



'There was no regime change' -Venezuela's ex-FM Jorge Arreaza on US kidnapping raid

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Max Blumenthal (MB): Welcome to The Grayzone, it's Max Blumenthal. Under orders from President Donald Trump, the United States military kidnapped Venezuelan President Nicolás Maduro and his wife Cilia Flores in a violent January 3rd raid that left at least 80 people dead, including 32 Cuban military officers without any apparent casualties on the American side. How is this operation possible? And where does Venezuela go now that Trump continues to issue threats amid his claim to own the country, its economy, and its vast resource wealth?! To get the perspective of Venezuela's government and the Chavista movement behind it, I spoke to Jorge Arreaza. Arreaza is a veteran diplomat who served as foreign minister of Venezuela under Maduro, and is a confidant of his country's acting president, Delcy Rodríguez. He is also the son-in-law of the original architect of Venezuela's

Bolivarian Revolution, former Venezuelan president Hugo Chávez. Jorge Arreaza, welcome to The Grayzone.

Jorge Arreaza (JA): Thank you.

MB: It's great to see you. There was, as everyone watching this knows, a massive US military kinetic raid on Caracas on January 3rd involving 150 military aircraft, Delta forces, and a helicopter division. It resulted in the kidnapping of your head of state, President Nicolás Maduro and First Lady Cilia Flores. And I think everyone wants to know how this was possible and how the US was able to achieve this without losing apparently any men or material. From your point of view, what happened there?

JA: Thank you, Max. Yes, it was quite an event. It's the first time in the Republican history of Venezuela, our history as a republic, that we are attacked by a foreign power with such an overwhelming use of war technology. This was being prepared for weeks, we all know that all these carriers and ships, warships etc were displaced in the Caribbean Sea close to the Venezuelan territorial waters for months with the false excuse of fighting against the drugs dealers and the narco traffic and cartel of the suns. All of this, I can't say the word, because it's not appropriate to say but all of these are lies, that they made up against our country against President Maduro and his team. So we were expecting from the first moment some time of attack we were preparing our people for even an invasion with our militias and our armed forces. But what happened this last January 3rd is that they used the most advanced war technology. They were able to silence, to neutralise our raiders, our air artillery or air defences. We understand it was more than 100 aircrafts from drones to bombers that were used in this operation and the facts are the facts. So we have maybe 100 people that are dead. They are our heroes, our martyrs, and we are really sad. Because civilians, not only military, the bombs also landed in places where normal people live and they killed young people who were not involved at all in politics or with the government. Military, of course, young military personnel who were just doing their job. So it was an operation well designed with very advanced technology. So what really happened is that they kidnapped, they hijacked our president and his wife, who is also a member of the National Assembly of Venezuela. She is a leader of the Venezuelan women as well. And the case is absolutely illegal and in the frame of international law. Even I believe I am certain about saying that it's also illegal in terms of your law of the constitution of the United States and the laws of the United States. It's absolutely unacceptable. It is barbaric. And we are asking the government of the United States to release President Maduro and his wife to bring them back to Venezuela, because it's absolutely illegal what you have done, not you, your government, and in terms of maintaining the international order based on the law, based on norms, I believe that this should be solved because he's a head of state. He has immunity, diplomatic immunity. And this is just unacceptable for any human being who believes in peace, who believes in international law, who believes that we can all understand each other through dialogue processes. So that's what happened. And we are still really under shock still. But something else happened, Max. The government of Venezuela is the same government. Delcy Rodríguez is the president at the moment, the constitution establishes that. And so the plan that President Maduro wrote with

his own hand is the same plan that President Chávez also led as his legacy when he died. And there was no regime change. Someone else is in the presidency now, but there was no regime change, and Delcy is a loyal and brave woman who's going to do whatever she has to do to protect our sovereignty and to make President Maduro and Cilia Flores come back to Venezuela.

MB: Well I want to ask you more about that but first just a couple more questions on what took place on the traumatic night of January 3rd. Can you tell us anything more about what happened when Nicolás Maduro, your president, and Cilia Flores were kidnapped and why they were not in a more secure place?

JA: I believe that they were in a secure place and all the military personnel that were taking care of them delivered their lives to protect them. Most of them died defending the president and his wife. So I believe it just was an overwhelming superiority in terms of technology. And this is what happened, because remember that we have always been ready for a different kind of, not the conventional warfare, but something like Vietnam that lasted for over 20 years or Afghanistan; it's different. As President Chávez said, we have lots of mountains, lots of savannas, lots of jungles, lots islands, and we have brave men and brave women that would defend in a man-to-man fight this country. But of course, we can't deny the superiority of the US in terms of the investment they have done. I mean, I believe that all what Venezuela has spent in the last 100 years in the military investment is not enough compared to what the United States spent in a two-hour operation in terms of money of each missile that was sent, each flight from bombers, from F-15, F-52, helicopters, drones, the carriers, the Gerald Ford carrier and all of this, it's thousands of millions of dollars that were spent for that operation. So in terms of the military, we are ready for non-conventional warfare, not for this conventional kind of warfare.

