"Sanctions seek to isolate the Venezuelan people and the Venezuelan population as a people that wants to be a different option to capitalism." - Laura Franco, Simon Bolivar Institute

On July 28, 2023, the International People's Tribunal on US Imperialism: Sanctions, Blockades, Coercive Economic Measures conducted its in-person hearing on U.S. sanctions targeting the Bolivarian Republic of Venezuela. The hearing came at the conclusion of a week-long fact-finding mission in which delegates, including a co-chair of the Tribunal, rapporteurs, jurors and steering committee members, met with a wide array of representatives from communes, women's organizations, LGBT organizations, children's rights campaigners, health workers and officials, Afro-Venezuelan communities and representatives of the Venezuelan government, including the Anti-Blockade Observatory directed by Venezuela's Ministry of Foreign Affairs specifically to challenge unlawful coercive economic measures targeting the Caribbean nation. The fact-finding mission was organized by the Tribunal together with the Simon Bolivar Institute, which works to coordinate global solidarity with the Bolivarian revolution and the Venezuelan people.

Historical Background

Simon Bolivar is not only a historical figure but a modern political symbol of the Venezuelan people – and indeed, the peoples of Latin America and the Caribbean – struggle against imperialist domination and colonial exploitation. The history of Bolivar's struggle for independence is intertwined with Indigenous struggles and resistance and the history of slave revolts through 300 years of Spanish colonialism, often led by Afro-Venezuelans, in today's Bolivarian Revolution.

Influenced by the Haitian, U.S., and French revolutions, the 1811 independence struggle in Venezuela sought not only national independence and sovereignty for Venezuela alone but was based on a pan-Latin American vision of unity in a "Patria Grande" throughout the region, free of the domination of Spain, the United States, or other imperialist powers. After the initial military defeat of the Venezuelan First Republic, Bolivar and his forces received support from Haiti and returned to Venezuela to resume the fight for independence. Bolivar's patriotic army was no longer confined to the sector of the Venezuelan elite that sought independence from Spain but incorporated liberated slaves, indigenous peoples, and urban poor and peasant masses. In 1821, the Battle of Carabobo was a

significant milestone on the road to the pronouncement of Venezuelan full independence in 2023, soon followed by the independence of Ecuador, Bolivia, Colombia, Peru, and Panama.

At the same time, the United States announced its Monroe Doctrine, claiming all of Latin America and the Caribbean as its sphere of influence. While purportedly supporting independence from Spain, the United States quickly showed that it viewed Venezuela – and all of Latin America and the Caribbean as its own imperial domain. While the U.S. claimed to support Venezuela in the late 19th and early 20th centuries against various European rivals, including the United Kingdom and the Netherlands, the U.S. Navy worked with Venezuelan Vice President Juan Vicente Gómez to carry out a coup. Most significantly, Gomez in power granted valuable Venezuelan petroleum concessions to foreign oil firms, including Standard Oil and Royal Dutch Shell.

As Brett Wilkins notes, "Rómulo Betancourt, who served two presidential terms in the mid-20th century and is considered the founding father of modern democratic Venezuela, wrote that Gómez "was the instrument of foreign control of the Venezuelan economy, the ally and servant of powerful outside interests.'"

Venezuela's petroleum resources are the largest in the world, greater than the second-largest reserves of Saudi Arabia. The country also possesses significant additional natural resources, including natural gas. As a result, control of Venezuela's petroleum resources has been a primary target of U.S. policy in Venezuela for over 100 years, including providing support for any political force that was willing to ensure the continued exploitation of Venezuela's resources by U.S. corporations.

The Bolivarian Revolution emerged as a response to the conditions created for the vast majority of the Venezuelan people due to the concentration of land wealth in large estates, the use of the wealth of the Venezuelan people to export abroad or fund a narrow sector of the Venezuelan bourgeoisie, and IMF-backed austerity programs leading to price increases and cuts in petroleum subsidies to the public. The army fired on protesters in 1989, leading to a growth in the movement that developed through 1992, when Hugo Chavez and several fellow officers in the army who were part of the Revolutionary Bolivarian Movement-200 attempted a coup. While the coup was unsuccessful, Chavez's

movement only became more popular during his two years in prison, and he was elected president of Venezuela in 1998, sparking the process of the Bolivarian Revolution.

