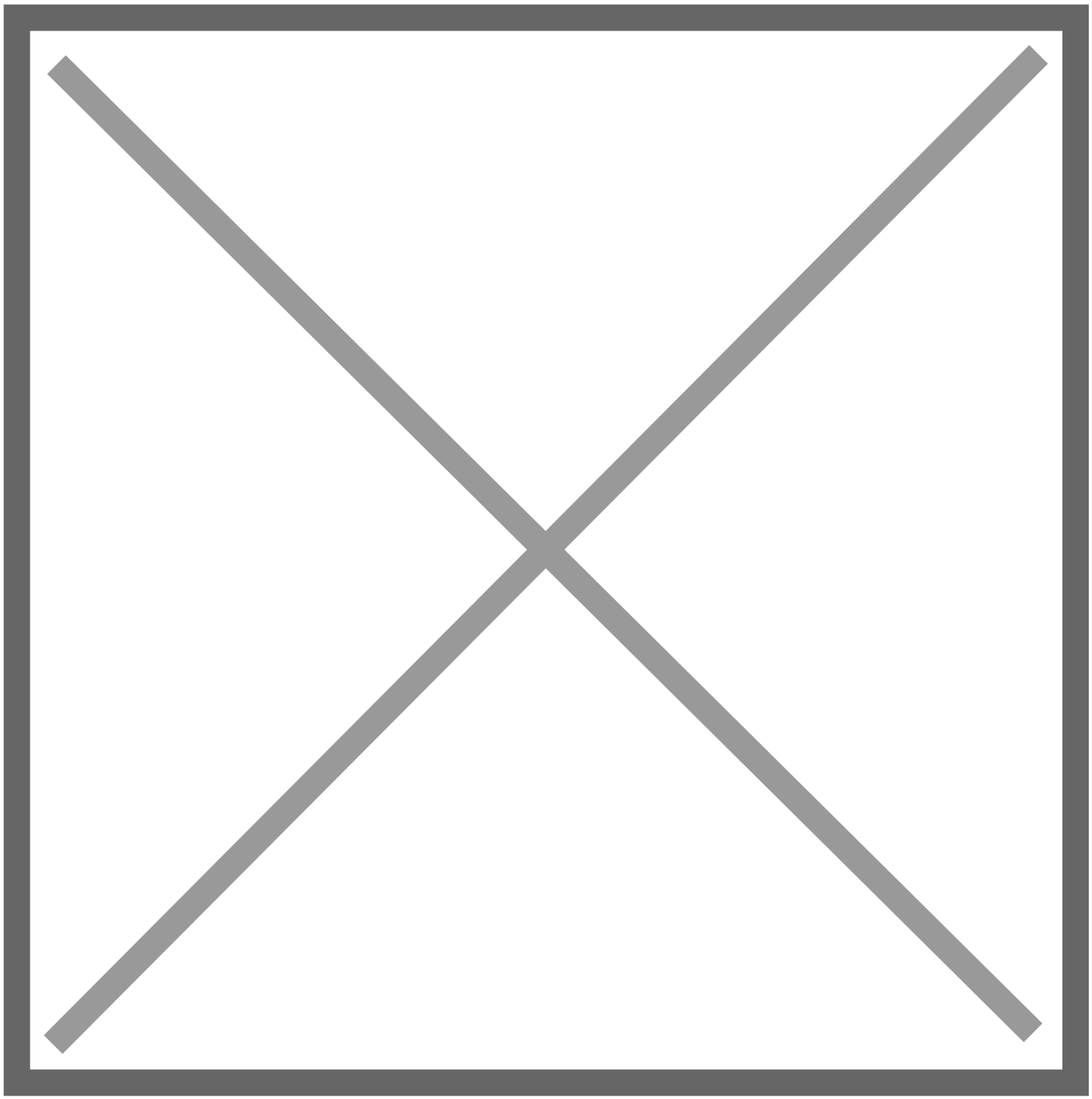
News



Demonstrators attend a protest in Barcelona, Spain, Jan. 3, 2026, to oppose U.S. actions in Venezuela, after U.S. President Donald Trump said the U.S. had struck Venezuela and captured its President Nicolas Maduro. (OSV News/Reuters/Lorena Sopena)

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Caracas, Venezuela — January 5, 2026
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The U.S. strikes on — and announced temporary takeover of — Venezuela violate both the United Nations Charter and the Christian principles on which it is based, a University of Notre Dame scholar told OSV News.

Although "the president of Venezuela has committed serious violations of human rights for years," the international legal system "has appropriate ways of responding in such cases" that begin "by supporting the rule of law in Venezuela," said Mary Ellen O'Connell, professor of law and international peace studies at Notre Dame.

On Jan. 3, the U.S. carried out what President Donald Trump, writing on his social media platform Truth Social, called "a large scale strike against Venezuela," capturing that country's President Nicolás Maduro and his wife, Cilia Flores. A Venezuelan official told The New York Times that preliminary reports indicate at least 40 Venezuelan civilians and military personnel were killed in the U.S. attack.

The pair were transported to New York that same evening. They — along with Maduro's son and several other Venezuelan officials not currently in U.S. custody — are set to face federal charges of narcoterrorism, conspiracy to import cocaine, and weapons offenses, according to a superseding indictment unsealed after Maduro and his wife were seized.

