

International

Humanitarian aid used as weapon as Venezuela political crisis rages

US and Russia push rival United Nations actions on Venezuela

CARACAS: Desperately needed aid being stockpiled at Venezuela's door is at the heart of a political duel between the two men fighting to lead the oil-rich nation: Juan Guaido and Nicolas Maduro. Guaido, recognized as Venezuela's interim president by around 50 countries, has pressed the all-critical military to allow the mostly American humanitarian aid to reach the most vulnerable population, or around 300,000 people.

Maduro insists the shortages plaguing the country are caused by Washington's punitive sections, and he has vowed to stop the "spectacle of fake humanitarian aid." The aid "is at the heart of the struggle between two pillars of power," political scientist Luis Salamanca told AFP. "This struggle is playing out as concerns the future of the armed forces. Guaido is trying to get the military on his side, while Maduro tries to keep it behind him." Using a tanker truck, two container trucks and barriers, the army has been blocking the Tienditas border bridge since Thursday.

Several hundred meters (yards) from there on the Colombia side are the hangars where the emergency aid is being stockpiled. For John Magdaleno of the Polity consultancy, the confrontation between the two men is a "major event" that "is inevitably leading toward an escalation" between the government and the opposition, as well as between Maduro and the countries supporting his adversary. "In the end, it's in the hand of the United States. They are the ones who can use force," Magdaleno said.

President Donald Trump's administration, which has insisted that "all options are on the table" - has frozen the accounts of Venezuelan leaders and unveiled fresh sanctions to bar Maduro from access-

ing revenues from oil his country sells in the US. Before possibly resorting to force, Washington is exploring "all other options" first, Magdaleno said, adding that "this chapter on humanitarian aid foreshadows a far more significant escalation that could trigger a military intervention." However, Assistant Secretary of State for Western Hemisphere Affairs Kimberly Breier has insisted that the US has no intention of entering Venezuelan territory by force to distribute food and medicine.

Politicized aid

The United Nations said it's ready to send emergency aid to Venezuela, but only if Caracas agrees. "Humanitarian aid should never be used as a political pawn," UN spokesman Stephane Dujarric said Thursday. Venezuela has faced a major political and economic crisis in recent years. Expropriations have hurt industry and oil production, which finances 96 percent of the national budget, thus reducing imports of basic goods.

More than 80 percent of medicine and medical equipment are missing in a country that has the world's largest proven oil reserves, according to the pharmaceutical federation. There are constant cuts of basic services such as water and electricity, Maduro accuses the United States of setting up an "international coalition... to intervene militarily in Venezuela under the pretext of a non-existing humanitarian crisis." For the National Assembly's former president and opposition lawmaker Henry Ramos Allup, the government's refusal to allow humanitarian aid to enter the country "reveals once more to the world the regime's human rights violations."

The anti-Maduro camp has also denounced the regime's decision - while Venezuela grapples with

such a dire situation - to send 100 tons of humanitarian aid to Cuba to assist the communist island in the wake of a recent hurricane. The government faces a "strategic dilemma" because "regardless of its decision, it loses," Magdaleno said. If Maduro relents and allows the aid in, this means he finally acknowledges that there is, in fact a humanitarian crisis. "Maduro is going to put his foot down. It doesn't matter much anymore to him. He is playing a game that seems to be entering its last phase," which threatens his hold on power, said Salamanca.

Rival UN actions

Meanwhile, the United States is pushing the UN Security Council to formally call for free, fair and credible presidential elections in Venezuela with international observers, diplomats said, a move that prompted Russia to propose a rival draft resolution. Moscow and Washington have been at loggerheads over a US-led campaign for international recognition of Venezuelan opposition leader and head of the country's elected National Assembly Juan Guaido over President Nicolas Maduro. Guaido last month declared himself interim head of state.

Diplomats from the 15 Security Council members met privately on Friday afternoon to discuss the U.S.-drafted resolution, seen by Reuters, that would express "full support for the National Assembly as the only democratically elected institution." Russia, China, Equatorial Guinea and South Africa last month blocked the Security Council from issuing a statement with the same language. But the same four countries failed in a Russian-led bid to stop the council from publicly discussing Venezuela, at the request of the United States, on Jan. 26.