The Chávez government presided over a radical democratic experience and a socialist process that included land reform, industrial nationalization, the creation of communal councils or communes, and widespread social programs dedicated to lifting Venezuelans out of poverty. The Bolivarian Revolution has always taken a pan-Latin American and pan-Caribbean approach, aligned with global anti-imperialist politics and directly in confrontation with the United States.

The United States backed an attempted military coup on April 11, 2002, against Chávez, which installed Pedro Carmona as acting president for 36 hours. A mass response in the streets of Venezuela forced Chávez's return to office. During Chavez's time in office, he was repeatedly re-elected and played a major role in launching Bolivarian projects as alternatives to U.S.-dominated regional institutions. In addition, Venezuela's nationalized petroleum industry and its US-based subsidiary, Citgo, also dedicated gas and oil products to support impoverished communities in the U.S., especially Black and Brown communities.

Following Chavez's death in 2013, Nicolas Maduro, also a longtime member of Chavez's movement and vice president of Venezuela, became president and was later elected to several terms of office as President of Venezuela, despite extensive intervention from the United States and support for Venezuela's right-wing opposition. In 2014 and 2015, the United States and its allies imposed a wide array of sanctions on Venezuela, particularly targeting government institutions, including PDVSA (Petróleos de Venezuela, S.A), the nationalized Venezuelan petroleum corporation. The sanctions were justified on the basis of unproven claims of election fraud by members of the right-wing opposition who had been backed by the United States, as well as assertions that it was unacceptable for Venezuelan authorities to disperse violent protests openly aimed at overthrowing the government led by the right-wing opposition. The sanctions imposed on Venezuela escalated in 2017 under the Trump government and have continued under the Biden government.

Political Context

The United States government has made it completely clear that one of its top foreign policy priorities is to depose the democratically elected government of Venezuela and to replace it with one that will open Venezuela's vast oil reserves to exploitation by US transnational oil companies. In recent years, the United States and its allies have unleashed a devastating blockade against Venezuela, targeting virtually all sectors of the economy, in hopes of triggering regime change. The economic aggression against Venezuela began with individual sanctions and it quickly escalated to a full-fledged blockade. The country's oil, mining, banking and food import sectors have been the subject of unilateral coercive measures.

Both the Bush and Obama administrations did not hide their opposition to the elected leadership of Hugo Chavez. Bush cut off the selling of arms to Venezuela and members of his administration and other governmental officials, including those tied to the "dirty wars" of the 1980s were tied to the attempted coup that took place against Chavez in 2022, with the Bush administration immediately endorsing the governance of businessman Pedro Carmona, which lasted only 48 hours.

On March 8, 2015, President Obama issued Executive Order (EO) 13692, which declared a national emergency, calling Venezuela "an unusual and extraordinary threat to the national security and foreign policy of the United States," and imposed sanctions on several Venezuelan officials. The order was issued just a month after congress passed the Venezuela Defense of Human Rights and Civil Society Act of 2014 which imposed unilateral sanctions on seven Venezuelan security and judicial officials. President Donald Trump would intensify the economic sanctions against Venezuela in what has been referred to as a "maximum pressure" campaign in 2019, 6 months after declaring Juan Guiado as the interim president of Venezuela, declaring President Nicloas Maduro as "illegitimate". The Biden Administration continued these policies with no amendments.

Impact on the Economy

The impact on the Venezuelan economy has been significant and far-reaching. The sanctions targeting Venezuela are unilateral coercive measures, illegal under international law and understood as an act of war. Our Fact-Finding Mission frequently heard the term "economic war" used to describe the sanctions regime, especially in the 2017-2020 period, prior to the COVID-19 pandemic. It is our

finding that it is accurate to label the sanctions imposed on Venezuela to be an illegal war conducted through economic means, aimed at undermining Venezuelan sovereignty.

Further, given the specific targeting of the health and nutrition of the Venezuelan people, including their access to food and essential medicines, the United States is responsible for attempted genocide targeting Venezuela, seemingly in the interests of exploiting the valuable oil and natural gas resources of Venezuela, in addition to preventing another alternative path of socialist development – alongside, but distinctly different from Cuba – in Latin America. 2023 marks the 200th year of the Monroe Doctrine, and the United States has attempted a genocide against the Venezuelan people in order to once again impose its domination over the entire region.

