Crisis-Torn Venezuela Remains a Member of the UN’s Top Human Rights Body

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The United Nations’ secretary-general and top human rights official on Tuesday both expressed concern about the political crisis in Venezuela, but neither statement addressed the fact that the Nicolas Maduro regime is a member of the U.N.’s top human rights body.

Amid calls for the Human Rights Council to convene an emergency “special session” on the crisis, secretary-general Antonio Guterres’ spokesman explained that it was up to HRC member-states to decide on the agenda – and up to U.N. member-states at large to elect the members of the Geneva-based council.

“The HRC is a legislative body of the U.N. and it is up to the members to decide on the agenda,” Stephane Dujarric told CNSNews.com from New York.

“As for Venezuela’s membership on the HRC, it’s up to [U.N.] member-states to elect members of these legislative bodies. It’s not a process for the secretary-general to comment on.”

Dujarric added, however, that there was “ an expectation that every member-state will uphold the principals enshrined in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and international covenants.”

“As a matter of principle, those countries that sit on human tights bodies have an added responsibility.”

Venezuelan police overnight arrested opposition leaders Leopoldo Lopez and Antonio Ledezma – the mayor of Caracas – a day after Maduro threatened to jail critics of Sunday’s controversial vote in favor of creating a constituent assembly to rewrite Venezuela’s constitution. At least ten people were reportedly killed in violence linked to the vote.

“Maduro is not just a bad leader,” President Trump said in a [statement](https://www.whitehouse.gov/the-press-office/2017/07/31/statement-president-donald-j-trump) read out by National Security Advisor H.R. McMaster. “He is now a dictator.”

Asked during a press briefing in New York whether Guterres shares that view of Maduro, Dujarric said it was “not for the secretary-general to comment” on the U.S. assessment.

**‘What can we do to create a change of conditions’**

Secretary of State Rex Tillerson told reporters at the State Department that the administration was “evaluating all our policy options as to what can we do to create a change of conditions where either Maduro decides he doesn’t have a future and wants to leave of his own accord or we can return the government processes back to their constitution.”

The U.S. Treasury Department earlier announced sanctions against Maduro “for undermining democracy in Venezuela.”

The designation freezes any assets in the U.S. and prohibits any U.S. person or entity from doing business with him. It also includes a U.S. travel ban – six weeks before the annual high-level U.N. General Assembly session which Maduro has attended several times since becoming president in 2013 – and in earlier years as foreign minister.

Maduro joins a small group of heads of government to be personally sanctioned by the U.S. –Syrian President Bashar al-Assad, North Korean leader Kim Jong-un and Zimbabwean President Robert Mugabe.

None of those other three countries have been members of the HRC in Geneva since its establishment in 2006. Venezuela has, however, twice – from 2013-2015, and now again for a three-year term in 2016-2018.

Since all 193 members of the U.N. General Assembly elect members of the HRC it is only the General Assembly that can decide to suspend a member.

It has only done so once – suspending Muammar Gaddafi’s Libya in 2011, although afterwards Venezuela’s envoy called the step premature and the Russian and Chinese ambassadors both [insisted that it did not establish a precedent](http://cnsnews.com/news/article/china-russia-insist-libya-s-suspension-un-human-rights-council-not-precedent).

This year, [almost one quarter of the HRC’s 47 members are autocracies](http://www.cnsnews.com/news/article/patrick-goodenough/un-human-rights-council-2017-almost-1-4-members-abuse-human-rights) with poor human rights records.

**‘If not now, when?’**

The Geneva-based rights group UN Watch is urging Guterres, U.N. human rights commissioner Zeid Ra’ad Al Hussein and U.S. ambassador to the U.N. Nikki Haley to support an emergency HRC session.

“The Maduro regime’s shameful actions constitute a flagrant violation of Venezuela’s basic human rights obligations as an elected member of the UNHRC, and this is the body which must now hold it to account,” said the group’s executive director, Hillel Neuer.

“More than 100 people have been killed in this year’s protests in Venezuela, while thousands have been injured. More than 400 are being held as political prisoners,” Neuer said. “The U.N.’s highest human rights body must take action. If not now, when?”

The HRC has held 26 special sessions in its 11-year history, including seven targeting Israel and five on the conflict in Syria.

Convening a special session requires the support of one-third, or 16, of the council’s members.

Twenty-one of the current members are democracies designated “free” by Freedom House.

Some of those – notably South Africa and India – have tended not to support Western initiatives seen to be targeting developing nations. On the other hand some members ranked “partly free,” such as Georgia and Albania, could potentially support calls for action against Venezuela.

Queries sent to the U.S. mission in New York and to Zeid’s office in Geneva brought no response by press time.

In an earlier statement, Haley said the U.S. would “keep all options on the table” in response to the regime's actions.

Venezuela’s council on ministers in a statement described the U.S. sanctions as “infamous imperial aggression.”

It called Maduro a “brave revolutionary fighter who will never kneel to any empire and will always raise the voice of our people and that of the peoples of the world who cry for justice and freedom.”