CUCUTA: Venezuelan Maria Florez cries during an interview with AFP in the La Parada neighborhood in Cucuta, Colombia, near the Simon Bolivar International Bridge, on the border with Tachira, Venezuela. Venezuelans cross to Colombia to buy groceries due to the shortages in their country. —AFP

During talks on the US draft resolution on Friday, Russia - which has accused Washington of backing a coup attempt in Venezuela - proposed an alternative text, diplomats said. The Russian draft would express "concern over the attempts to intervene in matters which are essentially within the domestic jurisdiction." It would also express "concern over the threats to use force against the territorial integrity and political independence" of Venezuela. US President Donald Trump has said military intervention in Venezuela was "an option." It was unclear if or when either draft Security Council resolution could be put to a vote. A council resolution needs nine votes and no vetoes by the United States, Britain, France, Russia or China to pass. —Agencies

Bangladesh makes record drugs seizure amid crackdown

DHAKA: Bangladesh seized a record 53 million methamphetamine pills in 2018 - up 33 percent in a year - amid a deadly nationwide crackdown on the trade, officials said yesterday. Nearly 300 suspected drug dealers were killed last year, according to authorities, who insisted the seizure figure was proof that their campaign was working. Rights groups said the record haul showed the deaths had failed to make an impact on the trade. The government Department of Narcotics Control said the drug - popularly known as 'yaba', a Thai word meaning 'crazy medicine' - was seized across the South Asian nation of 165 million people.

"It is the highest amount seized in a year," Bazul Rahman, a department deputy director, told AFP. Masum-e-Rabbani, another senior official at the department, said the record haul was proof that a crackdown launched in May last year was yielding "positive" results. He said there has been a significant decline in the use and sale of yaba. Nearly 300 suspected drug dealers were killed by security forces in the campaign and some 25,000 arrests made, according to Rabbani.

Human rights groups say many of the deaths amount to extrajudicial killings however. More than 40 were killed in the town of Teknaf, which borders Myanmar's troubled Rakhine state and is close to the refugee camps housing about one million Rohingya Muslims. Bangladesh has struggled to control a surge in yaba imports crossing the border from Myanmar, where the pills are manufactured by the millions. —AFP

Japanese PM vows to tackle growing child abuse

TOKYO: Prime Minister Shinzo Abe yesterday vowed to crack down on the increasing number of child abuse cases in Japan after the death of a 10-year-old girl, allegedly killed by her abusive father, shocked the country. Mia Kurihara was found dead in the bathroom of her home in Chiba near Tokyo last month after authorities failed to respond to her repeated pleas for help. Her parents have been arrested on suspicion of assaulting their daughter after her father reportedly abused her regularly and refused to allow her to go to school.

The tragedy came more than a year after she asked her teacher to help stop her father from "beating and kicking" her. She was temporarily protected by child welfare officials but returned to relatives about two months later. She was then brought back to her parents in March last year. Police have found a video on her father's mobile phone showing him hitting her, local media said, adding that she cried in the footage saying: "Dad, I'm sorry." The high-profile case has drawn huge media attention, prompting the government to take action amid growing public awareness over child abuse.

Abe told members of his ruling Liberal Democratic Party that his government had ordered child welfare centers across the nation to confirm within a month the safety of all children suspected to have been abused. Abe also said the government would raise the number of child welfare workers by some 1,000 for



TOKYO: Japan's Prime Minister Shinzo Abe (center) delivers a speech at the national rally to demand the return of the Northern Territories, a group of islands held by Russia. —AFP

the next fiscal year starting in April from the current 3,200. "It was a painful case which is all too regrettable," Abe said. "Protecting children's lives is our adults' responsibility," he added. Police reported the

suspected abuse of a record-high 80,104 minors to child welfare authorities in Japan in 2018, Kyodo News said. The figure rose by 22.4 percent from a year earlier, it said. —AFP

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