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U.S. Seizes Russia-Linked Oil Tanker Chased to North Atlantic

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US_EUCOM / X

The United States on Wednesday seized a Russia-linked oil tanker in the North Atlantic after pursuing it from off the coast of Venezuela, in an operation condemned by Moscow.

Washington says the tanker is part of a shadow fleet that carries oil for countries such as Venezuela, Russia and Iran in violation of U.S. sanctions, and seized it despite the ship being escorted by the Russian Navy.

The vessel had thwarted an earlier attempt to board it last month near oil-rich Venezuela, where a U.S. raid on Saturday toppled the country's authoritarian president, Nicolás Maduro — a close ally of Moscow.

"The vessel was seized in the North Atlantic pursuant to a warrant issued by a U.S. federal court," U.S. European Command said in a statement on X, while Pentagon chief Pete Hegseth

posted that the American blockade on Venezuelan oil was in full effect "anywhere in the world."

Russia's Transport Ministry criticized the seizure, saying "freedom of navigation applies in waters on the high seas."

Its Foreign Ministry urged Washington to allow the swift return of Russian crew members from the ship, but White House Press Secretary Karoline Leavitt told journalists that they may be taken to the United States for prosecution.

The vessel, formerly known as the Bella-1, in recent weeks switched its registration to Russia, changed its name to the Marinera and the tanker's crew reportedly painted a Russian flag on the tanker.

Leavitt said Washington deemed the ship to be stateless.

US says will run Venezuela

The U.S. military also announced a second sanctioned tanker had been seized in the Caribbean Sea, bringing the total number of ships Washington has taken control of since last month to four.

Homeland Security chief Kristi Noem posted on X that both vessels "were either last docked in Venezuela or en route to it," and included a video of armed U.S. forces roping down from a helicopter onto an unidentified ship.

Embed:

> The @TheJusticeDept & @DHSgov, in coordination with the @DeptofWar today announced the seizure of
> the M/V Bella 1 for violations of U.S. sanctions. The vessel was seized in the North Atlantic pursuant to a warrant issued by a U.S. federal court after being tracked by USCGC Munro. pic.twitter.com/bm5KcCK30X
>
> — U.S. European Command (@US_EUCOM) January 7, 2026

The North Atlantic operation came despite Russia reportedly sending a submarine and other naval assets to escort the tanker.

It had been heading to Venezuela before it evaded the U.S. blockade, and has been under U.S. sanctions since 2024 over alleged ties to Iran and Hezbollah.

Last weekend, U.S. special forces snatched Maduro and his wife from Caracas and flew them to New York to face trial on drug charges.

Since then, Trump has said that the United States will run Venezuela and U.S. companies will

control its critical oil industry.

Brian Finucane, of the International Crisis Group, said the seizure of ships fitted the "overarching theme, both with respect to Venezuela and how this president approaches foreign policy in general, of taking the oil, quite literally in this case."

After criticism from lawmakers, Secretary of State Marco Rubio insisted the United States had a plan for Venezuela, saying the White House was "not just winging it."

In Caracas, after several days of shuttered shops and intermittent public transport, the capital's streets were again busy Wednesday with pedestrians, street vendors, cars and motorbikes.

Trump said Tuesday that 30-50 million barrels of Venezuelan crude will be shipped to U.S. ports, with the revenue — perhaps more than $2 billion at current market prices — placed under his personal control.

U.S. Energy Secretary Chris Wright added Wednesday that Washington will control sales of Venezuelan oil indefinitely, while state oil company PDVSA said negotiations for the sale of crude to the United States were underway.

Leavitt said proceeds from the sale of Venezuelan crude will go to U.S.-controlled accounts and then "will be dispersed for the benefit of the American people and the Venezuelan people."

Venezuela's interim president Delcy Rodríguez — a long-time member of Maduro's inner circle — has vowed cooperation with the United States amid fears that Trump could pursue wider regime change, and Leavitt said the country's decisions would now be "dictated" by Washington.

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