

United States Senate

WASHINGTON, DC 20510

September 22, 2023

VIA ELECTRONIC TRANSMISSION

Juan Gonzalez
Senior Director for the Western Hemisphere
National Security Council

Dear Mr. Gonzalez:

I write about concerning reports that you are engaged in negotiations with representatives of Venezuela's narco-regime to ease sanctions in exchange for mere assurances that Venezuela will hold a "free and fair" presidential election in 2024.¹ If true, this will be the second time the Biden administration has eased restrictions against Venezuelan human rights violators in exchange for promises they will behave democratically in the future. In November 2022, the administration relaxed oil sanctions against Venezuela as oil prices hit a record high in the United States and President Biden opposed domestic oil production on federal lands.² The Biden deal included a prisoner swap exchanging two of Nicolás Maduro's nephews for seven Americans, including five oil executives.³ If anything, Venezuela's detention of oil executives should indicate the dangers of doing business with narco-terrorists.

As you are no doubt aware, Nicolás Maduro is a fugitive of U.S. justice.⁴ Likely emboldened by the Biden administration's previous concessions and the ongoing sanctions negotiations you are leading, Maduro is now reportedly demanding the release of his crony, Alex Saab, an alleged money launderer, in exchange for Eyvin Hernandez and seven other detainees.⁵ A U.S. official purportedly told *Reuters* that Mr. Hernandez "was 'quite possibly coerced into

¹ Juan Diego Quesada, *United States and Venezuela Hold Secret Meeting in Qatar*, El Pais (June 29, 2023), <https://english.elpais.com/international/2023-06-30/united-states-and-venezuela-hold-secret-meeting-in-qatar.html> ; Reuters Staff, *U.S. Officials Draft Proposal to Ease Venezuelan Oil Sanctions*, NBC News (Aug. 23, 2023), <https://www.nbcnews.com/news/latino/us-officials-draft-proposal-ease-venezuela-oil-sanctions-rcna101514>

² Fabiola Zerpa and Lucia Kassai /Bloomberg, *U.S. Eases Sanctions on Venezuela With Chevron Resuming Oil Output*, (Nov. 26, 2022), <https://time.com/6236995/venezuela-us-eases-sanctions-chevron/>; Mack Wilowski, *Oil Prices Hit a New 10-Month High. What This Could Mean For Your Wallet*, (Sept. 18, 2023), <https://www.investopedia.com/crude-oil-prices-just-hit-a-new-10-month-high-what-this-could-mean-for-your-wallet-7970945> ; David Blackmon, *Biden Promises 'No More Drilling' Just Days After Demanding More Drilling*, (Nov. 7, 2022), <https://www.forbes.com/sites/davidblackmon/2022/11/07/biden-promises-no-more-drilling-just-days-after-demanding-more-drilling/?sh=719c364878e7>.

³ Associated Press Staff, *Venezuela Frees Seven American As Part Of The Largest Prisoner Swap Under Biden*, NPR (Oct. 1, 2022), <https://www.npr.org/2022/10/01/1126410228/america-venezuela-biden-maduro-prisoner-swap>.

⁴ Press Release, *Grassley Calls Out Justice Department For Mismanagement of U.S. Funds* (April 19, 2023), <https://www.grassley.senate.gov/news/news-releases/grassley-calls-out-justice-department-for-mismanagement-of-us-funds>

⁵ Tim O'Connor, *Exclusive: Potential Venezuela Swap Emerges to Free U.S. Citizens for Alex Saab* (Feb. 28, 2023), <https://www.newsweek.com/exclusive-potential-venezuela-swap-emerges-free-us-citizens-alex-saab-1783499>.

appealing to Biden to swap him and seven other U.S. detainees for Alex Saab[.]”⁶ The official claimed the U.S. was not negotiating a prisoner swap. However, just three months later, news outlets reported the arrival of Special Presidential Envoy for Hostage Affairs Roger Carstens in Venezuela.⁷

Despite the Biden administration’s inclination to loosen the reins on the Maduro regime, efforts to entice fair elections from narco-terrorists have reportedly failed.⁸ Concessions embolden Maduro, further aggravating instability in the country. While the Biden administration recently recognized the unstable circumstances in Venezuela in granting a redesignation of Temporary Protected Status (TPS) for Venezuelans, this administration’s policy of appeasement to Maduro is counteractively prolonging the very conditions that currently prevent Venezuelans from returning home.

Please arrange a briefing for my staff on the Biden administration’s relaxation of sanctions against Venezuela, oil agreements with the Venezuelan government, and prisoner exchanges before October 22, 2023. If you intend to ease restrictions further or release any more of Nicolás Maduro’s co-conspirators, please brief my office beforehand, as this strategy appears to have been largely ineffective and dangerous thus far.

Sincerely,



Charles E. Grassley

⁶ Jonathan Landay and Vivian Sequera, *U.S. Not Negotiating New Venezuela Prisoner Swap Despite Appeal, Say U.S. Officials*, Reuters (Mar. 12, 2023), <https://www.reuters.com/world/americas/us-not-negotiating-new-venezuela-prisoner-swap-despite-appeal-say-us-officials-2023-03-12/>.

⁷ Fabiola Zerpa, Eric Martin, Andreina Itriago Acosta, *Negotiators in Venezuela Seek Freedom for Jailed US Citizens*, Bloomberg (June 22, 2023), <https://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2023-06-22/negotiators-in-venezuela-seek-freedom-for-jailed-us-citizens?embedded-checkout=true>; Jennifer Hansler, *US Hostage Envoy Quietly Traveled to Venezuela to See Detained Americans*, CNN (Jan. 13, 2023), <https://www.cnn.com/2023/01/13/politics/carstens-hostage-venezuela-detained-americans/index.html>.

⁸ AP Staff, *UN Rights Experts Report a Rise of Efforts in Venezuela to Squelch Democracy Ahead of 2023 Election*, AP News (Sept. 20, 2023), [UN rights experts report a rise of efforts in Venezuela to squelch democracy ahead of 2024 election | AP News](https://apnews.com/article/un-rights-experts-report-a-rise-of-efforts-in-venezuela-to-squelch-democracy-ahead-of-2023-election-1234567890).