offering vocational training, linked to employment and entrepreneurship opportunities in the private sector.

Moving back to Venezuela, President Guaidó and his Interim Government, the democratically elected National Assembly, and civil society continue to push for a peaceful democratic

transition. USAID provides direct technical training, staffing support, equipment, and communications support to the Interim Government and the National Assembly. Our technical support to the Interim Government has bolstered its ability to have administrative infrastructure, media operations, planning systems, and improved strategic decision-making. Additionally, our support to the National Assembly has ensured that its important and legitimate legislative work continues. Our funding has enabled 101 Deputies and 60 Alternate Deputies to participate in plenary sessions despite the increased repression from the illegitimate regime. A total of 79 Deputies and 15 Alternate Deputies from 10 democratic political parties have taken part in other initiatives, such as international policy exchanges, training, in-person events, and social-media communications efforts. Through these initiatives, the members of the National Assembly have increased their visibility with Venezuelan citizens, and their ability to engage with their local constituents. For example, with USAID's funding, National Assembly Deputies have held almost 800 constituent-engagement fora to promote dialogue with civil society. The members of the National Assembly have been subject to constant harassment and undermining, and our programming helps them overcome challenges, such finding meeting places, providing alternative communications platforms, or providing supplies the regime has illegally seized.

USAID also supports Venezuelan citizens who continue to assert their rights and maintain a democratic voice in the face of dictatorship. For years, the Agency has empowered Venezuelan human-rights defenders, civil-society organizations, and independent media who expose and document rampant corruption, flagrant electoral fraud, and wide-ranging abuses in the country. Our funding helps these groups define, discuss, and advocate for a free and democratic Venezuela. Our \$128 million in development assistance inside Venezuela includes the more than \$98 million in our 2019 bilateral agreement, which is critical to our work in the country. Not only does the DOAG allow us to continue to finance our current activities, but it positions us to be ready to expand our work quickly into other sectors once the democratic transition occurs.

To bring that day closer, our current efforts bring accurate and unbiased news and information to the people of Venezuela. To help 18 local civil-society organizations improve their reporting on human-rights abuses, USAID has funded the training of more than 2,300 people on the proper protocols for investigating, documenting, and reporting violations. This investment resulted in the production of more than 570 documented, verifiable reports during Fiscal Year (FY) 2019. With this documentation and evidence, these organizations are able to share essential information with the rest of the world.

To raise awareness of the Maduro's kleptocracy corruption and unconstitutional actions, the conditions of the failing Venezuelan state, and the environmental and human catastrophe caused by regime-sponsored illegal gold mining in the *Arco Minero* in the South of the country, USAID-funded civil-society organizations produced and distributed almost 950 reports, analyses, and videos in FY 2019. Additionally, these groups leveraged the power of the Internet to push out

vital information. Collectively, their websites received more than 672,500 unique visitors in FY 2019 alone, which increases widespread awareness of the tragic situation in Venezuela.

Those who are pushing for democratic change and citizen-responsive governance face dangerous obstacles at the hands of the illegitimate Maduro regime and the nefarious actors that are keeping him in power. Malign actors such as Cuba, the Russian Federation, the People's Republic of China, and the Islamic Republic of Iran actively are propping up the corrupt Maduro regime and encouraging efforts to stifle the Venezuelan people by spreading their own disinformation and lending best practices in how to oppress democracy. The United States is committed to working with our partners to stop these cynical attempts to erode democratic and economic progress. USAID will continue to promote and demonstrate democratic values in Venezuela and the region to advance a free, peaceful, and prosperous Hemisphere and world.

Vision for the Future: Democratic Transition

The United States continues to support the people of Venezuela in their quest for freedom and prosperity even as we address the ongoing, man-made humanitarian, economic, and political crisis, and, of course, COVID-19. We know this Committee shares these goals. Venezuelans are appreciative of this shared unity and support, from the Administration and Congress -- they remember the active participation of many Members of Congress and staff who have made numerous visits to Colombia, Brazil, Perú, and other countries to see first-hand the effect of the crisis on Venezuelans who have fled the chaos in their homeland.

With the support of Congress, USAID will continue to support the Venezuelan people as they work hard to steer their country back on a path to prosperity and create the opportunities, dignity, and stability that they deserve. For the sake of the Venezuelan people, the world must continue to pressure Maduro to relinquish control and allow for democratic change. One step in the process will be truly free elections -- not the rigged so-called "elections" Maduro is planning for December. Far from solving the political crisis, this process will end up aggravating the current political and humanitarian crisis in Venezuela. Like the fraudulent vote in 2018, the regime plans to hold the December "elections" under false pretenses and without any respect for Venezuelan rules and regulations, and seeks to undermine the last truly democratic voice of the people.

When the illegitimate Maduro regime has given way to freedom and authentic change, funding through our bilateral agreement will be able to finance recovery efforts led by a democratically elected Venezuelan administration. USAID will be a key part of the U.S. government's support to the new democratic Government of Venezuela as it works to restore a crumbling health sector and shattered economy, and reinvigorate critical work in agriculture to rebuild the private-sector production and distribution of food in Venezuela. We already are supporting the construction of

ideas and discussions about those visions and the change that is needed, partly through our support to the Interim Government's recovery strategy, *Plan Pais*.

Conclusion

The Venezuelan people deserve to live in peace and prosperity, and we are grateful for Congress' bipartisan support for this endeavor. The Interim Government of Juan Guaidó and the National Assembly are working very hard -- even under the added hardship of the pandemic -- for a peaceful transition to democracy that will enable Venezuelans to rebuild their country.

For too long, Venezuelans have suffered at the hands of the late Hugo Chávez and now Nicolás Maduro and their kleptocracy. I look forward to the day when we can celebrate with all Venezuelans as they meet their potential as a free, prosperous, and democratic society that is once again a leader in the region and the world.

Thank you for the invitation to testify before you. I look forward to taking your questions.