

International

Venezuela's Guaido calls for new anti-Maduro protests

Guaido on a mission to weaken military's support of Maduro

CARACAS: Venezuela's self-proclaimed president Juan Guaido called Sunday for two new protests, in an effort to push the military to turn against leader Nicolas Maduro and back a European ultimatum demanding free elections within the week. In a video posted on Twitter, the head of the opposition-controlled National Assembly said the first of the nationwide strikes, on Wednesday from noon to 2:00 pm (1600-1800 GMT), would be one "to demand that the armed forces side with the people."

The second, on Saturday, will be a "big national and international rally to back the support of the European Union and the ultimatum" from Britain, France, Germany, Portugal, Spain and the Netherlands that they would recognize Guaido as interim president unless Maduro calls elections by February 3. The EU was vaguer, saying it would take "further actions" if elections were not called in the coming days, including the issue of recognition of the country's "leadership." Australia, meanwhile, said it "recognizes and supports" Guaido as interim president pending elections. And Italy has called for "a rapid return to democratic legitimacy." The United States separately warned there would be a "significant response" if US diplomats, Guaido or the opposition-controlled National Assembly were targeted with violence and intimidation. Maduro so far has not budged from his position, telling CNN Turk: "No one can give us an ultimatum." Nearly 30 people have been killed and more than 350 arrested in clashes with security forces over the past week.

Appeals to the military

Encouraged by the international support for his cause, Guaido is on a mission to weaken the military's support of Maduro, which has been essential to keeping him in power since 2013. His appeals have included promises of amnesty, and mass protests to dramatize the depth of popular opposition to Maduro, who has presided over a virtual collapse of the economy and a severe humanitarian crisis, with shortages of food and medicines. Supporters circulated copies of amnesty measures approved by the National

Assembly to friends and relatives in the military, but some soldiers burned or ripped up the document.

Venezuela's military attache in Washington, Army Colonel Jose Luis Silva, switched his support to Guaido in a video that called on his brothers in arms to follow his lead. Maduro appeared at a military exercise in the state of Carabobo where he called for "union, discipline and cohesion" to defeat what he called an "attempted coup d'etat." "Traitors never, loyal always," he exhorted the military audience. Televised images showed tanks lined up in a row and soldiers firing their weapons. "Are you coup-backers or are you constitutionalists? Are you pro-imperialist or anti-imperialists?" Maduro asked. Thus far, the military has backed the leftist regime, which was ushered into power more than 20 years ago by the late Hugo Chavez, but there have been some signs of unrest.

Playing down military intervention

Guaido, 35, heads the opposition-controlled National Assembly and declared himself acting president in Caracas on Wednesday during an anti-government rally by tens of thousands of people. He contends that Maduro's reelection to a second six-year term was fraudulent. His bid was swiftly endorsed by Canada, the United States and many Latin American countries.

"Any violence and intimidation against US diplomatic personnel, Venezuela's democratic leader, Juan Guaido, or the National Assembly itself would represent a grave assault on the rule of law and will be met with a significant response," US National Security Advisor John Bolton tweeted, without specifying what kind of response he meant.

The warning didn't address specific groups or individuals, but Bolton noted in a linked tweet that Cuba's "support and control over Maduro's security and paramilitary forces" was well known. Washington also accepted exiled opposition leader Carlos Vecchio as Venezuela's new charge d'affaires to the United States after he was tapped by Guaido. Pope Francis, winding up a trip to Panama, said he was praying that "a just and peaceful solution is



NAGUANAGUA: Handout picture released by the Venezuelan presidency showing a Russian-made T72 tank taking part in military exercises at Fort Paramacay in Naganagua, Carabobo State, Venezuela, on January 27, 2019. — AFP

reached to overcome the crisis, respecting human rights."

Maduro has received backing from China, Russia, Syria and Turkey, as well as longtime allies Cuba and Bolivia. In Washington, Republican Senator Marco Rubio, considered a key architect of the US policy on Venezuela, played down the possibility of a military intervention despite his and Trump's warnings earlier in the week that "all options

are on the table." The Venezuelan leader earlier had given US diplomats until late Saturday to leave the country. But as the deadline expired, Maduro said he had begun negotiations to set up within 30 days an Interests Section in Caracas to maintain a minimum level of diplomatic contact, similar to the arrangement the US had with Cuba until their 2015 rapprochement. — AFP

Evangelicals gain ground in Panama despite pope visit

PANAMA CITY: Panama rolled out the red carpet for Pope Francis for World Youth Day celebrations, but here and across Latin America the Catholic Church is losing ground to a growing evangelical movement. In the gritty barrio of El Chorrillo, a kilometer (half-mile) of dense streets from where Francis celebrated mass at the city's 400-year old Cathedral on Saturday, evangelical churches are holding sway in a pitched battle for the souls of Panamanians, particularly the poor.

