



PRIMER: Problems in Venezuela

July 24, 2026

BOTTOM LINE UP FRONT

- While the January 3 operation to arrest Venezuelan dictator Nicolás Maduro for narcotics trafficking was a stunning success, allowing Maduro crony Delcy Rodríguez to remain in power indefinitely—the “Delcy Option”—has undermined American long-term interests and harmed the Venezuelan people.
- On June 24, 2026, Venezuela was hit by two back-to-back earthquakes that [killed](#) thousands of people and [destroyed](#) nearly 70,000 buildings, with an estimated \$37 billion in infrastructure damage.
- While the earthquakes were a natural disaster, the Venezuelan regime bears [significant blame](#) for creating conditions that unnecessarily increased casualties. For decades, Delcy and her predecessors Nicolás Maduro and Hugo Chávez took funding from disaster response programs and allowed substandard building construction in exchange for bribes.
- The Delcy regime delayed and obstructed U.S. humanitarian assistance efforts in an effort to hide the true extent of the damage, with Minister of Interior, Justice and Peace Diosdado Cabello—the target of a \$25 million U.S. [bounty](#) for cocaine trafficking and selling rocket launchers to a U.S.-designated terrorist organization—[caught on camera](#) physically blocking American rescue workers.
- As long as the Delcy regime is in power, the internal corruption that exacerbated the earthquakes’ damage will continue, threatening the [\\$380 million](#) of disaster relief funding provided by the United States and putting American security and economic interests more broadly at risk.
- The United States must push for a clear and fast timetable for democratic elections in Venezuela to facilitate a government accountable to the Venezuelan people and capable of being an honest, reliable long-term American partner.

BACKGROUND

The American operation to arrest Nicolás Maduro for narcotics trafficking on January 3, 2026, was a stunning accomplishment. Maduro, an illegitimate dictator who had lost Venezuela’s 2024 presidential election, was the leader of a [criminal enterprise](#) tied to cocaine, gold, and human trafficking. Maduro’s regime was also notoriously [corrupt](#), with key officials enriching themselves through criminal activity, and a close partner of American adversaries like China, Russia, and Iran.

However, while Operation Absolute Resolve succeeded in bringing Maduro back to the United States to face justice for his crimes, the United States allowed Maduro’s key lieutenants to remain in power. Delcy Rodríguez, the former vice president in the illegitimate Maduro government, has been in charge since Maduro’s arrest, aided by other former Maduro cronies like current Minister of Interior, Justice and Peace Diosdado Cabello. The current Venezuelan regime remains full of individuals with [ties](#) to cartels and terrorist organizations like [Tren de Aragua](#).

EARTHQUAKE

On June 24, 2026, at 6:04 PM local time, Venezuela was struck by back-to-back [earthquakes](#) less than a minute apart, one a magnitude of 7.2 and the other a magnitude of 7.5. These earthquakes caused extensive damage, [killing](#) thousands of people and [destroying](#) nearly 70,000 buildings, with an estimated \$37 billion in infrastructure damage. From the outset, the Delcy regime was attempting to undercount the casualties, including basing estimates mainly on high-income neighborhoods and ignoring the more vulnerable working-class areas. However, this appears to have been the most [devastating](#) earthquake to hit Venezuela in over a century.

Unlike the previous Venezuelan governments under Chávez and Maduro, the Delcy regime did formally request international assistance to respond to the earthquake. To date, the United States has provided over [\\$380 million](#) in under a month, along with multiple search-and-rescue teams.

In spite of this, the Delcy regime's response has been wholly inadequate, with Venezuelans expressing [significant frustration](#). On multiple occasions, the regime has blocked international assistance efforts, with Minister of Interior, Justice and Peace Diosdado Cabello—the target of a \$25 million U.S. [bounty](#) for cocaine trafficking and selling rocket launchers to a U.S.-designated terrorist organization—[caught on camera](#) physically blocking American rescue workers. Additionally, medical and rescue teams from Germany, Spain, and Chile were either prevented from entering Venezuela or repeatedly [harassed](#) by Venezuelan authorities once inside. Delcy even appointed someone for her reconstruction committee who is currently [sanctioned](#) by the United States for “blocking the delivery of critical humanitarian aid” in 2019.

CORRUPTION AND COVERUPS

At the heart of the Delcy regime's failure is ongoing [corruption](#), going back to the Maduro and Chávez regimes, that has drained resources from disaster response programs and allowed substandard infrastructure in exchange for bribes. Even as the United States was attempting to mount a herculean relief effort, U.S. military personnel needed to repair airport runways in Caracas which were already in disrepair, in spite of a Brazilian construction company having been awarded a contract to upgrade them after paying [\\$98 million](#) in bribes to Venezuelan government officials. Experts blame lax enforcement of building codes and inferior materials for the significant number of buildings that collapsed, lapses tied to a culture of kickbacks.

Rather than prioritizing the facilitation of assistance and supplies, the Delcy regime has been primarily concerned with covering up the evidence of this corruption, including by hindering the movement of international rescue teams. This cover up is also designed to hide proof of the regime's [criminal activity](#), as some of the hardest hit regions had served as bases for regime paramilitaries and hubs for drug trafficking.

SECURING U.S. INTERESTS

A stable Venezuela is critical for American security and economic interests in the Western Hemisphere. While removing Maduro was an important step, his chief lieutenants Delcy Rodríguez and Diosdado Cabello were equally corrupt and tied to criminal activities that harmed Americans. The earthquakes not only revealed the extent to which this regime's longstanding corruption put Venezuelans in unnecessary danger, but the deliberate attempts to impede and obstruct international assistance efforts demonstrated Americans cannot rely on this government to be a good partner moving forward. The United States cannot trust the Delcy regime to manage the \$380 million in disaster relief it provided, nor can American companies have any confidence that Venezuela will be a safe, profitable place to invest without significant reforms and a new government. And with Venezuelans understandably frustrated at the Delcy regime, there is a heightened risk for increased instability that could lead to violence and a renewed mass migration crisis.

In June 2026, there was some positive progress as the Delcy regime and representatives from the 2015 Venezuelan National Assembly, the last legitimately elected Venezuelan governmental body, began discussions about a [political transition](#). Key details still need to be addressed, but it is a good sign that reports are indicating both 2015 Venezuelan National Assembly President Dinorah Figueroa and the United States welcome the participation of prominent opposition leader, María Corina Machado. Her role will be dispositive in the final outcome.