MB: 32 Cuban officers were killed in the US assault on Venezuela. What can you tell us about what those Cubans were doing and in what context they were killed?

JA: The Presidents of Venezuela, Chávez and Maduro, have always counted with the help and the support of the Cuban experts in security. Remember that Fidel Castro had more than 600 attempts of assassination, so they really know how to protect a head of state. And there were about 100 people in the group that was protecting the President and maybe 30% of them were Cubans, and that's the case. They also gave their lives for the revolution and they gave their life in order to protect President Maduro.

MB: Were they in combat? Were they killed in combat?

JA: Yes, all of them.

MB: What do you say to those, particularly in Washington, who say that the stunning success of this US raid demonstrates that Iraq War Syndrome is over because, you know, civil war and destabilisation haven't erupted inside Venezuela yet?

JA: The only reason that that didn't happen is because Chavismo is in power, because the revolution is in power, is that we have really large structures of communication with our people, that we have communes, communal councils, our people is organised, so we have direct communication with our people. They know what's happening, they know what happened that night, they know about Delcy and her commitment with President Maduro and with the constitution and with our sovereignty. So Venezuela at the moment is in peace, the shops are opening, the malls have opened. We're going back to schools, to the universities, we are producing oil, we're producing everything that we need, food in Venezuela, but that's only possible because there wasn't a regime change, because Delcy Rodríguez is the vice president and now the president in charge of Venezuela. And that's the only reason. Without the Chavismo, this would be chaotic. Without Chavismo, we would be in a situation that wouldn't be under control for decades. So that's something they have to consider. And it's not because of the Iraq war, whatever, it's the Venezuelan people that rule in the Venezuelan government.

MB: Without Chavismo, there would be a civil war?

JA: Yes, a civil war or something like in Libya. Without Chavismo, there would be no peace in Venezuela.

MB: Is the Chavista movement, which is in power through the Bolivarian revolution, is it united?

JA: Monolithically united. Absolutely. More than ever, I would say. Even more, I believe that with this attack, the Chavismo is expanding to new sectors, the youth, the youngers that are just understanding what the world is about; geopolitics in the world and who wants to dominate who wants the abuse and they understand the importance of being independent they are really – how do we say? – outraged with what this means, that bombs falling in your country, in your territory, killing your people, and they are extending their hands. They want to come to the Bolivarian Revolution. They want to be our friends. They want to become part of the revolution. I can say that the popularity of President Maduro and of the Venezuelan government is much more important and big today than it was, I don't know, the 31st of December. So that's something. We are coming together, we are uniting even more than I thought that it would happen. I have family who are people that have never supported the government of the revolution and they have called me and they tell me Jorge what do I have to do, where is my weapon, what do i have to do to defend my people, where do I go to a demonstration to support President Maduro? They even say that they miss President Maduro, and they didn't like him, but they miss him.

MB: In a past interview with The Grayzone, you described how US intelligence actually attempted to recruit you and how you repudiated them. You obviously remained loyal. I met an official in Caracas who told me that in the US attempt to recruit him, his family inside the US was threatened. It sounded very intimidating what took place. He remained loyal. But now, in the face of what took place with this raid in which the head of state, Nicolás Maduro, was kidnapped so quickly, there are a lot of theories on the internet about Maduro potentially

having been betrayed, and they're starting to pour out into mainstream media that he was betrayed by Venezuelan leadership or that Venezuelan military officials had been recruited in advance by US intelligence and we're essentially asked to order some kind of stand-down. And I wanna get your response to these theories, which are gaining so much traction right now. It's obviously just speculation. I give you the floor to set the record straight.

JA: It's a psychological intrigue campaign. It's all speculation. I have no signal of treason in any sector of the state or any sector of the Chavismo, not the military, not the politicians, everyone is united. These are, I believe, what the government, the administration of the United States has done; it's another kind of warfare, psychological warfare. And the only way that we could be in trouble in Venezuela at the moment is if there was a division in the Chavismo. I see no chance for that to happen. I have spoken to all the military, the generals, major generals, and they are all very clear that we are on the right side of history and that we're going to defend our homeland and our sovereignty against whatever happens to us. So I believe that it's good to tell the world or to let the world know that unity in Venezuela not only, I insist, in the Chavismo, the Venezuelan people at the moment are united and believe that we were attacked by a foreign power, that this was absolutely illegal that the president of Venezuela is Nicolás Maduro Moros, that he has to come back. And all these conspiracy theories and all these conspiranoic theories are absolutely speculations, lies, and they are out of order, out of place at this moment.