In response to the sanctions regime, the Venezuelan government has created the Anti-Blockade Observatory within the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and the International Center for Productive Investment. This organization tracks the use of unilateral coercive measures against Venezuela and other targeted countries, viewing the sanctions on Venezuela as part of an international regime of coercion and violations of sovereignty.

There have been 930 different sanctions imposed on Venezuela since 2015. These have targeted the Venezuelan government, government officials, public finances, PDVSA and the oil industry, foreign trade, the banking system, foreign debt, Venezuelan currency and a number of ships and airplanes.

Given Venezuela's significant historic dependence on petroleum sales, especially to the United States as the primary recipient of Venezuelan oil, the impact of these sanctions was particularly severe. Since 2015, the country's income from foreign sources fell 90%, leading to significant hardship for a large number of Venezuelans. During the worst years of the crisis, we met with Venezuelans, including the families of ministerial-level government officials, who reported that they did not eat meat for over a year.

The majority – 60% of sanctions and other coercive economic measures imposed on Venezuela – were instituted by the United States, with the remainder by its allies in Canada, Switzerland, the UK, European Union and several Latin

American governments, including Panama. They target 468 individuals, including many high-ranking Venezuelan officials. In addition to imposing sanctions on Venezuelan President Nicolas Maduro for convening elections to the Constituent Assembly in 2017, a new set of sanctions were imposed on the Venezuelan government for trading with Iran, in breach of another set of unlawful U.S. unilateral coercive measures. They also target 171 companies, 69 vessels and 58 aircrafts, mostly those of the Venezuelan national airline, Conviasa.

The sanctions led to a loss of production of approximately 3.993 trillion barrels of oil, for a loss to Venezuela of $232 billion. Between 2015 and 2020, the production of PDVSA fell 87%, largely as a result of the sanctions. While there was a worldwide dip in oil prices as a result of economic decisions coordinated between the U.S. and Saudi Arabia and fracking in the U.S., Canada and elsewhere, the effects on the Venezuelan economy far outstripped those of other oil-producing nations and did not reflect a simple market downturn. Businesses that trade with PDVSA, like Rosneft Trading, TNK Trading and others, have themselves been sanctioned, while marine vessels transporting Venezuelan oil have come under attack, been sanctioned or confiscated. Furthermore, the U.S. has attempted to directly confiscate, freeze and redirect the assets of the Venezuelan people in the oil sector, particularly CITGO.

CITGO: Looting of Venezuelan assets by the United States

The case of CITGO, the subsidiary of PDVSA that owns a string of refineries and gas stations in the United States, is instructive in the form of seizure of public assets abroad that have come to define the sanctions regime targeting Venezuela. For example, Venezuelan gold held in British and other international banks has been denied repatriation and instead frozen in these international banks. Most recently, Venezuela successfully won its claim in Portugal to reclaim its $1.5 billion in frozen state assets stored in the country's Novo Banco (which, it is worth noting, is 75% owned by U.S. private equity firm Lone Star Funds.)

CITGO is valued at up to $13 billion and has paid up to $500 million to $1 billion in dividends each year. It is the most important foreign asset of the Bolivarian Republic of Venezuela, including three oil refineries and over 4,400 gas stations. The attack on CITGO has combined U.S. coercive economic measures, international court rulings that prioritize corporate greed over national

sovereignty, and Venezuela's right-wing opposition, working to advance the interests of both prior parties.

In January 2019, the U.S. Treasury Department froze CITGO and its U.S. assets. This occurred at the same time that the U.S. under Donald Trump recognized Juan Guaido as the "interim president" of Venezuela. As discussed earlier, this was a ploy by the U.S. and the Venezuelan opposition in an attempt to spark a coup. What this also meant, however, was that this alleged "interim government" was recognized as the rightful owner of Venezuelan state property, including CITGO. Guaido appointed a board to CITGO that was then placed in charge of dealing with court challenges from mining companies and other firms, including fellow oil company rivals. In 2021, after even Guaido's term as an elected member of parliament had ended, he continued to be recognized as the "interim president" of Venezuela, including his control over CITGO, until December 2022, when he was removed from this nonexistent position by fellow opposition forces. Despite the fact that there is no longer an "interim president" of Venezuela nor anyone claiming the term, the Venezuelan embassy in the United States continue to be held by representatives of this nonexistent entity, and its control over CITGO and other frozen assets has not been released.

