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Trump Says Russian Military Must Leave Venezuela

By Reuters

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Donald Trump **Gage Skidmore**

U.S. President Donald Trump on Wednesday called on Russia to pull its troops from Venezuela and said that "all options" were open to make that happen.

The arrival of two Russian air force planes outside Caracas on Saturday believed to be carrying nearly 100 Russian special forces and cybersecurity personnel has escalated the political crisis in Venezuela.

Russia and China have backed President Nicolas Maduro, while the United States and most other Western countries support opposition leader Juan Guaido. In January, Guaido invoked the constitution to assume Venezuela's interim presidency, arguing that Maduro's 2018 re-election was illegitimate.

"Russia has to get out," Trump told reporters in the Oval Office, where he met with Guaido's

wife, Fabiana Rosales.

Asked how he would make Russian forces leave, Trump said: "We'll see. All options are open."

Maduro, who retains control of state functions and the country's military, has said Guaido is a puppet of the United States.

Russia has bilateral relations and agreements with Venezuela and Maduro that it plans to honor, Russia's deputy U.N. ambassador, Dmitry Polyanskiy, said on Twitter.

A spokeswoman for Russia's Foreign Ministry, Maria Zakharova, said the United States should pull troops from Syria before telling Moscow to withdraw from Venezuela.

"Before giving advice to somebody to withdraw from somewhere, the United States should bring to life its own concept of exodus, particularly from Syria," Zakharova said, speaking on Russia's state Channel One, TASS news agency quoted her as saying.

Venezuela's economy is in tatters with food and medicine in short supply due to years of hyperinflation. In addition, citizens are now grappling with power blackouts that experts have blamed on years of neglect and maintenance.

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Earlier this year, the Trump administration slapped sanctions on state-owned oil company Petroleos de Venezuela, known as PDVSA, to try to cut off revenues to Maduro. Oil provides 90 percent of export revenue for Venezuela, an OPEC member. Trump has said tougher sanctions are still to come.

"Trying to break our morale"

U.S. Secretary of State Mike Pompeo told lawmakers on Wednesday that rebuilding after Maduro leaves office would be expensive.

"The day and week after is going to be a long process," Pompeo said. "I've seen estimates between $6 billion and $12 billion to repair" the economy, he said.

The Trump administration has asked Congress for up to $500 million in foreign aid to help "support a democratic transition in Venezuela," Pompeo said in written testimony to the U.S. House of Representatives.

At the White House, Rosales, Guaido's wife, told Trump and Vice President Mike Pence that food shortages in Venezuela were hurting children.

"They are trying to break our morale. They want to submerge us in eternal darkness. But let me tell you that there is light, and the light is here," said Rosales, a 26-year-old journalist and opposition activist.

Guaido was attacked on Tuesday, she told Trump. Upon leaving a National Assembly session, individuals threw stones at the vehicle Guaido was traveling in and tried to open its doors,

according to a Reuters witness.

"I fear for my husband's life," said Rosales, who was accompanied by the wife and sister of Roberto Marrero, Guaido's chief of staff, who was arrested and detained last week.

Rosales is slated to meet U.S. first lady Melania Trump in Palm Beach on Thursday on a swing through South Florida, home to the largest community of Venezuelan exiles in the United States.

Rosales also plans to meet with lawmakers on Capitol Hill and members of the Venezuelan diaspora at a prominent Washington think tank.

Pence praised Rosales for being "courageous."

"Our message very simply is: We're with you," Pence said.

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