"Without wanting to criticize the Catholics, the Evangelical Church is more united with the people, with the young who are here in the neighborhood," said evangelical preacher Juan Manuel. "Because we deal with them, we walk with them, we live in the same buildings with them," he said. Roberto Rodriguez was a practicing Catholic up to a couple of years ago, but says he only really felt connected when he joined the local evangelical church. "I was lost," said Rodriguez, 20. "Now that I am in the evangelical church I feel the glory of God. I feel the options that God has given me, really the grace of God."

Filling the void

Apart from occasional police patrols, there are few signs of government presence in El Chorrillo. Locals say churches fill the void in a barrio of broken families, school dropouts and gang violence. The vast majority of Evangelicals in Panama and across Latin America are Pentecostals, a charismatic branch of Protestantism born in the United States at the beginning of the 20th Century. In a rubbish-strewn alley, Yamilka Carrion runs the Valle de Beraca church on the ground floor of a run-down building.

It is one of six Pentecostal prayer rooms or soup kitchens located within 200 meters of El Chorrillo's Our Lady of Fatima Catholic church. "It's pure misery, a lot of young people are in danger," said Carrion, a 39-year-old preacher and business graduate. "But we are here." More than half of the 440 murders committed last year were of people under the age of 30, statistics show. The small evangelical communities have based their success on a simple but effective tactic: preachers go door to door, rather than passively waiting for people to come to church. "You have to go through the alleys, the stairs of buildings, knock on the doors of houses," said pastor Dalia Viveros. "The young person needs to feel you are interested in him."

Growing influence

Neighbors say evangelicals have been growing in number here over the last 15 years. Official figures show they now account for 19 percent of Panama's four million population. "It's real competition for the Catholic Church," said Claire Nevache in a report for Panama's Center for Democratic Initiatives CIDEM, which promotes democracy and respect for human rights.

Local Catholic priest Jonathan Vasquez however said that Pope Francis' five-day visit to Panama "has given an impulse" to the Catholic Church. "We are renewing ourselves, we are becoming more and more faithful to the message of Jesus Christ," said Vasquez. Pentecostals differ from Catholics because they don't pray to saints, recognize the pope, or acknowledge the pre-eminent role of the Virgin Mary. The Holy Spirit is the focal point of their spiritual life.

Pentecostal services are so animated by comparison to Catholic mass — sometimes even including exorcisms — that Pope Francis once likened them to "glorified Samba schools." Later, with a few neighbors, Rodriguez joined a prayer service led by three local preachers in a modest apartment. "Give me an Amen!" said the preacher Juan Manuel, a tall and thin man who said he had been "reformed" after spending 28 of his 50 years in prison. Rodriguez belted out an "Amen!" with a shudder. — AFP

Kamala Harris launches White House bid in America 'under attack'

OAKLAND: Lamenting that the American Dream and its democracy are under attack in Donald Trump's United States, California Senator Kamala Harris formally declared Sunday her candidacy to become the country's first black female president in 2020. Harris, who was California's attorney general from 2011 to 2017, made her announcement to supporters outside city hall in Oakland, San Francisco's grittier neighbor where she was born.

Barack Obama introduced himself to Californian voters in 2007 in the same location before he was elected the first African American president of the United States a year later. Harris already announced in a January 21 video that she would run for president. She joins a Democratic field with several other candidates seeking to keep Trump out of the White House for a second term. "We are here because the American dream and our American democracy are under attack and on the line like never before," she said. "When democratic values are under attack

around the globe, when authoritarianism is on the march, when nuclear proliferation is on the rise, when we have foreign powers infecting the White House like malware, let's speak the truth," she added to raucous applause.

'Not our America'

Without naming the president, Harris directly targeted the divisive policies of his unconventional administration. Harris, whose father is from Jamaica and whose mother is a Tamil Indian, said that "in the face of powerful forces trying to sow hate and division among us, the truth is that as Americans, we have so much more in common than what separates us."

Trump regularly tries to equate illegal immigrants with crime and gangs, and his standoff with Democrats in Congress over funding for a wall on the Mexican border led to a record nearly five-week shutdown of parts of the government. "The president's medieval vanity project is not going to stop them," Harris said of transnational gangs. She also attacked Trump's failed policy that put migrant children "in cages" after separating them from their parents. "Don't you dare call that border security. That's a human rights abuse!" she said.

Referring to racist-inspired deadly violence in the country, Harris said "that's not our America," and neither is it when "we have leaders who bully and attack a free press and undermine our democratic institutions." Trump regularly dismisses as "fake news" reports that cast him in a critical light, and has called some journalists the "enemy of the people." — AFP

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