

# FINANCIAL TIMES

## Latin American heavyweights exasperated by Venezuelan deadlock

**Leftist minority is stopping the region from agreeing on a response to the crisis**

Gideon Long, Andean correspondent

Latin America's leading nations are growing increasingly impatient with the region's inability to find any solution to the crisis in Venezuela, or even to come up with a strongly-worded condemnation of what is happening in Caracas.

A meeting of leaders from across the Americas on Monday left the Mexicans, Brazilians, Argentines and others exasperated. They had hoped that the Organization of American States (OAS), which groups 35 nations from both north and south, would agree a resolution criticising Nicolás Maduro's plans to set up an assembly to rewrite the constitution and cement his grip on power.

Protests against Mr Maduro's government, now in their 12th week, have left 70 people dead.

Despite their size and influence, however, Brazil and Mexico were thwarted by a handful of leftist nations and Caribbean island states which voted against the OAS draft resolutions or abstained, ensuring the bloc's meeting in the Mexican resort of Cancún ended in deadlock.

"While we are here unable to agree, in the streets of Caracas and many other places, violence is continuing," said Mexico's foreign minister Luis Videgaray, who led the barrage of criticism against not only the Maduro regime but the OAS and the hemisphere itself.

Brazil and Chile described Venezuela's government as "a dictatorship", something they had been reluctant to do in the past. Latin American states have a long tradition of mutual non-interference and seldom criticise their neighbours bluntly, but the gravity of the Venezuelan crisis means the gloves are coming off.

"Since when is standing up for democracy and human rights a violation of non-intervention?" asked a visibly annoyed Chilean foreign minister Heraldo Muñoz.

While the ministers talked in Cancún, thousands of people were again on the streets of Caracas protesting against the increasingly unpopular Maduro regime. The demonstrators want free elections and the release of political prisoners. Many want Mr Maduro to step down immediately or at least scrap his plan for elections on July 30 to the new constituent assembly.

Two teenage protesters were killed in the run-up to the Cancún gathering and the Costa Rican foreign minister, Manuel González Sanz, said their blood had stained the OAS meeting. He said the bloc had failed the international community, let down millions of Venezuelans and was “practically broken apart into two different groups”.

David Smilde, a Caracas-based political analyst, said Latin America’s major nations should do more to win over smaller Caribbean states, many of which have benefited from shrewd Venezuelan “soft power” investments and cheap oil since the turn of the century.

“Venezuela’s long-term support of these countries has generated a great deal of gratitude and friendship,” Mr Smilde told the FT. “They need to be taken seriously and engaged with, not simply denounced.”

In a measure of how serious Venezuela’s crisis has become, German Chancellor Angela Merkel weighed in earlier this month, saying she was “deeply concerned” by what was happening. Her comments earned a swift rebuke from Venezuela’s foreign minister Delcy Rodríguez, who accused Ms Merkel of fuelling opposition violence.

In Caracas, some cracks have appeared in the Bolivarian façade, constructed by the country’s late leader Hugo Chávez and bolstered with increasing difficulty by Mr Maduro since Mr Chavez’s death in 2013.

A week ago, Alexis López Ramírez, a military general and head of Venezuela's National Defence Council, resigned over the planned constituent assembly — a rare defection from inside the armed forces.

Venezuela’s chief prosecutor Luisa Ortega has kept up her assault on the Maduro government, saying it is intent on “dismantling the Venezuelan state”. Once a key regime supporter, she has turned her back on it and is now a hate figure for many in government.

Economically, Venezuelans continue to suffer and international investors are wondering how long the country can service its debts, with the oil price stuck below \$50 a barrel and foreign reserves dwindling.

Pirelli and United Airlines became the latest international companies to give up on Venezuela this month. The Italian tyre maker said it could no longer guarantee supplies to its factory in Valencia and was halting production, while United said it would cancel all flights to Venezuela in July.

In a startling example of what might happen if Caracas fails to meet its debt obligations, a Russian state-owned shipping company seized a shipment of Venezuelan oil in the Caribbean, Reuters reported.

Sovcomflot said it was keeping the oil as compensation for what it says are unpaid shipping fees owed by PDVSA, the Venezuelan state oil company.

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