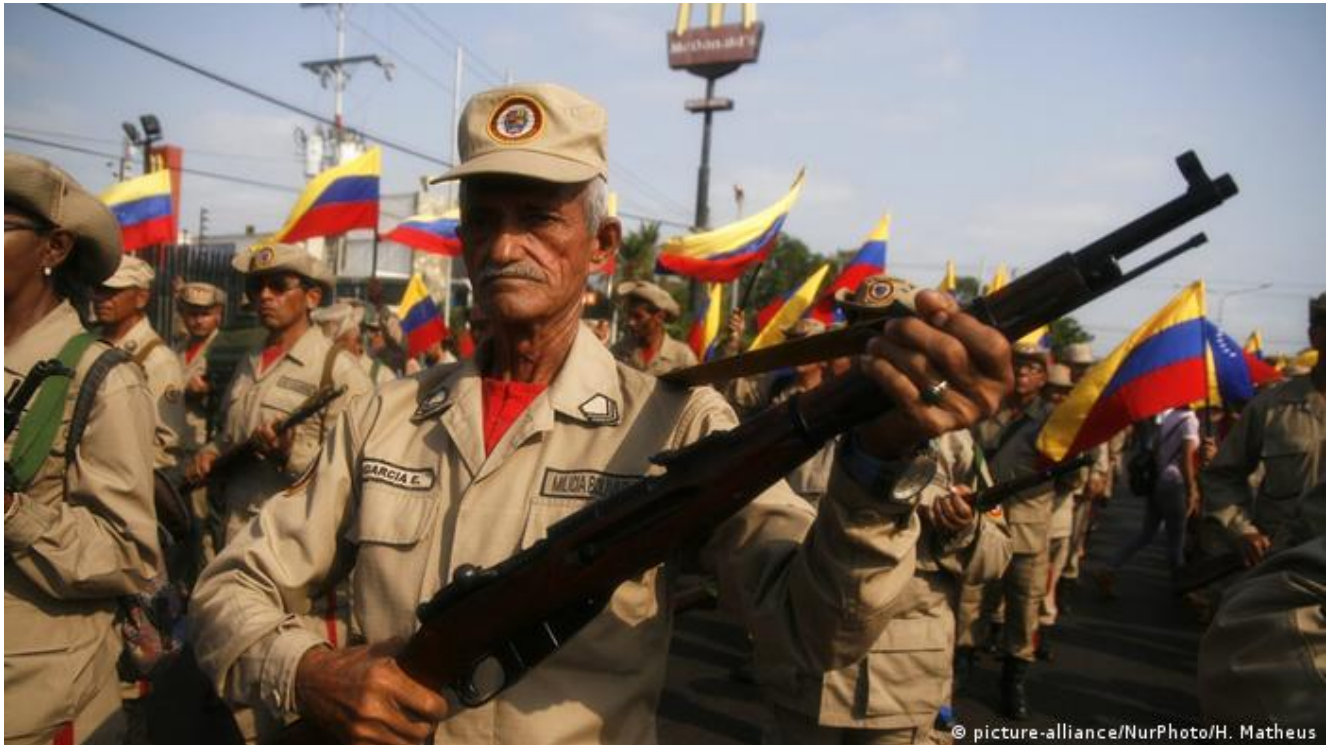


Venezuela military 'on alert' as it closes borders to aid

The military is preparing to enforce border closures to prevent aid from entering Venezuela. Soldiers have remained loyal to President Nicolas Maduro, despite efforts from Juan Guaido to bring the army to his side.



Venezuela's military is "on alert" against any border violations as it remains loyal to acting President Nicolas Maduro, Defense Minister Vladimir Padrino Lopez has said.

"The armed forces will remain deployed and on alert along the borders, as our commander in chief has ordered, to avoid any violations of territorial integrity," Padrino said in a statement on Tuesday.

He said the military "only has one president," referring to Maduro, and the armed forces are "not mercenaries who sell themselves to the highest bidder." He said the army will not accept "a puppet government" or "orders from any foreign government power."

Juan Guaido, who declared himself the interim president last month in an effort to oust Maduro from office, has tried to recruit the military to his side and let aid

into Venezuela. The opposition leader has been rallying for international support for his challenge to Maduro.

But the military high command has maintained its allegiance to Maduro, a factor deemed key to keeping the acting president in power.

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Closed to aid

Humanitarian aid, including emergency food and medicine, is being stored in Colombia, Venezuela's neighbor to the west, and three Dutch Caribbean islands, namely Curacao, Aruba and Bonaire. Venezuela has instituted a maritime and airspace ban on the three islands.

Guaido said he is organizing caravans through Brazil and the Colombian border city of Cucuta on Saturday to bring aid provided by the United States into the country. The opposition has claimed that 300,000 people face death without the aid, but Maduro has denied there is a humanitarian crisis in the country.

A Brazilian presidential spokesman said Tuesday that the country was cooperating with the US to supply aid, but would leave it to Venezuelans to take the goods across the border.

Maduro has claimed that the aid relief is a smokescreen for a US invasion of Venezuela, and has blamed US sanctions and "economic war" for Venezuela's crisis and fiscal woes.

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Trump's 'extreme arrogance'

On Monday, US President Donald Trump, who backs Guaido, warned the Venezuelan military not to continue supporting Maduro.

"You will find no safe harbor, no easy exit and no way out. You will lose everything," Trump said.

Defense Minister Padrino Lopez responded Tuesday by calling Trump's words "foolish," and said the US president exhibited "extreme arrogance." He said the US is using "blackmail" and seeking to "intimidate" with "coercion."

dv/cm (AFP, AP, dpa, EFE)

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