

**INTELLIGENCE BRIEF**

# Operation Absolute Resolve: U.S. Decapitation Raid in Caracas

## Key Points

- On January 2-3, U.S. forces executed a multi-domain night raid in Caracas that seized President Nicolás Maduro and his wife Cilia Flores, following a 2025 maritime strike campaign, a declared “non-international armed conflict” with unlawful combatants, and the public identification of Venezuelan land nodes linking regime elements to trafficking logistics.
- Washington’s stated rationale centres on counter-narcotics and judicial accountability, but the campaign has drawn sustained legal scrutiny and UN warnings since the maritime phase, foreshadowing post-raid legal/diplomatic pushback.
- Regional reactions remain polarised: left-leaning governments condemned the action; several right-leaning states aligned with the U.S. drug-war frame—mirroring the split seen throughout late 2025 and complicating stabilisation diplomacy.
- Civil aviation risk over Venezuela is high due to elevated air-defence posture, potential SAM activations, and misidentification risk amid ongoing U.S. operations and pre-identified land targets; operators should avoid FIR Maiquetía (SVZM) and plan for spillover constraints in adjacent FIRs.

## Event description

- **When:** Night of 2–3 January 2026 (local), over roughly two hours.
- **What:** A U.S. precision air campaign to suppress defences, paired with a special-mission entry/exfiltration, that apprehended the Venezuelan president and first lady for transfer to U.S. jurisdiction (New York).
- **Who:** U.S. joint force elements; Venezuelan military/security sites were struck to enable the decapitation raid; Delcy Rodríguez was subsequently designated interim leader domestically.
- **Where:** Multiple sites in/around Caracas were targeted (including air and port infrastructure) to create the window for the urban seizure and rapid air exfiltration.
- **How:** ISR saturation, air-defence suppression, urban blackout to maximise surprise, rapid breach on a rehearsed safe house, and tight exfiltration under layered air cover—consistent with the 2025 shift from maritime interdiction to land “nexus” targets linking state organs and trafficking logistics.

## Analysis

The Caracas raid capped a 2025 pattern that normalised lethal strikes on suspected narco vessels across the Caribbean and eastern Pacific, while the administration formally notified Congress it was in a “non-international armed conflict” with unlawful combatants and stood up Joint Task Force Southern Spear to prosecute networked trafficking targets. By late October 2025, officials had identified Venezuelan land “targets that sit at the nexus of the drug gangs and the [Maduro] regime,” explicitly including ports and airstrips—signalling escalation ashore. That maritime-to-land progression, paired with a law-enforcement narrative, aims to deny sanctuary and showcase prosecutorial reach. Yet the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights and multiple legal scholars had already questioned the legal basis and proportionality of the maritime phase—warning that lethal force outside active hostilities risks constituting extrajudicial executions—indicating that the Caracas action will face sustained legal/diplomatic challenge ahead.

Beneath the counter-narcotics frame sits an energy-security logic. The U.S. shale “revolution” dramatically lifted output but produces predominantly light, sweet crude. Over decades, however, U.S. Gulf Coast refineries were capital-intensively configured for heavy, sour feedstock; converting them at scale is slow and costly. The result is a structural mismatch: U.S. producers flood the market with “light,” while U.S. refiners “crave” heavy barrels. With heavy supply concentrated among Canada, Venezuela, and Russia, Washington has strategic incentives to diversify away from single-supplier dependence and to hedge against hostile suppliers. Venezuela’s outsized heavy-oil reserves align with U.S. refinery slates; securing ports/airfields and stabilising export nodes would, over time, ease U.S. heavy-sour constraints. The 2025 public identification of Venezuelan land targets, followed by a decapitation opening space for security perimeters around energy infrastructure, suggests that ensuring reliable heavy-crude flows was factored alongside the drug narrative when planners linked “nexus” nodes to regime logistics.

### **The Donroe doctrine**

The Trump administration’s Donroe doctrine is a contemporary restatement of the Monroe principle for today’s threat set: reassert U.S. primacy in the Western Hemisphere (“home-region” security) by fusing three lines of effort. First, deny extra-hemispheric leverage exercised through state-criminal nexuses and local proxies. Second, treat transnational cartels and aligned actors as “unlawful combatants” to enable preemptive, lethal action and rapid cross-domain raids under an armed-conflict posture. Third, protect strategic commerce and resource flows—particularly heavy-sour crude supply lines critical to U.S. refinery configurations—by targeting “nexus” nodes where state security organs and trafficking logistics intersect. This was operationalised in 2025 via the armed-conflict notification, creation of JTF Southern Spear, a tempo of maritime strikes, and the public flagging of Venezuelan ports/airstrips as land targets—of which the Caracas decapitation raid is the logical next step. The same package, however, inherits 2025’s legal and diplomatic headwinds, with UN warnings and polarised hemispheric reactions likely to shape coalition-building and the narrative battles that follow.

## **AVSEC threat assessment**

- Threat picture: High at all altitudes over SVZM. Expect elevated Venezuelan air-defence readiness, intermittent radar/comm failures, GNSS interference risk, and heightened misidentification probability as military profiles overlap civil traffic amid ongoing U.S. ISR/CAP patterns and pre-identified land targets inside Venezuela.
- Routing and planning: Avoid Venezuelan airspace (FIR Maiquetía). Build generous lateral/vertical standoff to FIR boundaries; anticipate spillover constraints in adjacent FIRs from CAP orbits, tanker tracks, ISR boxes, and naval air corridors. Load conservative alternates/ETP fuel and prepare for insurer war-risk updates tied to the campaign trajectory.
- Airports and ground risk: Intermittent power/ATC outages and perimeter security surges at Caracas-area aerodromes; crew layovers cannot be risk-managed to corporate thresholds—avoid overnighting.
- Operator mitigations: Harden flight-watch and threat-monitoring; scrutinise non-standard ATC instructions that reduce separation from SVZM; maintain TCAS vigilance; coordinate with national authorities for the latest conflict-zone guidance and with OEMs for GNSS/RAIM resilience.

## **Forecast (3–6 months)**

- Security: Additional limited strikes on remaining “nexus” nodes are plausible if armed resistance forms around ports/airfields. Urban protests and episodic sabotage risks in oil belts are likely as factions contest control of revenue-critical assets—consistent with the campaign’s 2025 signalling about land targets and the deterrent logic of the maritime-to-land shift.
- Diplomacy/legal: Expect multilateral censure attempts and continued legal challenges echoing 2025 critiques of authority and proportionality; regional polarisation observed during the maritime phase will continue to complicate coalition management for any stabilisation mission.
- Energy: If security perimeters hold around export terminals and trunk lines, incremental heavy-sour flows could emerge, easing U.S. refinery constraints and reducing single-supplier risk; sabotage or factional violence against pipelines/ports would delay normalisation.



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