

# Venezuela – Rising U.S. Tensions

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## Summary

Venezuela faces rising tensions with the U.S. after disputed 2024 elections, economic collapse, and human rights abuses. Since July, Washington has escalated sanctions targeting Venezuelan government officials and entities linked to drug trafficking, deployed naval forces, and conducted strikes on Venezuelan speedboats allegedly involved in drug smuggling, including a strike on September 1 that killed 11 people. Since March, President Trump has labelled President Maduro as a global security threat. In response, Venezuela has, in recent weeks, intensified military exercises and armed civilian militias to demonstrate readiness amid stalled diplomacy.

## Recent events and developments

On September 20, the Venezuelan military conducted weapons training for civilians in Caracas, mobilising residents with armoured vehicles amid escalating U.S. naval activity and strikes, framing it as preparation against the U.S. in an “undeclared war”. On September 18, Defence Minister Vladimir Padrino López announced the launch of “Caribe Soberano 200”, a three-day military exercise on La Orchila Island with 2,500 troops, 12 ships, 22 aircraft, surveillance drones, and amphibious operations. The drills featured Su-30MK2 fighter jets armed with Kh-31 missiles, responding directly to U.S. actions in the Caribbean. On September 15, the U.S. led multinational UNITAS 2025 exercises extending into Caribbean waters near Venezuela, engaging 8,000 troops from 25 nations, including Argentina, Brazil, Colombia, Mexico, the Netherlands, and Japan, concluding on October 6. The same day, U.S. forces conducted their third strike on a Venezuelan speedboat suspected of drug smuggling in the southern Caribbean, reportedly killing three people. President Trump labelled the passengers “narcoterrorists”, though no evidence was disclosed. Earlier, on September 6, President Maduro appealed for direct talks with Trump through Special Envoy Richard Grenell, but Washington ignored the offer, and hostilities persisted. On September 1, a U.S. strike in international waters off San Juan de Unare, northeastern Venezuela, killed 11 individuals aboard a Venezuelan speedboat. Officials cited drug trafficking but provided no verification, while local journalists noted gangs often coerce fishermen into smuggling to sustain families. On August 18, the U.S. reinforced its Caribbean presence with eight warships, a submarine, surveillance aircraft, and roughly 4,000 personnel near Venezuelan waters, under the pretext of an anti-drug mission. On July 25, Washington designated Venezuela’s “Cartel of the Suns” as a Specially Designated Global Terrorist group and tightened sanctions on President Maduro’s government.

## Impact assessment

The intensified militarisation of Venezuela amid growing U.S. naval pressure elevates operational and security risks for travellers and businesses. The government’s widespread mobilisation of civilians, including weapons training for thousands in urban centres such as Caracas, Petare, and San Cristóbal, signals preparation for possible conflict and reflects a strategic shift toward mass internal deterrence. These activities may increase chances of localised unrest, transport disruptions, and security clampdowns in key population hubs, such as Simón Bolívar International Airport and seaports like La Guaira. Criminal networks, notably the “Cartel of the Suns”, continue to dominate illicit drug trafficking routes stretching from border regions like Zulia and Táchira into Caracas and coastal ports, including La Guaira and Puerto Cabello. Armed colectivos and criminal gangs operate with impunity, frequently engaging in kidnappings, extortion, and violent robberies that raise risk levels in business districts, transport corridors, and mining areas such as Bolívar state. The surge of U.S. military deployments, including warships off the Caribbean coast, F-35 squadrons in Puerto Rico, and naval strikes on suspected drug-smuggling speedboats, significantly destabilises maritime routes crucial for trade and logistics, heightening risks of interception, port disruptions, and operational delays, which directly threaten maritime companies operating in this volatile region. Foreign nationals in Venezuela face heightened legal risks due to a highly polarised political environment, increased arbitrary detentions, and systemic judicial and penitentiary weaknesses, especially in Caracas and border areas, creating unpredictable legal exposure. Although the probability of widespread overt conflict remains low and commercial and humanitarian sectors continue to operate, the unstable mix of geopolitical tension, militarised civilian participation, and entrenched criminality demands heightened vigilance.

## Advice from Forth Global

- Register with your embassy and keep emergency contacts accessible both digitally and on paper for quick assistance.
- Avoid travel near high-crime border regions, such as Táchira and Zulia, or outside major urban centres like the Petare slum without prior risk assessment or appropriate HEAT Training.
- Maintain a low profile, minimise cash carried, and use trusted transportation to reduce exposure to opportunistic crime.
- Maritime companies operating in the southern Caribbean and Venezuelan coastal waters should enhance onboard security, continuously monitor naval activity, communicate promptly with authorities, and prepare for potential interdictions.

### Customized advice

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