



By —  
Meg Kinnard,  
Associated Press

By —  
Michelle L.  
Price,  
Associated Press

Leave your  
feedback

Share



# How U.S. forces captured Venezuelan leader Nicolás Maduro in Caracas

World Jan 3, 2026 3:30 PM EST

WASHINGTON (AP) — After months of growing military pressure on Venezuela President Nicolás Maduro, President Donald Trump ordered a brazen operation into the South American country to capture its leader and whisk him to the United States where his administration planned to put him on trial.

**WATCH: Trump holds news conference after announcing U.S. has captured Venezuelan leader Maduro**

Trump, during a news conference Saturday at his Florida home, laid out the details of the overnight strike, after which he said Maduro and his wife, Cilia Flores, were flown by helicopter to a U.S. warship.

## Maduro was in a 'fortress,' Trump says

Trump described Maduro as being "highly guarded" in a presidential palace that was "a heavily fortified military fortress in the heart of Caracas." Maduro had nearly made it to a safe room inside it, Trump told reporters, although "he was unable to close it."

In an interview earlier Saturday morning on "Fox & Friends Weekend," Trump said that American forces were armed with "massive blowtorches," which they would have used to cut through steel walls had Maduro locked himself in the room.

"It had what they call a safety space, where it's solid steel all around," Trump told Fox. "He didn't get that space closed. He was trying to get into it, but he got bum-rushed right so fast that he didn't get into that. We were prepared."

## U.S. military prepared for months

Gen. Dan Caine, chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, said at Trump's news conference that U.S. forces had rehearsed their maneuvers for months, learning everything about Maduro — where he was and what he ate, as well as details of his pets and the clothes he wore.

"We think, we develop, we train, we rehearse, we debrief, we rehearse again, and again," Caine said, saying his forces were "set" by early December. "Not to get it right, but to ensure we cannot get it wrong."

Trump said on Fox that U.S. forces had practiced their extraction on a replica building.

"They actually built a house which was identical to the one they went into with all the same, all that steel all over the place," Trump said.

## 'We turned off all the lights'

Trump said the U.S. operation took place in darkness, although he did not detail how that had happened. "The lights of Caracas were largely turned off due to a certain expertise that we have," Trump said. "It was dark and it was deadly."

At least seven explosions were heard in Caracas. The attack, which Defense Secretary Pete Hegseth described as part of "massive joint military and law enforcement raid," lasted less than 30 minutes.

Venezuela's Vice President Delcy Rodríguez, who under law takes power, said some Venezuelan civilians and members of the military were killed.

Yanire Lucas, a Caracas resident whose house sits pressed up next to a Venezuelan military base struck overnight, said she began to hear explosions next to her house around 1:50 in the morning.

## Trump says 'a couple of guys injured'

Trump said a few U.S. members of the operation were injured but he believed no one was killed.

"A couple of guys were hit, but they came back and they're supposed to be in pretty good shape," he told Fox.

"We had to do it because it's a war," he added.

Caine said one helicopter was struck by fire as it closed in on Maduro's compound but it was able to safely fly on its return.

## The weather was a factor

U.S. forces held off on conducting the operation for days, waiting for cloud cover to pass because the "weather has to be perfect," Trump said in the television interview.

"We waited four days," he said. "We were going to do this four days ago, three days ago, two days ago. And then all of a sudden it opened up and we said, go. And I'll tell you, it's, it was just amazing."

Caine said that on Friday night, "the weather broke just enough, clearing a path that only the most skilled aviators in the world could move through." He said helicopters flew low to the water to enter Venezuela and were covered above by protective U.S. aircraft.

## Operation 'Absolute Resolve,' by the numbers

Caine detailed the aircraft and U.S. forces involved in the operation, which he said was named "Absolute Resolve."

- More than 150 aircraft launched from across the Western Hemisphere, including F-18, F-22 and F-35 fighter jets, B-1 bombers and drones.
- Trump gave the go-ahead at 10:46 p.m. EST Friday.
- U.S. forces reached Maduro's compound at 1:01 a.m. EST Saturday and were back over water headed away at 3:29 a.m. EST.
- U.S. service members involved in the operation ranged in age from 20 to 49.

## Where is Maduro now?

Trump said that Maduro and Flores were flown by helicopter to a U.S. warship and would go on to New York to face charges. He posted on Truth Social a photo of the Venezuelan leader, wearing in a gray sweatsuit, protective headphones and blindfold. The caption said: "Nicolas Maduro on board the USS Iwo Jima."

The Justice Department released an indictment accusing the pair of having an alleged role in a narco-terrorism conspiracy.

## Months of escalating actions

The raid was a dramatic escalation from a series of strikes the U.S. military has carried out on what Trump has said were drug carrying boats in the Caribbean Sea and eastern Pacific Ocean since early September. There had been 35 known strikes that killed at least 115 people.