The legitimate government of Venezuela was prevented from legally representing itself or providing representation to CITGO in several cases from foreign interests pursuing claims against CITGO itself or the Bolivarian Republic, notably the lawsuit by US oil giant ConocoPhillips, which sued Venezuela over the nationalization of assets inside Venezuela in 2007-2008, and Rusoro Mining, a Canadian corporation pursuing a similar claim. Lawyers appointed by the Venezuelan opposition either did not show up to court or dropped their appeals against these companies. Guaido's appointed team also struck a deal to pay ConocoPhillips over $1.287 billion from CITGO's assets.

The role of international financial agencies in the coercive economic measures imposed on Venezuela is also clear in this context. The International Center for the Settlement of Investment Disputes (ICSID) ordered Venezuela to pay ConocoPhillips billions of dollars because the Venezuelan people took their own resources into their own hands. The ICSID further ordered Venezuela to pay $1.4 billion to Crystallex, a Canadian mining corporation (like Rusoro) that alleged "damages" over the nationalization of a Venezuelan gold mine, which Crystallex

had never been given final approval to operate and where the company was found responsible for multiple labour and environmental violations. The ICSID is currently being used by U.S. company Prospera in an attempt to prevent Honduras from repealing its law allowing the creation of ZEDEs, corporately owned private "city-states." The ICSID decisions have repeatedly been used to prevent nations, particularly in the Global South, from controlling their own resources.

Further, while these decisions largely came against the Venezuelan government, they are now being enforced against PDVSA and its subsidiaries, particularly CITGO, because a U.S federal court ruled in 2019 that PDVSA is an "alter ego" of the Venezuelan government. This is despite long-standing precedent that state-owned companies are not an alter ego of the state. In the meantime, the Venezuelan opposition "interim government" declared the 2020 PDVSA debt bond offering "invalid," refusing to pay and sparking new lawsuits, again in U.S. courts.

The seizure of CITGO, its potential breakup by U.S. courts to "creditors," most of which are foreign multinational corporations stopped from plundering Venezuela's natural resources by the actions of the Bolivarian Republic, and its plundering by opposition representatives "recognized" as a fake government by U.S. officials, is nothing short of criminal grand theft of the highest order and perhaps one of the clearest examples, alongside the seizure of Iranian and Syrian oil, of sanctions and coercive economic measures as a direct form of value transfer from the Global South to the imperial core.

The Case of Venezuelan Diplomat Alex Saab

Alex Saab is a Venezuelan diplomat who was appointed by President Maduro as a Special Envoy to Iran with a mission to obtain critical goods from Iran to help Venezuela cope with the deprivation of basic needs as result of years of uniliateral U.S. economic sanctions and the Covid-19 pandemic, a crisis exacerbated by these sanctions.

His role as "special envoy" for Venezuela to Iran, another nation targeted by unlawful U.S. sanctions, was to trade crude oil and gold for food, medicine, fuel and other material to keep the Venezuelan productive economy running despite

the devastating effects of U.S. unilateral coercive economic measures (UCMs). U.S. goals for regime change in Venezuela relies on the sanctions continuing to deprive Venezuela of basic needs to the point of destabilization. The U.S. has gone as far as seizing millions of barrels of Iranian fuel headed to Venezuela on the high-seas to block these two sovereign nations from engaging in peaceful trade, thus evading the illegal American economic sanctions.

Saab was intercepted and seized unlawfully in Cabo Verde as his plane was refueling on June 12, 2020, on his third trip from Venezuela to Iran as special envoy. Saab was engaging in legal international trade. He was arrested without a warrant, with an Interpol red notice received only after his arrest on a series of charges related to violation of U.S. sanctions. He remained in this tiny island nation, where he was subjected to torture for over a year.

On October 16th, 2021 the Venezuelan diplomat Alex Saab was effectively kidnapped and brought to the United States. He was “renditioned” from a nation without an extradition treaty and before a final extradition decision could be given through the legal process in Cabo Verde. The action was taken in secret, without notifying his defense team and without relevant documentation.He continues to be illegally held in the Federal Detention Center in Miami, FLA.

