

Sen. Rick Scott: Venezuela will become 'this hemisphere's Syria' if Maduro not ousted

BOGOTA, Colombia — Florida Sen. Rick Scott sees Venezuela in the starkest of terms: a toxic brew of hunger, desperation and “bad actors” that are threatening to turn the country into “this hemisphere’s Syria” and swamp the region in trouble. And he’s become one of the few voices on Capitol Hill openly advocating for U.S. boots on the ground to push aid into the country.

After visiting the Colombian-Venezuelan border for the first time Wednesday, the former Florida governor said the world needs to wake up to the crisis and redouble its efforts to oust Nicolas Maduro.

“People in America don’t know how bad this is. They don’t know that people are dying of starvation,” the Republican senator told reporters in Bogota. “This is genocide going on this hemisphere. We have to figure out how to get Maduro to leave.”

The United States and more than 50 nations recognize the head of Venezuela’s congress, Juan Guaido, as the country’s sole president. And Washington has been ratcheting up sanctions in hopes of starving Maduro and his allies out of office. But so far the 56-year-old leader has hung on.

Scott, a freshman U.S. senator, says more sanctions are required and that an international military coalition is needed to ram food and medicine into the country against Maduro’s will.

“Every country that says they care about the humanitarian crisis going on, they should team up with the United States and say, ‘We are going to force the humanitarian aid into the country,’” he said.

While Maduro has warned that such an effort could spark a war, Scott played down those fears.

“We hope the Venezuelan military would understand that they have families that are starving, too, and that they wouldn’t shoot,” he said. “But you’re not going to

know unless you try.”

Maduro accuses Washington of using humanitarian relief as a pretext for a military invasion, and in February Venezuelan security forces violently opposed a U.S.-backed effort to drive aid trucks across the border from Colombia and Brazil. Even so, more recently, Caracas has allowed the International Red Cross to bring in food and medicine.

While President Donald Trump and Secretary of State Mike Pompeo have repeatedly said that “all options are on the table” when it comes to removing Maduro, they have also stressed that diplomacy is the favored solution. Guaido has also said that a military intervention isn’t in the cards.

Asked if his hopes for military action have support from his colleagues in Washington, Scott shrugged, “It hasn’t happened yet.”

While the past few months suggest that sanctions alone won’t dislodge Maduro, there are growing concerns that the economic measures, including severely limiting Venezuela’s ability to sell oil, are exacerbating hunger on the ground.

On Thursday, the Center for Economic and Policy Research published a report suggesting that as many as 40,000 people may have died due to the U.S. economic sanctions.

Scott dismissed the idea that sanctions could be hurting everyday Venezuelans, saying this was no time for “appeasement.”

“We got to sanction everything we can,” he said, and strictly enforce all the measures that have already been adopted. Scott said he was concerned that there haven’t been high-profile deportations or asset seizures in Florida, home to an estimated 200,000 Venezuelans, some of them thought to be Maduro collaborators.

Every time he meets Trump or his national security staff, Scott says he always presses them on this issue.

“I tell them the same thing, ‘You might have sanctioned everybody in the world ... but are you enforcing all these sanctions that you’re doing?’” he said. “‘And is there anything else you can do to make sure that Maduro doesn’t have a dime?’”

Historically, sanctions have rarely worked to produce regime change. And while Scott acknowledged they were an imperfect tool he said there didn't seem to be any better solution at the moment.

While the crisis in Venezuela is already dire (more than 3.4 million people have fled in recent years, many driven by hunger) the situation could become much worse as Maduro's international allies entrench themselves and prop up his unpopular leadership. Scott likened the situation to Syria, where a prolonged civil war, backed by an array of international actors, has led to the death of more than 400,000 people and a refugee crisis.

"If we don't figure out how to get Maduro out of there, this is going to become Syria," he said. "You have Russia, you have China, you have Hezbollah, you have Iran there (in Venezuela). We are going to have a Syria. It's going to be in our hemisphere. It's going to be not that many miles away from Florida."

"If we don't solve Venezuela, then you should assume that all the bad actors of the world will be in Venezuela and they will be causing problems in the entire southern hemisphere," he added.

In recent months, at least five U.S. delegations have visited the Venezuelan-Colombian border where thousands of Venezuelans stream across every day — some fleeing for good and others seeking basic necessities. Despite the growing awareness of how dire things are in the country, there are many in the United States that still can't comprehend the scope of it, Scott said.

"You just can't believe what the people are going through and it's so disgusting because it's man-made," he said. "You can sort of understand a hurricane, you understand a tornado, you understand flooding — maybe you get that. But something that's completely man-made, someone who is intentionally starving people, is shocking."

Scott concedes that Maduro seems to have survived the first wave of sanctions and international rejection, but he believes the writing is on the wall.

"I don't think there's any way people will sit around for 12 more months and watch people die," Scott said. "While we don't have the results we want today, I believe we are headed down that path."

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