

Congress of the United States
Washington, DC 20515

February 8, 2017

The President
The White House
Washington, DC 20500

Dear Mr. President:

We are writing to request that your administration take immediate action to sanction regime officials responsible for profiting off of the dire humanitarian situation and stealing from other state resources and violating human rights in Venezuela. Moreover, Nicolás Maduro's recent appointment of Tareck El Aissami puts him next in line to possibly become the next leader of Venezuela, which is extremely troubling given his alleged ties to drug trafficking and terrorist organizations.

Pursuant to the Venezuela Defense of Human Rights and Civil Society Act of 2014 (Public Law 113-278), extended through December 31, 2019 by Public Law 114-194, and Executive Order 13692 of March 8, 2015 ("Blocking Property and Suspending Entry of Certain Persons Contributing to the Situation in Venezuela"), the executive branch has the existing authority to apply sanctions including asset freezes and visa bans to any Venezuelan official who is involved in human rights violations or corrupt practices.

We urge you to exercise these authorities and send a strong signal to the Maduro regime and other bad actors in the region that human rights abusers will be held accountable for the misery and suffering it has needlessly brought to the people of Venezuela. As a result of Maduro's failed economic and political policies, Venezuelans face worsening food and medicine shortages. To make matters worse, the Maduro regime has nationalized the distribution of food, placing the Venezuelan military in charge of five sea ports and the country's food and medical supply chain.

It is extremely concerning that the Maduro regime continues to undertake increasingly authoritarian measures against innocent people in Venezuela. The opposition has been subjected to intense persecution, being vilified on state media by Maduro regime officials, routinely accused of false crimes, and arbitrarily imprisoned. Currently there are more than 100 political prisoners in the country, including both U.S. citizens and opposition leaders like Leopoldo López and Daniel Ceballos. We believe that all of them must be immediately freed. Maduro has also relied on corrupted branches of his regime, such as the Supreme Court and the National Electoral Council, to invalidate actions undertaken by the National Assembly, including an amnesty bill for the country's political prisoners and a motion for a constitutionally-enshrined recall referendum on the presidency. In that regard, **we are also supportive of increased funding under the Economic Support Fund (ESF) account (currently \$6.5 million annually) with the purpose of supporting the development of democratic political processes, institutions and values that support human rights, freedom of information and independent civil society until the country returns to democratic governance.**

An extensive investigative report by the *Associated Press* in December 2016 exposed what many assumed to be true, that corrupt Venezuelan officials are in fact profiting from the humanitarian struggle in the country. According to press reports, senior level officials are using various schemes to defraud companies providing food through the nationalized chain. The *Associated Press* report alleges that, for example, Generals Rodolfo Marco Torres and Carlos Osorio are orchestrating a fraudulent scheme with suspected shell companies in order to line their own pockets instead of bringing food into the country. **If true, any generals or any other Venezuelan regime officials engaged in fraudulent crime or corruption, particularly at the expense of suffering Venezuelans should be sanctioned pursuant to U.S. law.**

Not only are these actions by Maduro and his cronies detrimental to the well-being of the Venezuelan people and the stability of Venezuela, they may also have a direct and damaging impact on the United States and U.S. businesses. In a recent plea agreement with the Department of Justice, the Brazilian construction company, Odebrecht, admitted to paying approximately \$98 million worth of payments to corrupt Venezuelan regime officials. Accordingly, we are concerned that overpayments of food contracts could likewise represent a potential liability for U.S. companies. **Thus, we believe that the Office of Foreign Assets Control should issue clarifying regulations to ensure that U.S. companies do not inadvertently engage in business directly with any corrupt regime entity in Venezuela that would violate the Foreign Corrupt Practices Act of 1977.**

