
Juan Guaidó Risks Arrest As He Returns To Challenge Venezuelan President

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Caracas: Venezuelan opposition leader Juan Guaidó plans to run the risk of arrest by returning home on Monday, after he ignored a court-imposed travel ban and toured Latin American allies to boost support for his campaign to oust President Nicolás Maduro.

Guaidó's return, details of which his team have kept under wraps, could become the next flashpoint in his duel with Maduro as he seeks to keep up momentum and spur his international backers to further isolate the socialist government.

His arrest could allow the opposition to highlight how the Maduro administration represses political foes and prompt the United States to impose even harsher sanctions. But it could also strip the opposition of a public figurehead who has brought unity after years of infighting.

Guaidó, who is recognized as Venezuela's legitimate head of state by most Western countries, said on Sunday he would undertake the "historic challenge" of returning in time to lead protests on Monday and Tuesday during the Carnival holiday period, an unusual time for demonstrations.

"If the regime dares, of course, to kidnap us, it will be the last mistake they make," Guaidó said during a broadcast on Twitter, without disclosing his location. Guaidó said they had prepared "the steps to follow" in case he was detained.

Guaidó secretly left Venezuela for Colombia, in violation of a Supreme Court order, to

coordinate efforts there on Feb 23 to send humanitarian aid into Venezuela to alleviate widespread shortages of food and medicine.

But troops loyal to Maduro blocked convoys of aid trucks sent from Colombia and Brazil, leading to clashes that killed at least six people along the Brazilian border, rights groups say.

From Colombia, he then traveled to Argentina, Brazil, Ecuador and Paraguay to shore up Latin American support for a transition government that would precede free and fair elections.

On Sunday, he departed by plane from the Ecuadorean coastal town of Salinas but has not appeared publicly since, beyond the Twitter broadcast. To arrive in Caracas by Monday morning, he could take commercial flights from Bogota or Panama City.

Maduro, who labels Guaidó a coup-mongering U.S. puppet, has said his arrest depends on the justice system.

"He can't just come and go. He will have to face justice, and justice prohibited him from leaving the country," he told ABC News last week.

The United States has warned Maduro of the consequences of arresting Guaidó and the Treasury imposed new sanctions on Friday targeting Venezuelan military officials.

"If Maduro took that step, I think it would just hasten the day that he leaves," U.S. National Security Adviser John Bolton told Fox News on Sunday.

After the military blocked the aid convoys, Guaidó proposed that "all options be kept open" to topple Maduro, but foreign military intervention is seen as unlikely and his international backers are instead using a mix of sanctions and diplomacy.
