

United States Senate
WASHINGTON, DC 20510

March 23, 2021

The Honorable Antony Blinken
Secretary of State
U.S. Department of State
2201 C Street NW
Washington, DC 20520

Dear Secretary Blinken,

I am writing to express my grave concern regarding the rapidly deteriorating humanitarian crisis in Venezuela. Five years into the country's economic collapse, 25 percent of the population is in need of humanitarian aid and Venezuela has produced more refugees than any country in the world other than Syria. As the Department reassesses U.S. sanctions policy on Venezuela, I urge you to restore diesel swaps to help provide much-needed relief to the Venezuelan people as we work toward a political solution to this crisis.

In November 2020, the previous administration reversed U.S. policy exempting international companies from sanctions to supply diesel fuel in exchange for Venezuela's crude oil, also known as "crude-for-diesel swaps." The reversal has created no real political leverage with Maduro, who was able to maneuver around the unilateral sanctions, and instead threatens to severely worsen the already dire humanitarian situation in the country. In fact, this misguided policy change created more opportunities for corruption. Since the ban on diesel swaps was enacted, the Maduro regime abandoned its previous practice of trading crude oil for the diesel that average Venezuelans depend on, and instead increased the export of discounted crude oil to China for cash.

Diesel fuel plays a pivotal role in the Venezuelan economy. Imported diesel is used to generate electricity, support public transportation, and supply 95 percent of fuel trucks transporting essential goods such as food, medicine, and humanitarian goods. Dwindling diesel reserves have harmed agricultural production, water pumping, and medical facilities crucial to providing lifesaving assistance.

Venezuela's current diesel reserves are expected to run critically low in April, which could plunge the country deeper into crisis. The poverty rate in the country is now at 96 percent, with 70 percent living in extreme poverty. Lack of access to clean water, basic medical care, and vaccines have led to the outbreak of preventable diseases such as malaria, measles, and diphtheria, in addition to the high rate of COVID-19 cases. The UN Special Rapporteur said last month that the diesel shortage "has a potential dramatic effect on the production and storage of food" risking a "humanitarian crisis of unprecedented proportion."

I recognize that the administration is currently reviewing U.S. policy toward Venezuela, with the goal of restoring democracy through free and fair elections. As you continue this effort, I urge you to swiftly restore crude-for-diesel swaps to provide lifesaving relief for millions of Venezuelans in this crisis.

Thank you for your attention to this matter. I look forward to your response.

Sincerely,



Christopher S. Murphy
United States Senator