

Sunday

Los Angeles Times

\$3.66 DESIGNATED AREAS HIGHER © 2026 WST

SUNDAY, JANUARY 4, 2026

latimes.com

U.S. forces seize Venezuelan leader

Trump says Washington will 'run' the oil-rich nation after stunning attack and capture

Move is broadly criticized as illegal

By KEVIN RECTOR

President Trump's decision to send U.S. forces into Venezuela to capture President Nicolás Maduro and his wife and return them to the U.S. to face drug charges elicited condemnation from legal experts and other critics who argued that the operation — conducted without congressional or United Nations approval — clearly violated U.S. and international law.

Such criticism came from Democratic leaders, international allies and adversaries including Mexico, France, China and Russia, United Nations Secretary-General António Guterres and experts on international law and wartime powers.

"Nicolás Maduro was a thug and an illegitimate leader of Venezuela, terrorizing and oppressing its people for far too long and forcing many to leave the country. But starting a war to remove Maduro doesn't just continue Donald Trump's trampling of the Constitution, it further erodes America's standing on the world stage and risks our adversaries mirroring this brazen illegal escalation," Sen. Adam Schiff (D-Calif.) wrote on X.

A U.N. spokesman said Guterres was "deeply alarmed" by the U.S. operation and "deeply concerned that the rules of international law have not been respected."

China's foreign ministry said "such hegemonic acts of the U.S. seriously violate international law and Venezuela's sovereignty," and France's foreign minister said the U.S. operation "contravenes the principle of the non-use of force that underpins international law."

Republicans largely backed the president, with both House Speaker Mike Johnson (R-La.) and Senate Majority Leader John Thune (R-S.D.) defending the operation as "decisive" and legally justified. However, other Republicans questioned Trump's authority to act unilaterally, and raised similar concerns as Schiff about other world leaders citing Trump's actions to justify their own aggression into neighboring nations.

Rep. Don Bacon (R-Neb.) defended Trump's actions as "great for the future of Venezuelans and the region" but said he was concerned that "Russia will use this to justify their illegal and barbaric military actions against Ukraine, or China to justify an invasion of Taiwan."

Trump defended the op-

[See Law, A6]



JIM WATSON AFP/Getty Images

"IF YOU would've seen the speed, the violence," said President Trump, pictured with top aides. "Amazing job."

In Caracas, fear and uncertainty

Celebrations by some Venezuelans abroad were not repeated in a defiant capital city.

By MERY MOGOLLON AND PATRICK J. McDONNELL

CARACAS, Venezuela — It was about 2 a.m. Saturday Caracas time when the detonations began, lighting up the sullen sky like a post-New Year's fireworks display.

"*¡Ya comenzó!*" was the recurrent phrase in homes, telephone conversations and social media chats as the latest iteration of U.S. "shock and awe" rocked the Venezuelan capital. "It has begun!"

Then the question: "¿*¿Maduro?*"

The great uncertainty was the whereabouts of President Nicolás Maduro, who has been under Trump administration threat for months.

The scenes of revelry from a joyous Venezuelan diaspora celebrating from Miami to Madrid were not repeated here. Fear of the unknown kept most at home.

Hours would pass before news reports from outside Venezuela confirmed that U.S. forces had captured Maduro and placed him on a [See Caracas, A5]

'It's like a jolt of relief'

Some Venezuelans in the U.S. celebrate the capture, others worry and many do both. **WORLD, A6**



MATIAS DELACROIX Associated Press

DEMONSTRATORS hold posters of Nicolás Maduro, right, and Hugo Chávez.

Leaders around the world react with praise, anger — and worry

By KATE LINTHICUM

MEXICO CITY — Argentina's president called it "excellent news for the free world."

Iran condemned it as a "blatant violation of national sovereignty."

Canada said little, except that it was "monitoring developments closely."

The dramatic U.S. capture of Venezuelan President Nicolás Maduro was cheered by world leaders allied with President Trump, and condemned by those who oppose him.

Other countries responded carefully to news of the covert U.S. operation, hoping to stay out of the crosshairs of a famously vindictive American president who wields tariffs freely — and who has hinted at a willingness to broaden his military campaign.

On Saturday, as details emerged about the early morning apprehension of Maduro and his wife from their Caracas home by special operations forces and the White House plan to exploit Venezuela's vast oil reserves, Trump boasted that he is "reasserting American

power in a very powerful way" and suggested that he may target Cuba, Colombia and Mexico next.