The reason the US is persecuting Alex Saab, revealed by Forbes, is because he is “the key that unlocks the Venezuelan monetary mystery—that is, how a country facing sanctions from the US, the UK, and the European Union—is still able to export things like gold and oil…and really the only man who can actually explain how the country [Venezuela] survives today.” According to the New York Times, “Saab [was] widely believed to be the architect of the economic deals that [were] keeping the Maduro government afloat.”

The arrest, imprisonment, kidnapping and torture of a diplomat is an unprecedented violation of international laws. The case raises dangerous precedents both in terms of the violation of rules which have been established for centuries governing the freedom of movement of diplomats and the extraterritorial judicial overreach by the US in enforcing its unilateral coercive measures against Venezuela and 40 other countries, comprising a third of humanity.

The majority of the criminal charges against Saab were dropped, with one charge of "money laundering" to violate US sanctions remaining. After an exhaustive investigation by Swiss prosecutors of this US charge that Saab had used Swiss banks for "money laundering," the case was dropped. Yet, the U.S. continues to accuse Saab of "loot[ing] hundreds of millions of dollars from starving Venezuelans,". These findings and countless reports show that this is what the U.S. is doing through their economic sanctions.

The United States has consistently ignored Saab's diplomatic status, arguing that he was not acting in the capacity as special envoy for Venezuela, despite evidence that the U.S. government clearly understood him to be a diplomat. The federal court ruling in Miami denying Saab's diplomatic status showed that the U.S. persistent denial of Saab's diplomatic immunity is entrenched in their wider U.S. regime change goals for Venezuela. The ruling stated that even if it could be established that Saab was acting as a special envoy, he would not be recognized as such because the U.S. does not recognize the legitimacy of the Venezuelan Government. The court stated:

"Only the President may determine which governments are legitimate in the eyes of the United States and which are not[.].. It is clear that the United States does not recognize the Maduro regime to represent the official government of Venezuela. Instead, '[t]he United States recognizes Interim President Juan Guaid[ó] and considers the 2014 democratically elected Venezuelan National Assembly, which he currently leads, to be the only legitimate federal institution, according to the Venezuelan Constitution.... Maduro's regime has been deemed 'illegitimate.' Accordingly, any claim to diplomatic immunity asserted by a representative of the Maduro regime must also be considered illegitimate."

Social Impacts

The impact of these sanctions has not only been felt at the macroeconomic level but throughout every sector of society. During our Fact-Finding Mission we heard from representatives of multiple organizations and social sectors who demonstrated and spoke about the role of coercive economic measures in their lives in the past eight years.

Women

"Women are the first victims of all of this aggression" - Yhosmary Franco (Gender with Class Foundation)

At least 65% of households in Venezuela are headed by women who are tasked with solving day-to-day economic challenges of families, battling the day-to-day impact of the economic sanctions. It has also been a product of the sanctions that Venezuelans are being forced to migrate. On one level it has left women to manage multigenerational households on their own. Women have also had to stop studying, pursuing careers in order to work to support the survival of these households under worsening conditions. The sanctions have also cut off vital medicines for women including those used to treat cervix and breast cancer and cut off access to contraceptives which the State previously provided. In 2014, the state's High-Cost Medicines program distributed 535,071 medications in 2014, in 2020 only 64,078 medications were distributed. The new reality of survival has also impacted the mental health of women.

Yhosmary Franco, a co-founder of the Foundation, testified at the Hearing of the Fact-Finding Mission: "The Bolivarian process made women more visible as subjects of the revolution. It gave us rights and it gave us institutions to have access to those rights….As a product of these coercive unilateral measures against Venezuela, we had to assume different roles. We were advancing a feminist agenda (Bolivarian process) and now we are fighting for our rights."

Women also represented 80% of those who had joined and led popular organizations as part of the Bolivarian process. "We had to put it aside. We had to stay home to solve the problems of the day,
with daily problems, producing that women then, we dedicate ourselves to survive with our children,
to provide for our children, and to solve the day-to-day problems due to the shortages," Franco said.