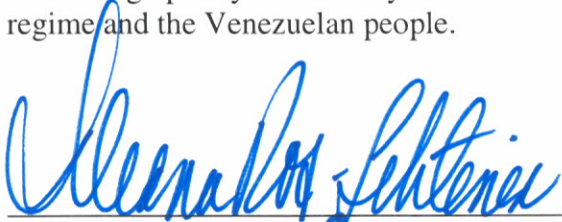
Finally, we are particularly concerned about Maduro's elevation of Tareck El Aissami. The nexus between corruption, drug trafficking, and the influence of terrorist organizations in Venezuela has been raised in several media reports:

- The *American Interest* from September 9, 2009 reported that "Mr. El Aissami, who at one time headed Onidex, the Venezuelan passport and naturalization agency inside the interior ministry, is suspected of having issued passports to members of Hamas and Hezbollah. There are also allegations that El Aissami and others affiliated with Hezbollah are in charge of recruiting young Venezuelan Arabs who are then trained in Hezbollah camps in Southern Lebanon."
- The *Wall Street Journal* stated on November 23, 2014 that "El Aissami's office used information technology developed by Cuban state security to give some 173 individuals from the Middle East new Venezuelan identities that are extremely difficult to trace." The same article continues by alleging "that regional intelligence officials believe that "of the more notable persons of interest" who received false papers from Caracas was Suleiman Ghani Abdul Waked, an important member of Lebanese Hezbollah."
- The *Wall Street Journal* article from May 18, 2015 stated that the former Venezuelan finance minister and governor of Aragua Rafael Isea "told investigators that Walid Makled, a drug kingpin now in prison, paid off former Interior Minister Tareck El Aissami to get drug shipments through Venezuela."

Given these reports, the deteriorating humanitarian situation in the country, and his new prominence in the regime, we urge the appropriate agencies to thoroughly investigate Tareck El Aissami's conduct and activities in view of the aforementioned sanctions instruments.

Decisive, principled action in response to unfolding developments in Venezuela as one of the first foreign policy actions of your administration would send a powerful message to the Maduro regime and the Venezuelan people.

Sincerely,



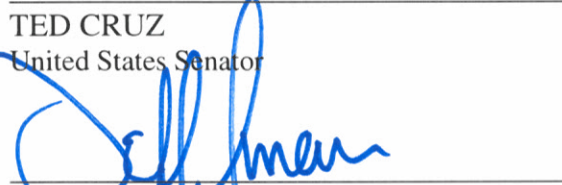
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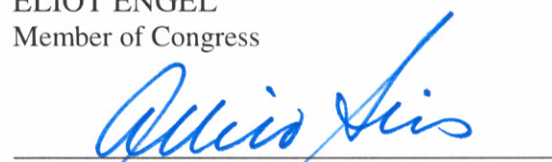
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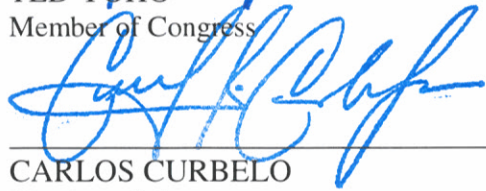
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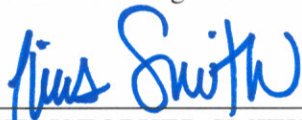
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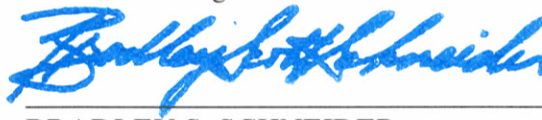
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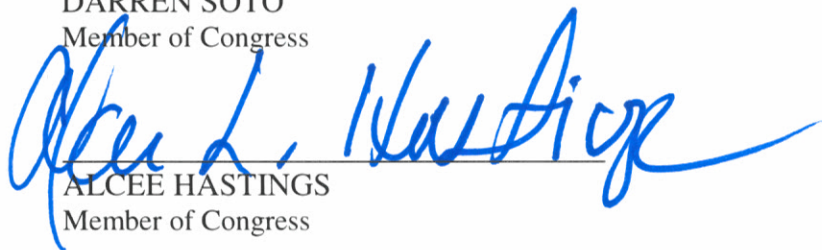
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