
Kerry Announces Plans for Immediate High-Level Talks with Venezuela

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SANTO DOMINGO – U.S. Secretary of State John Kerry on Tuesday announced plans for immediate high-level talks involving himself, Venezuelan counterpart Delcy Rodriguez and the U.S. undersecretary of state for political affairs, Thomas Shannon, who will be the first to travel to Caracas.

Kerry and Rodriguez agreed on the talks during a bilateral meeting Tuesday on the sidelines of an Organization of American States's General Assembly meeting, which will run through Wednesday in the Dominican capital.

Kerry and Rodriguez met Tuesday in Santo Domingo and gave speeches on the first day of the gathering, which has revolved around the issue of what role the region's countries should play in Venezuela's political and social crisis.

The U.S. secretary of state had angered Rodriguez prior to their meeting by calling in his speech for Venezuela to release political prisoners and respect human rights.

Kerry said he expressed during his meeting with his Venezuelan counterpart that their countries had become stuck in longstanding rhetorical battles and stressed the need to reach an agreement that satisfies Venezuelans' needs, respects that nation's constitution and the constitutional process.

Asked about his call Tuesday for the Venezuelan government to hold a "timely" recall referendum, Kerry said the United States was not taking sides and simply supports the constitutional process.

Venezuelan President Nicolas Maduro, for his part, said Tuesday he supported talks at the highest level with the United States, albeit "without impositions," and was ready to resume relations at the "level of ambassadors."

Venezuela's opposition is seeking to recall the socialist Maduro amid escalating tensions in the South American nation, which is in a severe economic crisis and facing sky-high inflation and food, medicine and electricity shortages.

Maduro's opponents want to force a recall referendum before Jan. 10, 2017, because in that case, if the president were to be voted out, a snap election would be held that could bring the opposition to power shortly afterward.

But if the referendum is held after that date, then even if Maduro loses he would be replaced by his vice president, Aristobulo Isturiz, who would serve out the remaining two years of his term.