She further discussed the issue of compelled or forced migration due to economic crisis as a project that was advanced specifically by Western powers at the same time they imposed coercive economic measures upon Venezuela, leaving people to search for funds to support their families. "In many cases,

women saw themselves in the need to go to other countries where they, many times, ended up being victims of human trafficking. All these problems are more acute, and the crisis is not neutral with respect to gender. When we speak about coercive unilateral measures against the Venezuelan people, it's the women, the one who, it's us women, the one who receives the highest weight of this criminal war waged against us."

LGBT Community

Alexis Bolivar of the Breaking the Norm Foundation also reported on the effects of unilateral coercive measures on the LGBT community. After detailing the advances in human rights made as part of the Bolivarian project and the support the community had received from the government, including laws passed in 2019, 2017, 2014, 2012, 2011 and 2010 that prohibited discrimination, he drew attention to serious concerns about non-governmental organizations funded by the U.S. and other western countries. He noted that these organizations have promoted migration and offered to write letters claiming that LGBT rights in Venezuela are under attack. In reality, he said, LGBT people are facing the same severe economic crisis caused by the sanctions, which is also a social crisis. He warned that vulnerable and impoverished LGBT people in Venezuela were being targeted for an international propaganda campaign rather than these organizations helping to advance rights and protections in Venezuela, despite their large budget. He also spoke about the dangers of human trafficking on the borders, noting that trans women in particular had been victims of trafficking agents and faced severe risks of assault and exploitation.

Agriculture

Venezuelan agriculture has been severely affected by the sanctions, although it has also been a notable point of resistance and self-organizing, with Venezuela's food sovereignty growing significantly, especially in the 2019-2023 period of economic growth despite the extreme restrictions caused by the loss of 90% of external income. The Fact-Finding Mission heard from the Pueblo a Pueblo initiative, which links rural producers to communities in Venezuelan cities to directly link up for production, sale, distribution and consumption, cutting out speculators, smugglers and middlemen, who are often part of Venezuela's

wealthy class, and allowing for direct collaboration between rural farmers and communes and cooperatives to build greater food sovereignty.

On multiple occasions, food production has been a particular target for sanctions. In 2017, international financial institutions refused to process $297 million in transfers for Venezuela's seed bank. As noted above in the case of Alex Saab, the CLAP program, which provides food boxes to working-class people throughout Venezuela, has come under specific and severe sanctions. The Colombian government under Ivan Duque blocked the shipment of 400,000 kilos of food to Venezuela that had been purchased for the CLAP program, and in 2018, $17 million in soybean cake was seized after a Swiss bank refused to release Venezuela's sovereign funds.

The sanctions have made it far more difficult for producers to transport their goods to market, as travel costs have shot up and there is a shortage of spare parts to repair vehicles, leaving rural producers subject to the whims of middlemen. As Pueblo a Pueblo noted, "Ours is not simply a plan for the sale of food at prices below market, nor is it a form of food delivery. We are instead developing a new way of relating: self-managed socialism, producing food and distributing it communally, without intermediaries, along a plan organised to meet need. This poses the economic planning of the organized people directly against capitalist relations of production."

Healthcare

The Fact-Finding Mission visited the Latin American Children's Cardiology Hospital, a large and innovative hospital set up by the Bolivarian government of President Chavez, which provides free advanced cardiology treatment and surgeries to children throughout Venezuela and all of of Latin America. The director of the hospital, Dr. Isabel Iturria, spoke movingly of the costs imposed by sanctions, including lack of access to medicines and lack of access to necessary supplies, including replacement parts for advanced equipment. Only 20% of hospital equipment is functioning fully up to standards due to the inability to acquire spare parts. At the Cardiology Hospital, in 2020, the hospital conducted 120 surgeries, 10% of its previous number. In 2023, surgeries are now up to 406 this year, with a success rate of 96%.

Under the Venezuelan constitution, health care is a public responsibility and a human right. However, the sanctions that block trade with the Venezuelan government also directly require that only private corporations can purchase medicines and other essential health needs. These unilateral coercive measures can be understood as an attempt to force the privatization of Venezuelan healthcare through denial of urgent medical needs for the population. Further, the health impacts on the population are so severe that the unilateral coercive measures are even more than theft, looting of resources, and an attempt to forcibly privatize the health system: they indicate attempted genocide through denial of medical care.

