

Country Report on Terrorism 2023 - Chapter 1 - Venezuela

Overview: Maduro and his representatives continued to provide a permissive environment for certain terrorist groups to operate inside Venezuelan territory. Maduro and his representatives cooperated with nonstate armed groups where their interests aligned, including by providing safe haven for Colombian-origin, U.S.-designated terrorist groups such as ELN, FARC-EP, and Segunda Marquetalia. Enabled by Maduro and his representatives, terrorist groups, insurgents, and criminals operated in large stretches of the nation's territory, profiting from illicit activities and financial ties they have built with elements of the Venezuelan state.

Maduro and his representatives treat nonstate armed groups selectively, at times dealing with them through cooperation and at other times engaging in conflict with them. There are NGO reports that "mutually beneficial nexuses" between 1) ELN and Frente Acacio Medina and 2) political and military officials in Amazonas state exist. Human Rights Watch reported "Venezuelan security agents have conducted joint operations with ELN fighters and have been complicit in their abuses." NGOs report that Maduro has allowed the ELN to take control of small-scale mines, and that the ELN has engaged in repressing protests.

Drug seizures at clandestine laboratories along the border with Colombia suggest ELN and FARC-EP dissidents are expanding cocaine processing in Zulia state – possibly to evade security forces in Colombia. Media and local NGOs also have reported the presence of "irregular armed groups" in Amazonas, Anzoátegui, Apure, Bolívar, Delta Amacuro, Falcón, Guárico, Mérida, Nueva Esparta, Sucre, Táchira, and Zulia states.

2023 Terrorist Incidents: Violent extremist groups continued to fight against Maduro and his representatives and among themselves for domination of the illicit economy in Venezuela in 2023.

- On July 6, Ivan Marquez, leader of the U.S.-designated terrorist group Segunda Marquetalia, reportedly died in Venezuela, though – as was the case when his death was reported in July 2022 – the death has not been confirmed. Later reports, including an alleged audio message from Marquez in August, cast doubt on the claim.
- In September the Red Cross in Colombia confirmed the evacuation of persons injured in conflict between ELN and FARC-EP in Tame, Arauca state.

Legislation, Law Enforcement, and Border Security: Maduro and his representatives continued to use terrorism charges to target political dissidents and civil society groups. In August the Office of the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights condemned Venezuela's "chronic misuse" of counterterrorism laws to convict trade unionists and labor leaders. On December 6, Maduro and his representatives detained NGO Súmate's director Roberto Abdul (who helped organize the democratic opposition's October primary election) and three campaign staffers for opposition presidential candidate María Corina Machado and charged them with conspiring against Maduro's December 3 referendum on the disputed Essequibo territory. Tarek William Saab, a Maduro representative claiming the title of attorney general, accused the group of involvement in an alleged plot against Maduro. Abdul was required to appear before a court that adjudicates terrorism cases every 15 days and was prohibited from leaving Venezuela.

Countering the Financing of Terrorism: Venezuela is a member of the Caribbean Financial Action Task Force, and its Financial Intelligence Unit is a member of the Egmont Group. There were no significant changes in 2023.

Countering Violent Extremism: There were no known efforts to counter violent extremism under way in 2023.

International and Regional Cooperation: Since November 2022, Maduro has served as the guarantor of peace talks between the Colombian government and the ELN organized as part of Colombian President Petro's efforts to bring "total peace" to Colombia. On November 17, Vladimir Padrino Lopez, a Maduro representative claiming the title of defense minister, met with Colombian Defense Minister Ivan Velasquez to discuss migration and security along the Venezuelan-Colombian border. The two signed a joint declaration to combat transnational organized crime and agreed to increase Venezuelan and Colombian security force presence along the border. Media noted that Venezuela has failed to cooperate with Colombia on combating terrorism and transnational crime, allowing the ELN and other nonstate armed groups to transit freely between Norte de Santander and Arauca in Colombia and Zulia and Táchira states in Venezuela.