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European Languages

زبانهای اروپائی

5 July 2018

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06.07.2018

Trump pressed aides, Latin American leaders on US invasion of Venezuela

US President Donald Trump repeatedly pressed his top aides as well as the heads of right-wing governments in Latin America on the possibility of a US invasion of Venezuela, according to a report by the Associated Press.

The report comes amid a growing campaign of sanctions and political pressure mounted by the Trump administration against the government of Venezuelan President Nicolas Maduro aimed at provoking its collapse or overthrow by means of a military coup.

The first discussions of a direct US military intervention came last August, the day before Trump staged an extraordinary public appearance with his then-Secretary of State Rex Tillerson, the former head of ExxonMobil, whose predecessor company long dominated Venezuela's oil production, and US Ambassador to the United Nations Nikki Haley.

Trump declared: "We are all over the world and we have troops all over the world in places that are very, very far away. Venezuela is not very far away and the people are suffering. They're dying. We have many options for Venezuela including a possible military option, if necessary."

Asked by a reporter whether his statement implied a US military operation in the South American country, Trump replied, "We don't talk about it, but a military operation, a military option is certainly something that we could pursue."

It is now clear that the statement was not merely staged for the cameras but reflected Trump's genuine thinking on the issue and discussions that were going behind the scenes. According to the AP report, Tillerson and Gen. H.R. McMaster, then Trump's national

security advisor, attempted to convince him that an invasion would entail substantial risks, including political upheavals throughout Latin America. Both men have since been removed from the administration.

According to the unnamed senior US administration official cited by the AP, Trump argued against his aides, pointing to the successful US military interventions carried out in Grenada in 1983 and Panama in 1989-1990. That Venezuela is more than 10 times the size and has nearly 10 times the population of Panama—where the US had extensive military bases at the time—while Grenada is a small island of barely more than 100,000 people, apparently did not factor into the US president’s thinking.

The Associated Press also quoted Colombian sources as confirming that Trump had raised the prospect of a US invasion with Colombian President Juan Manuel Santos, Washington’s closest ally in the region. Santos, who has carried out repeated provocations against Venezuela and sent troops to its border, is to be replaced next month by the even more right-wing and anti-Venezuelan president-elect Ivan Duque.

Trump raised the prospect again in September during a meeting held on the sidelines of the UN General Assembly with Santos and unnamed other leaders of right-wing Latin American governments aligned with Washington.

While the White House declined to comment on Trump’s discussions on invading Venezuela, a National Security Council spokesperson told the news agency that the US “will consider all options at its disposal to help restore Venezuela’s democracy and bring stability.”

Last week, US Vice President Mike Pence made a tour of Latin America dedicated in large measure to drumming up regional support for Washington’s bid to isolate Venezuela economically and politically in preparation for regime change.

As part of the tour, Pence staged a visit last Wednesday to a refuge for Venezuelan migrants in the city of Manaus in the Brazilian Amazon, telling the immigrants, “We will keep standing with you until democracy is restored in Venezuela.”

The US vice president came under immediate fire for the grotesque hypocrisy of posing as a supporter of Venezuelan migrants in Brazil, even as the US administration treats every refugee reaching the US border as a criminal and locks families and children in cages.

On the eve of his arrival, the Brazilian Foreign Ministry released a letter to Washington, describing the separation of children from their parents as a “cruel practice.”

US sanctions against Venezuela were first imposed under the Obama administration in an executive order that branded the South American nation an “extraordinary threat to the

national security and foreign policy of the United States.” Now, under Trump, the sanctions include prohibitions against Venezuela borrowing or selling assets on the US financial markets. The aim is to impose an economic chokehold that will create such intolerable conditions for the masses that the government will collapse or be overthrown by the military.

Hyperinflation is destroying the living standards of the majority of working people, with the inflation rate—which is not officially recorded—estimated at 110 percent for the month of May alone.

While the protests by more privileged layers of the middle class against the Maduro government have waned, and the right-wing opposition has become largely quiescent, with its leaders hoping for a US intervention, workers’ struggles have broken out across the country, including a nationwide strike by nurses demanding salary increases and the government’s provision of hospitals with essential supplies.

Since Maduro’s re-election in May, in a vote derided by Washington and its allies in Latin America as “illegitimate,” the government has continued to impose the full burden of the economic crisis upon the backs of the working class, while providing concessions to Venezuelan capitalists and financiers, many of whom have seen their fortunes balloon through financial speculation.

The government continues to rely on the military as its principal base of support. On Wednesday, some 17,000 members of the Bolivarian National Armed Forces (FANB) were promoted in a ceremony celebrating their “loyalty to the president constitutionally elected by the people.” The promotions followed reports that a number of military officers had been arrested on charges of treason in connection with alleged coup plots.

Driving the threat of a US military intervention is not just the right-wing ideology of Donald Trump, but geo-strategic interests.

Even as Washington attempts to tighten the noose around the Venezuelan economy, China has provided somewhat of a lifeline to the Maduro government. Venezuela’s Finance Minister Simon Zerpa issued a statement after meetings in Beijing this week that the China Development Bank and China National Petroleum Corporation have agreed to invest \$250 million in Venezuela’s beleaguered state-run oil corporation, PDVSA, which has seen production levels drop to an all-time low this year. In addition, he reported that China was prepared to extend a “special loan” of \$5 billion “for direct investment in production.”

While Venezuela has in the past exported 40 percent of its oil to the US market, it has increasingly shifted toward China, paying off loans with crude oil. The Venezuelan oil sector, however, still remains dependent upon the US for the import of technology, light crude and other products needed to blend with Venezuelan heavy oil for export.

With Venezuela boasting the world's largest proven oil reserves, China's role in propping up the Maduro government provides an additional motivation, beyond the profit interests of the US energy conglomerates, for Washington to intervene.

These motives have been spelled out in the recent national strategy and defense documents issued by the Trump administration and the Pentagon, defining both Russia and China as "revisionist powers" seeking to challenge US global hegemony and charting a course of preparation for "great power" conflicts.

Venezuela and Latin America as a whole will be an arena for these conflicts. Trump's demands to know why the US cannot simply invade Venezuela are not merely the ravings of the right-wing demagogue in the White House, but a warning of what is to come.