



14 January 2026

Minister of Foreign Affairs

For action by

23 January 2026

United States actions toward Venezuela: New Zealand positioning

BRIEFING Decision Submission

PURPOSE To provide an update on US actions toward Venezuela and propose New Zealand positioning as the situation evolves.

Contact details

NAME	ROLE	DIVISION	WORK PHONE
James Waite	Divisional Manager	Americas Division	s9(2)(a)
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Recommended referrals

Prime Minister	For information by	20 January 2026
Minister of Defence	For information by	20 January 2026

Minister's Office to complete

- | | | |
|--|---|------------------------------------|
| <input type="checkbox"/> Approved | <input type="checkbox"/> Noted | <input type="checkbox"/> Referred |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Needs amendment | <input type="checkbox"/> Declined | <input type="checkbox"/> Withdrawn |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Overtaken by events | <input type="checkbox"/> See Minister's notes | |

Comments

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Key points

- On Saturday 3 January, the United States carried out "Operation Absolute Resolve" in Venezuela to capture and transport President Nicolás Maduro and his wife Cilia Flores to the US to face narco-terrorism, cocaine importation, and weapons charges. Maduro and Flores are standing trial in New York and face the prospect of life imprisonment.

- s9(2)(h)

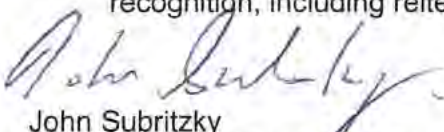
- s6(a)

- President Trump has stated that the US will "run Venezuela...until such time we can do a safe, proper and judicious transition." s6(a)

- New Zealand's response s6(a) and has been shaped by the principles agreed in our submission of 24 November 2025: (1) we expect all parties to comply with international law; (2) transnational criminal groups are a genuine security threat in the Americas and cannot act with impunity; these groups are a national security threat to New Zealand; (3) Venezuelans' democratic and human rights must be upheld; and (4) diplomacy and political dialogue are the preferred pathways to restoring democracy in Venezuela and resetting the country's economy.

- s6(a)

In line with our agreed principles, we propose New Zealand's position convey our support for the Venezuelan people to decide their future under free and fair elections. In the lead up to, and following any future elections in Venezuela, we will look to adhere to New Zealand's long-standing policy toward recognition, including reiterating concern with the Maduro regime's actions.



John Subritzky
for Secretary of Foreign Affairs and Trade

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Recommendations

It is recommended that you:

- 1 **Note** on 3 January the United States carried out “Operation Absolute Resolve” in Venezuela to capture and transport President Nicolás Maduro and his wife Cilia Flores to the US on narco-terrorism, cocaine importation, and weapons indictments; **Yes / No**
- 2 ^{s6(a)}
- 3 **Note** that New Zealand’s response to developments concerning Venezuela ^{s6(a)} and has been guided by the following principles, as agreed to in our submission of 24 November 2025: **Yes / No**
- 3.1 We expect all parties to comply with international law;
- 3.2 Transnational criminal groups are a genuine security threat in the Americas and cannot act with impunity; these groups are a national security threat to New Zealand;
- 3.3 Venezuelans’ democratic and human rights must be upheld; and
- 3.4 Diplomacy and political dialogue are the preferred pathways to restoring democracy in Venezuela and resetting the country’s economy.
- 4 **Agree** that should New Zealand ^{s6(a)} should convey our support for the Venezuelan people to decide their future under free and fair elections that are free from external interference, in line with our agreed principles. **Yes / No**
- 5 ^{s6(a)}
- 6 **Refer** a copy of this submission to the Prime Minister and Minister of Defence. **Yes / No**

Rt Hon Winston Peters
Minister of Foreign Affairs

Date: / /

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Report

“Operation Absolute Resolve”