Blood reagents were blocked from purchase, preventing 2.5 million patients from receiving blood tests and 123,000 from receiving blood transfusions in 2020. Over 180,000 surgeries were canceled due to a lack of antibiotics, anesthesia, and tuberculosis medicine. 2.6 million Venezuelan children have not been vaccinated for meningitis, rotavirus, malaria, measles, yellow fever and influenza due to a lack of vaccine equipment, in a sharp turn from the pre-2015 numbers.

Dr. Iturria emphasized the importance of partnerships with Cuba, China and Russia in forestalling and turning around some of the worst effects of the blockade on healthcare, but noted that the situation remained an extreme emergency.

Communes

Unilateral coercive measures have had a particularly severe impact on the communes, self-governed, large areas, in rural areas or in cities, that are part of the Bolivarian project aimed toward the development of socialism and the creation of new social relations. Communes are self-governed by commune councils, hold elections, and create productive enterprise, distributing the proceeds among the population. Our Fact-Finding Mission visited El Panal 2021 Commune in Caracas, but the effects of these measures on the communes has been felt nationwide. The commune runs a textile factory (which supplies school uniforms to Caracas public schools), a fish farm, a pig farm, a recycling plant and a radio station.

Communes were identified by Chavez as a key building block to socialism. They are denied access to goods, and as social units, are considered under the sanctions as governmental units subject to blockade. Combined with hoarding and sabotage by some elements of the private sector, communes have faced difficulty receiving fuel, fertilizer and other raw materials essential for production. “The pain and suffering caused by the US blockade are enormous, but we have learned a lot,” Robert Longo said, discussing how the commune developed new measures of self-reliance when the goods they sought to buy were no longer available.

Undermining the Bolivarian Process

Laura Franco of the Simon Bolivar Institute addressed a primary reason for the unilateral coercive measures:

> “One form of aggression against Venezuela comes from the mass media that plays a role in blocking vital information about Venezuela and the Bolivarian process. It has become difficult for us to talk about our political ideas, the ideas that grew from our sovereignty, to move forward toward 21st century socialism. Mass media puts forth a false narrative based on lies about the Bolivarian process.
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> For instance, the Bolivarian government is using social policies to address the impact of the sanctions that are being described as neoliberal and against the Venezuelan population. The reality is that due to the unconventional war on Venezuela,we have had to take emergency measures, forced to move towards a war economy.
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> A war economy means that we use all our efforts,as we have done in the past and we continue to do as people, as government and armed forces and the whole Venezuelan institutions to guarantee food for the most vulnerable populations.”

From the Children’s Cardiology Hospital to El Panal Commune, our fact-finding mission heard again and again that those sectors most heavily targeted by the

sanctions were also those with the strongest ties to the Bolivarian process and the drive to construct socialism in Venezuela. For a nation largely reliant on petroleum sales abroad, a cut of 90% in income from external sources is devastatingly catastrophic.

The U.S. has continued to expand its sanctions regime. As the Fact-Finding Mission returned from Venezuela, we learned of a new announcement of a $15 million reward for information leading to the arrest and/or conviction of Venezuelan President Nicolás Maduro, as well as three bills in the U.S. Congress that seek through legislative means to achieve the same ends: the Prohibition of Transactions and Leases with Venezuela's Illegitimate Authoritarian Regime Act, the Venezuelan Human Rights "AFFECT" Act and the Venezuelan Democracy Act. The bills have a common denominator: to further increase the pressure of the blockade and impose on it a framework of "humanitarian assistance".

It is clear that the intent of the sanctions are to deny the Venezuelan people sovereignty over their land and resources, force Venezuela's natural resources open to full and unfettered exploitation by U.S., Canadian and other multinational companies; and, above all, prevent the success of the Bolivarian project as an example of an alternative route of development towards socialism. To this end, the U.S. is responsible for ongoing crimes against humanity in Venezuela, up to and including genocide and attempted genocide through the use of coercive economic measures, as well as massive criminal theft against the people of Venezuela and their national wealth. There is tremendous resistance in Venezuela, from the continuing communal projects that are very determined with a high level of political education to confront the blockade, to a government committed to increasing food sovereignty, seeking alliances in a multipolar world, and developing creative strategies to confront the blockade. In this context, it is particularly urgent to ensure that the ongoing crimes against the people and nation of the Bolivarian Republic of Venezuela are not met with further impunity.