At a news conference, Trump said he wants to "help the people in Cuba," which he described as a "failing nation," and threatened military action in Colombia, whose leftist President Gustavo Petro has been one of Trump's most vocal critics.

Trump asserted, without evidence, that Petro is a drug trafficker and warned that Colombia's leader should "watch his ass."

In an interview with Fox

[See Leaders, A5]

Crimes alleged, but focus is on crude

By MICHAEL WILNER, ANA CEBALLOS AND KATE LINTHICUM

WASHINGTON — An audacious overnight raid by elite U.S. forces that seized Venezuelan President Nicolás Maduro from his bedroom in Caracas plunged the country into turmoil Saturday, prompting international concern about Venezuela's future and President Trump's attempt to take control of the sovereign nation.

Trump justified the stunning attack by accusing Maduro, without evidence, of sending "monsters" into the United States from Venezuelan prisons, and by claiming Maduro's involvement in the drug trade. But the American president focused more on Venezuela's vast oil reserves, accusing its government of stealing U.S. oil infrastructure in the country decades prior and vowing that, under new U.S. government control, output would increase going forward.

He spoke little about democracy there, dismissing a potential role for Venezuela's long-standing democratic opposition in running the country with Maduro now gone. Instead, Trump said his team was in touch with Maduro's handpicked vice president, Delcy Rodriguez, whom he called "quite gracious" and said was "essentially willing to do what we think is necessary to Make Venezuela Great Again."

"We're going to run the country until such time as we can do a safe, proper and judicious transition," Trump said. "We can't take a chance that somebody else takes over Venezuela that doesn't have the good of the Venezuelan people in mind. We're not going to let that happen."

"We're going to have our very large United States oil companies, the biggest anywhere in the world, go in," he added, "spend billions of dollars, fix the badly broken infrastructure, the oil infrastructure, and start making money for the country."

But the president offered few details on how his administration would exert control over Caracas — either through political coercion or by force. He suggested both options were on the table. "We're not afraid of boots on the ground," he added.

In a defiant speech, flanked by military leaders who had long stood by Maduro in the face of U.S. pressure, Rodriguez called for the "immediate release" [See Venezuela, A4]

Appeals court rules California's open-carry ban is unconstitutional

By CLARA HARTER AND DEBORAH NETBURN

those regulations, 95% of the state's population was subject to the ban.

Gov. Gavin Newsom suggested the state will probably appeal the ruling, which would otherwise go into effect within seven to 21 days.

"California's law was carefully crafted to comply with the Second Amendment and we're confident this decision will not stand," he said in a post on X.

The 2-1 opinion was supported by two appointees of President Trump, U.S. Circuit Judges Lawrence

VanDyke and Kenneth Kiyul Lee. U.S. Circuit Judge N. Randy Smith, an appointee of former President George W. Bush, dissented.

VanDyke, writing for the majority, stated that California's urban ban on open-carry permits does not stand under the Supreme Court's landmark gun rights ruling *New York State Rifle & Pistol Assn. vs. Bruen*.

That 2022 decision made it much easier to carry a gun in public by striking down laws that required people to show [See Open carry, A10]

6 political issues to watch in 2026

Los Angeles heads into a year of uncertainty, which could bring fresh faces to halls of government. **CALIFORNIA, B1**

Seeking a leader, not a celebrity

There's a large field to choose from in state's governor's race, writes Mark Z. Barabak.

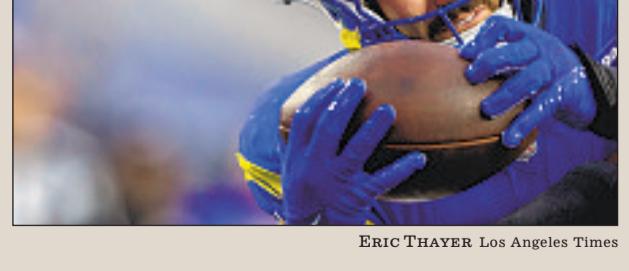
PERSPECTIVES, A2

Weather

Rain this afternoon.

L.A. Basin: 60/51. **B5**

7 85944 00200 5



ERIC THAYER Los Angeles Times

TUNING UP FOR PLAYOFFS

Tight end Colby Parkinson and the Rams will host the Arizona Cardinals on Sunday with their eyes on a bigger prize in the postseason. **SPORTS, D1**