1. On 3 January the United States carried out Operation Absolute Resolve to capture and transport President Nicolás Maduro and his wife Cilia Flores to the US on indictments of “narco-terrorism conspiracy, cocaine importation conspiracy, possession of machineguns and destructive devices, and conspiracy to possess machineguns and destructive devices”.
2. In a show of considerable US military capability, and in what the US has described as a “law enforcement operation”, Maduro’s capture involved more than 150 aircraft including bombers, fighter jets and reconnaissance planes. At least five locations in Venezuela were targeted by US strikes, with Maduro ultimately captured by the US Army’s Delta Force at Fuerte Tiuna, a large and heavily fortified military complex in Caracas. The operation’s death toll has been reported at around 100 people, including Venezuelan military personnel, civilians, and 32 Cuban security personnel. The US military sustained damage to a helicopter but recorded no fatalities.
3. The operation followed months of escalating US military, political and economic measures aimed at securing Maduro’s exit from Venezuela. These included kinetic strikes on small vessels, a blockade on and seizure of sanctioned oil tankers, and the designation of Cartel de los Soles ^{s6(a)} as a Foreign Terrorist Organisation. According to comments issued by Ambassador Mike Waltz at an emergency meeting of the United Nations Security Council on 5 January, Maduro was provided multiple “off ramps” prior to his capture which he “refused to take”.
4. Following transportation to the US, Maduro and Flores were arraigned in a Manhattan federal court on 5 January, where both pled not guilty. They will remain in custody at the Metropolitan Detention Centre in Brooklyn until their next court date on 17 March, which is expected to be a pretrial hearing focused on procedural matters. Both Maduro and Flores could face up to life imprisonment if found guilty.

s6(a)

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s6(a)

Future of Venezuela

10. President Trump has stated that the US will “run Venezuela...until such time we can do a safe, proper and judicious transition.”^{s6(a)}

11.

12. Secretary Rubio has outlined a phased approach to US intervention in Venezuela. This includes a “stabilization” phase to prevent economic and political collapse by securing and disbursing Venezuelan oil “in a way that benefits the Venezuelan people”; a “recovery” phase to rebuild civil society and allow US oil companies to access the Venezuelan market; and a “transition” phase to release political prisoners and hold elections.

Reactions from others

13. Internationally, there has been a spectrum of reactions to the US operation, ranging from support to condemnation. Most positions exist in between with countries seeking to balance concern about the Maduro regime with concern for adherence to international law.

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14. Thus far Australia, the UK and Canada have issued statements restating concern about conditions under Maduro's regime, reiterating both the need for a democratic transition in Venezuela and support for the observance of international law. ^{s6(a), s6(b)(i)}
15. ^{s6(a)} Singapore, France and Norway have all criticised the US operation in Venezuela as a violation of international law.
16. Brazil, Chile, Colombia, Mexico, Uruguay and Spain have come out strongly against the US operation and on 5 January issued a joint statement which "firmly reject[s] the military actions undertaken unilaterally in Venezuelan territory".
17. In the multilateral setting, United Nations Secretary General Antonio Guterres has underscored the importance of sticking to principles including "respect for the UN Charter", "respect for the principles of sovereignty, political independence and territorial integrity of states", and "the prohibition of the threat or use of force".
18. Reactions from Venezuelans both inside and outside of the Venezuela have been mixed. Reporting and social media suggest that the diaspora, which now consists around 8 million people, is relieved about Maduro's removal, and holds hope for a democratic transition. The reaction from within Venezuela has been muted due to fears of persecution for supporting the US operation, and because of other priorities, such as access to food and medicine.

^{s9(2)(h)}

New Zealand's response

22. New Zealand's response to the situation ^{s6(a)} has been shaped by the principles agreed in our submission of 24 November 2025:
1. We expect all parties to comply with international law;
 2. Transnational criminal groups are a genuine security threat in the Americas and cannot act with impunity; these groups are also a national security threat to New Zealand;

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3. Venezuelans' democratic and human rights must be upheld; and
4. Diplomacy and political dialogue are the preferred pathways to restoring democracy in Venezuela and resetting the country's economy.

23. ^{s6(a)}

In line with our agreed framing principles, we propose that any New Zealand position on governance should emphasise our support for the Venezuelan people to decide their future under free and fair elections that are free from external interference.

24. In the lead up to, and following any future elections in Venezuela, we will look to adhere to New Zealand's long-standing policy toward recognition (or non-recognition) of governments¹. In accordance with this, should New Zealand be asked to comment on Maduro's (il)legitimacy as president of Venezuela, we propose to infer our non-recognition through reiterating our concerns with both the fraudulent way he came to power and the actions of his regime. ^{s6(a)}

25. Given the evolving nature of developments in Venezuela, we propose that New Zealand's response and positioning remain under review ^{s6(a)}

¹ New Zealand has a long-standing policy of not making statements giving formal recognition to governments. Our position on recognition of a government is to be inferred from conduct as well as the nature and level of dealings with the government.