MB: You have been on the front lines of the Chavista movement even before you were Foreign Minister, and you now know every important leader of Venezuela on a very close basis, better than US media knows them. US media is now focused on Delcy Rodríguez, and she's been portrayed in the New York Times, for example, as a kind of moderate, someone who's more amenable to deal-making than Nicolás Maduro. Donald Trump has said she will do whatever we want. I don't know what he meant by that precisely, but I wanna get your perspective. How would you portray the political outlook of Delcy Rodríguez? Where does she fit within the pantheon of Chavista leadership? Who is Delcy Rodríguez?

JA: I must say she's the most important woman, leader woman, of the Venezuelan Revolution. She's more than patriotic. You know the story of her father, I mean, he was killed by the CIA in a Venezuelan prison. He was a left leader also from the working class in the 1970s. So she's absolutely loyal to her father, to her history, to the Venezuelans revolution, to Venezuelan history. And I believe she's one of the most courageous women I have ever met. Well, when she was Minister of Foreign Affairs, she was the minister, but she had nine Deputy Ministers, nine Vice Ministers who were men or they were all gentlemen and one woman. And when I came into a meeting and I saw one woman, nine Deputy Ministers, I said, they still can't fit who Delcy is because she's worth at least ten men, at least. She's really a very brave woman and I believe she's going to be absolutely loyal to President Chávez, to President Maduro, to the Venezuelan people. But we have to understand the circumstances, our President and his wife are kidnapped. They are not imprisoned. They have been kidnapped illegally. They can be assassinated. Anything can happen. President Trump, as if it was a natural thing to say, he says: "We could do a second attack and it would be a major

attack and we would kill and we would destroy the country." These are our circumstances. There was a Spanish writer, philosopher, Ortega y Gasset, and he said: "Man is himself and his circumstances." So, Delcy is herself and her circumstances. And we understand her circumstances, we know, the people of Venezuela know what circumstances she's facing, and we know she's going to do her best in defending our sovereignty and in bringing back President Maduro and Cilia Flores.

MB: Well, I want to get to Trump's threats in a moment, but interim President, Delcy Rodríguez, if I can call her that, has set up several commissions to return Nicolás Maduro and his kidnapped first lady, Cilia Flores, back to Venezuela. There have been mass protests calling for their return. Rodríguez has vowed to bring Maduro and Flores back. What is the plan there? What is the plan to bring Nicolás Maduro and Cilia Flores back to Venezuela?

JA: Well, that's a main objective of Delcy, who is the acting president at the moment. We're absolutely convinced that all these accusations against and the indictment against President Maduro and his wife are all made up. And there's a legal team Delcy and our government have chosen and we are in contact with them that are going to defend President Maduro, even though it's an illegal trial. They're going to defend him in the legal system of the United States. So everything is being talked and agreed with us and it's a main issue because if there is some kind of fairness in the legal system of the United States, President Maduro should be released in the next hearing because he has immunity. He's a head of state because the Cartel of the Suns doesn't exist because this is all false. It's lies. But let's see what happens. But it's a main objective of the Chavista government at the moment, is not only to run the country as we're doing, but to bring President Maduro and his wife back to Venezuela.

MB: Have you or anyone in the government had contact with the President or First Lady? And if so, can you tell us anything about their mental state or their physical condition since it's been reported that Cilia Flores was injured and bruised during the violent raid that led to her kidnapping.

JA: I believe there hasn't been direct conversations with them, but through the legal defence team, through the lawyers. And you saw President Maduro when he was saying: "Good night. Happy new year." Even in the hearing he was very emphatic and he showed his strength and his personality there. So he's in very good shape, mental health shape. He's sure that he's facing an unjust situation, an unjust trial. As he said, he's a prisoner of war and he is going to make his case. I'm sure Max, as it happened with Alex Saab, President Maduro is coming back to Venezuela and his wife. And we'll see them as soon as possible back in Venezuela.

MB: Trump has announced Stephen Miller as one of the kind of viceroys who he intends to control Venezuela's economy or control or administer the remote occupation. Trump has also issued several demands that we've seen publicly that Venezuela cut ties with Russia, China, Cuba and Iran, kick them out of the country and allow the US to control Venezuela's oil industry. What's the response from the Venezuelan government to these obviously very onerous demands?

JA: Yeah, I believe that President Trump is really afraid of the multipolar world that has been born and that exists, it's in place. And Venezuela, President Chávez, Comandante Chávez and President Maduro have been leaders of this new world that has emerged. And we will always have good relations with these big powers with China, with Russia. But we have circumstances at the moment that we have to evaluate. Our oil has been seized, the oil tankers have been seized illegally. It's all barbaric. It is something that I believe that even my son who is seven years old, when I tell him what's happening, when he saw that because there was a bomb that would fall close to where we were last Saturday and when I explained to him what's happening, he said: But how can that happen? How can the president do that? How can they kidnap a president? How can they throw bombs and kill people when we have done nothing against that country. So in this situation we have to evaluate every step we take and every step the revolution and government takes in order to preserve good relations with all the countries in the world, but in order to have a good relation with the United States, always respecting Venezuelan sovereignty.

MB: You were in the room for many negotiations with the United States just about a year ago. