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FEATURED Q&A

What's Behind Top Military Changes in Venezuela?



Venezuela's interim president last month made several changes in the country's military leadership, including installing Gustavo González López as defense minister. // File Photo: Venezuelan Government.

Q **Interim Venezuelan President Delcy Rodríguez on March 18 dismissed Defense Minister General Vladimir Padrino López, replacing him with an ally, former domestic intelligence chief Gustavo González López. Since assuming the presidency in early January, Rodríguez has replaced more than a dozen cabinet ministers and military officials who held significant sway in the government of President Nicolás Maduro. What precipitated Rodríguez's decision to remove Padrino from his post as defense minister? What does the decision to remove Padrino say about Rodríguez's control over Venezuela's security apparatus? Now three months after Maduro's removal from power, to what extent does his government remain intact?**

A **Carrie Filipetti, executive director of the Vandenberg Coalition:** "The elevation of former intelligence chief Gustavo González López to defense minister is an inauspicious sign for Venezuelan democracy. Coming just weeks after the United States recognized the regime for the first time since the 2019 crisis, it signals one of two things: an emboldened Delcy, testing the mettle of the United States, or worse, an emboldened Diosdado Cabello, forcing his will onto Venezuelan leadership. González López is well known in Venezuelan circles as the previous head of the SEBIN intelligence agency during the period of some of its most egregious human rights violations (2014-2018). Sanctioned by the European Union and the United States for human rights abuses, González López oversaw SEBIN at the moment that its agents murdered Venezuelan dissident and deeply devout Catholic Fernando Albán. Critically, he is a close ally of Cabello, Venezuela's

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First Foreign Soldiers of U.N.-Backed Force Arrive in Haiti

A contingent of soldiers from Chad arrived Wednesday in Haiti, marking the first foreign soldiers to be deployed from a new U.N.-backed force.

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Brazil Begins Requiring Banks to Check for Deforestation

A new rule took effect Wednesday in Brazil that requires banks to check for deforestation on the farms of loan applicants.

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U.S. Lifts Sanctions Against Venezuela's Acting President

The U.S. Treasury Department's Office of Foreign Assets Control on Wednesday lifted sanctions against Venezuela's acting president, Delcy Rodríguez.

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Rodríguez // File Photo: imo.un via Wikimedia Commons [CC 1.0](#).

POLITICAL NEWS

U.S. Lifts Sanctions Against Venezuela's Acting President

The administration of U.S. President Donald Trump on Wednesday lifted sanctions against acting Venezuelan President Delcy Rodríguez, the U.S. Treasury's Office of Foreign Assets Control said in a statement on its website. Rodríguez became the country's interim leader after U.S. military forces captured President Nicolás Maduro in a Jan. 3 raid. Rodríguez had served as Maduro's vice president, and after the raid, the Trump administration chose to work with her instead of seeking to put the opposition into power. Since Maduro's ouster, Rodríguez has pitched Venezuela to international investors and has sought to open the country to private capital and international arbitration, the Associated Press reported. "We value President Donald Trump's decision as a step toward normalizing and strengthening relations between our countries," Rodríguez said in a post on social media site Telegram in response to the lifting of sanctions against her, the AP reported. "We trust that this progress will allow for the lifting of current sanctions against our country, enabling us to build and guarantee an effective bilateral cooperation agenda for the benefit of our people," she added. The United States sanctioned Rodríguez and her brother, National Assembly President Jorge Rodríguez, in 2018 during Trump's first term, accusing them of undermining democracy in Venezuela, the AP reported. The siblings and other close associates of Maduro were sanctioned after Maduro was declared the winner of the country's presidential election, which was internationally derided as a sham. However, the Trump administration has had warming relations with Delcy Rodríguez since Maduro's arrest and last month referred to her as Venezuela's "sole head of state" in a civil case in U.S. court, the AP reported. The lifting of sanctions against Rodríguez came a day after U.S. Secretary of State Marco Rubio met in Washington with Venezuelan opposition leader and Nobel

Peace Prize laureate María Corina Machado. The meeting, which happened behind closed doors, was a cordial encounter that focused on restoring Venezuela's democratic institutions, including elections, as well as institutional reforms and the creation of conditions to attract investment, unnamed sources familiar with the matter told the Miami Herald.

First Foreign Soldiers of U.N.-Backed Force Arrive in Haiti

A contingent of soldiers from the African nation of Chad arrived in Haiti on Wednesday, marking the first foreign soldiers to be deployed from the United Nations-backed Gang Suppression Force (GSF) that was established last year, Al Jazeera English reported. The GSF is set to ultimately include 5,500 uniformed personnel, who will deploy between now and October "from Africa, Asia, Latin America and the Caribbean," the GSF said Wednesday in a statement posted on social media site X. The group's mission is to "conduct targeted intelligence-led operations against armed gangs, secure critical infrastructure and key roads, and protect civilians," it added. It's unclear how many Chadian troops have been deployed or exactly what role they might play in assisting Haitian police forces' anti-gang operations. Also arriving in Haiti on Wednesday was the GSF's special representative, Jack Christofides, a U.N. official from South Africa who has overseen multiple peacekeeping missions in Africa, Al Jazeera English reported. The GSF's deployment comes as Haiti's provisional government faces a daunting task ahead of national elections scheduled for later this year. Gangs control an estimated 90 percent of Haiti's capital of Port-au-Prince and have expanded their attacks in some areas of the countryside in recent months; at least 70 people were killed on Sunday and Monday in attacks by gang members near the town of Petite Rivière in Haiti's central Artibonite region, Reuters reported. Less than 1,000 foreign troops, mostly from Kenya and the Dominican Republic, were stationed in Haiti at the beginning of this year

NEWS BRIEFS

Mexico's President Taps Velasco as Foreign Minister

Mexican President Claudia Sheinbaum on Wednesday named Robert Velasco, subsecretary for North America at Mexico's foreign ministry, as the country's new foreign minister after incumbent Foreign Relations Secretary Juan Ramón de la Fuente asked to resign due to health concerns, the Associated Press reported. Velasco's appointment comes as Mexico and the United States have begun formal negotiations ahead of the July review period for the USMCA trade agreement. Velasco, 38, has been involved in trade talks with the United States and Canada since at least 2020, the AP reported.

Brazilian Environment Minister Steps Down to Run for Congress

Brazilian Environment Minister Marina Silva will step down from her role to run for a seat in Congress in Brazil's October election, she said Wednesday in an Instagram post. Under the leadership of Silva, a high-profile member of the cabinet of President Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva, Brazil's annual deforestation rate declined by more than 50 percent between 2022 and 2025, the Associated Press reported. Silva had previously served as a senator and national deputy; she is a member of Brazil's Green Party.

El Salvador's Central Bank Launches Electronic Payment System

El Salvador's central bank has launched a new payment system, called Pay, that will provide informal workers access to formal financial services, Global Finance reported. The service will allow users to receive payments by using QR codes and also transfer money. The system is free to use, the central bank said.

as part of the initial U.N.-backed force that is being replaced by the GSF, according to the wire service. Those troops are set to depart the Caribbean nation later this year after the GSF's full deployment.

BUSINESS NEWS

Brazil Now Requiring Banks to Check for Deforestation

A new rule took effect Wednesday in Brazil that requires banks to check for deforestation on farms of loan applicants using government tools that utilize satellite imagery, Reuters reported. Whenever banks find evidence of deforestation since 2019 on the lands of loan applicants, they must require proof from the loan applicants that the clearing was done in accordance with the law, the Associated Press reported. "We turned every bank manager who handles subsidized credit into an inspector of illegal deforestation," André Lima, who heads efforts against deforestation at Brazil's environment ministry, told Reuters. Connecting access to credit to environmental rules encourages sustainable production and strengthens environmental responsibility in the agribusiness sector, Paulo Camuri, the climate and territorial intelligence manager at nonprofit group Imaflora, which tracks deforestation, told the AP. "It is an intelligent incentive mechanism that uses credit—the main driver of agribusiness development—as a lever for good practices," Camuri told the wire service. However, the Confederation of Agriculture Livestock of Brazil, the South American country's main farm lobbying group, opposes the new rules, saying they do not adequately distinguish between legal forest clearings and illegal deforestation. "This scenario may create uncertainty in the credit analysis process and increase the risk of restricting access to financing for producers who comply with environmental legislation," the group said, the AP reported. The lobbying organization is backing a bill in Congress to block the new rules.

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indicted interior minister. Combined with the ratification of Asdrúbal Chávez as the head of Citgo's parent company and the refusal to grant amnesty to key members of the Venezuelan opposition, González López's appointment confirms that far from seeing change in Venezuela, we are merely seeing a consolidation of power. The regime may be sporting new figureheads, but they are using the same old repressive tactics. If the United States allows these appointments to go unchallenged while simultaneously increasing recognition of the regime and considering sanctions removal, it will spell doom for U.S. policy toward Venezuela, and reverse the successes promised by Operation Absolute Resolve."

A **Elias Ferrer, founder of Orinoco Research and lead editor of Guacamaya in Caracas:** "Delcy Rodríguez has carried out a complete overhaul of the military leadership, not only replacing Vladimir Padrino, but also the joint chiefs of staff (CEOFANB), and the regional commands (REDI). This move came right after tension was resolved between conservatives and reformers within Chavismo. The first group was trying to shut down, among other things, the National Assembly's amnesty commission. Delcy Rodríguez was able to impose her vision, and thanks to that, she finally moved to completely reform her cabinet and the command of the armed forces, consolidating her position. Unlike what has been reported in some media outlets, new Defense Minister Gustavo González López is Rodríguez's man in the armed forces, with no current links to Diosdado Cabello. Her loyalists also oversee the military counterintelligence service and the Presidential Guard. She is clearly signaling that she is the one in control of all parts of the state. The new appointments are also about coup-proofing in a volatile environment. Maduro's government no longer exists—now we have Delcy Rodríguez's government. She has changed half the cabinet, while some

members were already part of her team, like Finance Minister Anabel Pereira. Not only are the names different, but also the profiles she is choosing: we now see more technocrats in charge of strategic areas such as

“Delcy Rodríguez has carried out a complete overhaul of the military leadership...”

— Elias Ferrer

electricity, the judiciary and the investment center. There are even names that are not part of the ruling PSUV but are close to her. Examples are Ana María Sanjuán, minister of higher education, and Oliver Blanco, the vice minister for North America and Europe. This will probably also be the case for the ombudsman. Only a few holdouts from the old government remain. Cabello and his direct relatives still control some ministries and government agencies."

A **Orlando J. Pérez, professor of political science at the University of North Texas at Dallas:** "Padrino López's removal was driven by converging pressures. He had served as defense minister since 2014, an extraordinarily long tenure that allowed him to build patronage networks within the armed forces while blocking an entire generation of officers from promotion. Senior commanders viewed the security establishment as having failed its core mission on Jan. 3, when U.S. forces captured Maduro. Padrino also carries a \$15 million U.S. bounty for narco-trafficking, making him a liability as Rodríguez positions herself as Washington's interlocutor. His replacement, General Gustavo González López, is a career intelligence officer who ran the SEBIN intelligence agency in two stints and has been sanctioned by the United States, Canada, the European Union and Switzerland

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for involvement in arbitrary detention and torture. The reshuffle went well beyond the Defense Ministry. Between March 18 and 20, Rodríguez replaced the head of the Strategic Operations Command of the Bolivarian National Armed Forces (CEOFANB), the commanders of all four service branches,

“**The new commanders belong to the 1993 and 1994 academy classes and face mandatory retirement by 2028...**”

— Orlando J. Pérez

the Bolivarian National Guard and the leaders of all eight Regional Strategic Defense Zones. The new commanders belong to the 1993 and 1994 academy classes and face mandatory retirement by 2028, keeping them dependent on Rodríguez. Three months after the Jan. 3 operation, Rodríguez has systematically removed Maduro-era power brokers and replaced the entire military command structure, placing trusted operatives at every link in the security chain. The speed of the purge is remarkable. But the PSUV and the

institutional skeleton of chavismo remain intact; they now answer to Rodríguez and, through her, to Washington. Rodríguez has reshuffled the players, but the game remains authoritarian consolidation with Washington's acquiescence.”

A **Beatrice Rangel, director of AMLA Consulting in Miami Beach:** “Vladimir Padrino's dismissal should not be considered consequential. His leadership of the military is an open question. What really matters is his successor Gustavo González López, who has quite an interesting background covering unlawful seizure of political prisoners, torture, extortion, administrative felonies and blackmail. This tells us a lot about Delcy Rodríguez's selection criteria—she will surround herself with people she can control to prevent any rebellions against her leadership. Other replacements do not seem to be qualitatively different from González López, thus bringing to mind the question of whether Rodríguez and her team are going to serve Venezuela or rather save themselves from prosecution.”

The Advisor welcomes comments on its Q&A section. Readers can write editor Gene Kuleta.

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