The U.S. mission, named "Absolute Resolve," follows months of deadly strikes on alleged drug-smuggling boats in the region and in the Pacific. Some 115 have been

killed in 35 such attacks since September.

During a Jan. 3 press conference from his Mar-a-Lago resort, Trump — flanked by Secretary of State Marco Rubio, Secretary of War Pete Hegseth and Air Force Gen. Dan Caine, chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff — said "not a single American service member was killed and not a single piece of American equipment was lost," although the U.S. "had many helicopters, many planes, many, many people involved in that fight."

The mission stirred up debate on Capitol Hill as to whether the strikes were legally justified under the Constitution, and because Congress was not informed prior to the attack. Rubio, however, argued to media outlets it wasn't necessary because it was a "law enforcement operation" and not an actual invasion. A war powers vote in the Senate is expected to take place after lawmakers return from the holiday break.

But Trump also declared at the press conference the U.S. will "run the country (Venezuela) until such time as we can do a safe, proper and judicious transition." It was not immediately clear how the U.S. would do that with Maduro's government still in place.

Trump also made clear a second military operation was possible to force Venezuela to comply, emphasizing, "We're not afraid of boots on the ground."

That plan and Trump's stated intention at the press conference to extract oil from Venezuela are "two very serious statements in violation of international law," said O'Connell.

"No country has the right to take control of another country," she said. "The only way such action could be lawful is if the United Nations Security Council authorized it. And the U.N. Security Council is not going to authorize a U.S. administration over Venezuela."

The U.N. Charter recognizes the equal sovereignty of nations, while prohibiting "the threat or use of force against the territorial integrity or political independence of any state."

The U.S. attack has drawn a range of reactions, from outright condemnation to support, with some global leaders expressing carefully worded concern as developments continue to unfold.

A spokesperson said in a Jan. 3 statement that U.N. Secretary-General António Guterres was "deeply alarmed by the recent escalation in Venezuela," worrying the developments "constitute a dangerous precedent" of disrespect for the rules of international law. The statement called on "all actors in Venezuela to engage in inclusive dialogue, in full respect of human rights and the rule of law."

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The U.N. Security Council is set to hold an emergency meeting Jan. 5 to discuss the U.S. strikes.

Pope Leo XIV, the U.S. born pontiff who spent decades as a missionary in Latin America, also expressed "deep concern." A month earlier, addressing reporters on the papal plane during the return flight from his apostolic journey to Turkey and Lebanon, he had urged "dialogue" amid U.S.-Venezuela tensions even as he acknowledged the looming possibility of a military intervention.

"The good of the beloved Venezuelan people must prevail over every other consideration," the pope said following the Jan. 4 Angelus prayer in St. Peter's Square.

Leo urged "the overcoming of violence" and "the pursuit of paths of justice and peace, guaranteeing the sovereignty of the country, ensuring the rule of law enshrined in its constitution, respecting the human and civil rights of each and every person, and working together to build a peaceful future of cooperation, stability and harmony, with special attention to the poorest who are suffering because of the difficult economic situation."

In a Jan. 3 statement, Rev. Jerry Pillay, the general secretary of the World Council of Churches — whose organization represents more than 580 million Christians in over 120 countries — denounced the strikes and the seizure of Maduro and his wife as "stunningly flagrant violations of international law."

"These actions set a dangerous precedent and example for others who seek to shrug off all constraints against the use of armed aggression and brute force to achieve political objectives," said Pillay.

Referencing the contested 2024 elections which Maduro — the authoritarian successor of socialist strongman Hugo Chavez — claimed to have defeated opposition leaders, O'Connell said that some members of the U.N. Security Council might support U.S. military intervention "if we were committed to putting the popularly elected government in place."

"There is sympathy for ensuring that elections are honored. There will be no sympathy for the U.S. taking control of Venezuela's oil and other resources," said. "That is a throwback to colonialism, to imperialism. It's the kind of thing that Russia has in mind in seizing control of Ukraine. And it is unlawful."

Trump indicated that empowering Venezuela's opposition, which is widely regarded as having won the 2024 presidential elections by proving its candidate won 67% of the vote, is not part of the U.S. plan for the country. Trump claimed Maria Corina Machado, the opposition leader and Nobel Peace Prize laureate who praised Trump's ouster of Maduro, "doesn't have the support within or the respect within the country" to lead.

Instead, Trump indicated the U.S. would work with Venezuela's interim president and Maduro's vice president, Delcy Rodríguez, saying, "She's essentially willing to do what we think is necessary to make Venezuela great again."

Amid poverty, corruption and systemic human rights abuses under the Maduro regime, "the people of Venezuela have suffered a long time," said O'Connell. "They have not gotten the kind of support they need to change their government and their system of government peacefully and lawfully and in a way that will endure."

Forming the basis for "the most important rules of international law" — which safeguards the sovereignty of nations and human rights, while providing mechanisms for the nonviolent resolution of conflicts — are "basic Christian teachings," she said.

"Our teaching, the teaching of Jesus Christ, was first and foremost peace. ... He blessed the peacemakers," O'Connell said. "He also plainly cared about and taught us all to see the human dignity of every person and to treat them with human dignity."

"When we know that there are alternative ways of helping Venezuela become a normal, successful society without a dictator who violates human rights left and right, especially the right to life, we should be on the side of supporting the lawful —

that is, also the moral — change in that society," she said.

This story appears in the **US in Venezuela** feature series. View the full series.