**READ MORE: A timeline of U.S. military escalation against Venezuela leading to Maduro's capture**

On Dec. 29, Trump said the U.S. struck a facility where boats accused of carrying drugs "load up." The CIA was behind the drone strike at a docking area believed to have been used by Venezuelan drug cartels. It was the first known direct operation on Venezuelan soil since the U.S. began its strikes in September.

## Few details about how the U.S. will now run Venezuela

Trump said at his news conference that group of officials standing behind him, including Hegseth, Caine and Secretary of State Marco Rubio, will "be a team that's working with the people of Venezuela."

**READ MORE: Maduro's capture and Trump's claim that U.S. will run Venezuela raise new legal questions**

The Republican president left open the possibility that U.S. troops would have a presence in the country. "We're not afraid of boots on the ground if we have to," he said, adding, "We had boots on the ground last night."

The U.S. will now "run" the country until a new leader can be chosen, Trump said.

"We're going to make sure that that country is run properly. We're not doing this in vain," he said. "This is a very dangerous attack. This is an attack that could have gone very, very badly."

*Kinnard reported from Chapin, South Carolina. Associated Press reporters Regina Garcia Cano and Juan Arraez in Caracas, Venezuela, contributed to this report.*

A free press is a cornerstone of a healthy democracy.

Support trusted journalism and civil dialogue.

Donate now →

**Left:** Government supporters hold photographs of Venezuela's late President Hugo Chavez and President Nicolas Maduro, after President Donald Trump said the U.S. struck Venezuela and captured Maduro, in Caracas, Venezuela, Jan. 3, 2026. Photo by Maxwell Briceno/Reuters

### Related

**Maduro's capture and Trump's claim that U.S. will run Venezuela raise new legal questions**

By Lisa Mascaro, Joshua Goodman, Ben Finley, Associated Press

**A timeline of U.S. military escalation against Venezuela leading to Maduro's capture**

By Ben Finley, Konstantin Toropin, Regina Garcia Cano, Associated Press

**WATCH: Trump says U.S. is 'going to run' Venezuela until transition of power after capturing Maduro**

By Associated Press

**Live updates: U.S. captures Maduro and his wife after striking Venezuela**

By Associated Press

**What we know about a U.S. strike that captured Venezuela's Maduro**

By Jill Lawless, Rebecca Santana, Associated Press

**U.S. strikes Venezuela and says leader Maduro has been captured and flown out of the country**

By Regina Garcia Cano, Konstantin Toropin, Eric Tucker, Associated Press

### Go Deeper

- dan caine
- donald trump news
- nicolas maduro
- u.s. military
- venezuela

Support Provided By: Learn more

Keep PBS Growing for Generations

Support the programs and voices that inspire, educate, and unite us all.

Support Your Local Station

Stand up for truly independent, trusted news that you can count on.

Donate now →

Educate your inbox

Subscribe to Here's the Deal, our politics newsletter for analysis you won't find anywhere else.

Enter your email address Subscribe

PBS NEWS WEEKEND

Saturday, Jan 3

<div>IBDO</div>	<div>BNSF RAILWAY</div>
<div>Consumer Cellular</div>	<div>RAYMOND JAMES</div>
<div>VIEWERS LIKE YOU</div>	<div>FRIENDS of the NEWSHOUR</div>

- Trending Now
- 1

Read Jan 03  
Iran's leader says rioters 'must be put in their place' as protest death toll rises to at least 10
- 2

Watch Jan 02  
Iran's leader says rioters 'must be put in their place' as protest death toll rises to at least 10
- 3

Read Jan 03  
WATCH: Trump holds news conference after announcing U.S. has captured Venezuelan leader Maduro
- 4

Read Jan 03  
A timeline of U.S. military escalation against Venezuela leading to Maduro's capture
- 5

Read Jan 02  
Maduro says Venezuela is open to U.S. talks on drug trafficking, but keeps mum on CIA strike

By — Meg Kinnard, Associated Press

By — Michelle L. Price, Associated Press

### The Latest

- World

Jan 03

Authorities investigate managers of Swiss bar where New Year's fire killed 40

By John Leicester, Jamey Keaten, Associated Press
- World

Jan 03

Iran's leader says rioters 'must be put in their place' as protest death toll rises to at least 10

By Jon Gambrell, Associated Press
- Politics

Jan 03

How U.S. forces captured Venezuelan leader Nicolás Maduro in Caracas

By Vanessa A. Alvarez, Tim Reynolds, Bruce Schreiner, Associated Press
- World

Jan 03

U.S. strikes Venezuela and says leader Maduro has been captured and flown out of the country

By Meg Kinnard, Michelle L. Price, Associated Press
- Politics

Jan 03

Maduro's capture and Trump's claim that U.S. will run Venezuela raise new legal questions

By Lisa Mascaro, Joshua Goodman, Ben Finley, Associated Press
- World

Jan 03

Allied security advisers discuss peace proposal Ukraine ahead of leader summit

By Volodymyr Yurchuk, Associ Press