

July 5, 2023

Senator Robert Menendez
528 Hart Senate Office Bldg.
Washington, DC 20510

Dear Senator Menendez:

The humanitarian crisis unfolding on the U.S. southern border has prompted an important discussion about how to address, in a humane manner, the large influx of migrants seeking to enter the U.S., and about what the Biden administration can do to attenuate the factors driving hundreds of thousands of men, women, and children to seek refuge in the U.S.

Recently, Texas Congresswoman Veronica Escobar, Arizona Congressman Raúl Grijalva and nineteen other U.S. House Representatives put forward a simple, common-sense proposal that could help curb migration by easing the economic crises enveloping two countries from which a significant proportion of migrants originate. In [a May 10 letter](#), Escobar and her colleagues — many of whom represent communities on or near the border with Mexico — called on President Biden to lift the destructive economic sanctions targeting Venezuela and Cuba, a measure that could be in large part achieved via an executive order signed by the president. While the letter makes clear that sanctions aren't the only reason that these countries are experiencing economic challenges, it cites numerous academic and UN studies and media reports and notes that “experts widely agree that broad-based U.S. sanctions — expanded to an unprecedented level by former President Donald Trump — are a critical contributing factor in the current increase in migration.”

On May 11, [you published a response](#) to Rep. Escobar in which you stated: “I vehemently disagree with your assessment that U.S. sanctions policies towards Cuba and Venezuela are a leading contributor to this crisis. The truth is that Cubans and Venezuelans are leaving their homeland because of one simple fact: they are suffering under the yoke of brutal dictatorships that violently repress their citizens and that have destroyed their countries’ economies through widespread mismanagement and graft.”

Unlike Rep. Escobar’s letter, your letter fails to cite any research or evidence supporting your central claim that US economic sanctions have not been a significant driver of migration from Cuba and Venezuela. This is hardly surprising, as there is in fact no serious research supporting this claim. In contrast, as a recent [report on the human consequences of sanctions](#) has highlighted, dozens of peer-reviewed academic studies document the substantive negative— and often [lethal](#)— effects of economic sanctions on people’s living conditions in target countries.

Regarding the Trump-era Venezuela sanctions still in place, it is worth citing two recent, peer-reviewed studies that show how sanctions have caused widespread economic distress and a sharp, general decline in living conditions, as well as tens of thousands of deaths, key factors that help explain migration from that country. [The first](#) demonstrates how U.S. sanctions on Venezuela's oil industry contributed to a major drop in oil production, which has historically accounted for 80–95 percent of the country's export revenue; and therefore the country's ability to pay for imports, including food and medicine. [A second, forthcoming peer-reviewed paper](#) shows that the recent sharp decline in Venezuela's oil revenue has led to massive cuts in imports of food and inputs for agricultural production, which in turn has been the major factor behind widespread hunger and malnutrition in Venezuela.

Both papers are authored by the respected, Harvard-trained Venezuelan economist Francisco Rodríguez, currently a professor at the University of Denver. Dr. Rodríguez has been a consistent, outspoken critic of Venezuelan president Nicolás Maduro and an economic advisor to Venezuela's opposition. His most recent paper shows that sanctions on Venezuela have driven “a collapse in oil revenues, contributing to the largest peacetime contraction in modern history.”

Meanwhile, numerous reports describe the immense economic and humanitarian harm caused by the embargo that the US has imposed on Cuba for over 60 years. In a [2018 report](#), various UN agencies assessed economic and human costs of the embargo. According to the Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO), it “has very negative implications for Cuba's balance of trade and foreign exchange earnings, as well as for the country's supply of food and agriculture products.” The FAO also noted that the embargo “affects the import of food products for human consumption, particularly those destined for social programmes (...) thus having a direct effect on the food security of the vulnerable segments of the population.” In the same report, the United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF) stated: “the embargo imposed by the United States of America against Cuba continues to affect the ability of Cuban children, adolescents and their families to improve their living conditions and opportunities for development.”

[A 2021 report](#) by anti-poverty organization Oxfam America reviewed historical data on the embargo's impact, as well as testimony from various citizens in Cuba, and found that US sanctions “produce real damage that obstructs the ability of Cuban citizens to access basic products and violates their right to a life with dignity. These policies are an obstacle for local economic, social, and environmental development.”

Given the abundant evidence of the US embargo's devastating effects on the Cuban population, it should be no surprise that year after year nearly every country in the world votes in favor of a UN General Assembly resolution calling for the embargo's immediate repeal. [Last November](#), 185 countries voted for the resolution and only two (the US and Israel) voted against it.

Last year, US Customs and Border Protection [documented](#) 414,127 arrivals of Venezuelan and Cuban migrants at US borders, a 361 percent increase from the year before. This year, the number of arrivals of citizens from those countries has already reached nearly 280,000.

Rep. Escobar and her colleagues are correct: economic sanctions against Venezuela and Cuba are a big part of the reason for why so many citizens from those countries are abandoning their communities to seek better living conditions in the US.

We respectfully ask that you stop spreading the false narrative that there is no association between economic sanctions and the economic and humanitarian crises in countries targeted by those sanctions. If you truly believe in protecting the human rights of ordinary Cubans and Venezuelans, you should stop leveraging your considerable power in the Senate to maintain the cruel measures that cause profound human suffering, fuel humanitarian emergencies, and push many more people to migrate to the US.

Sincerely,

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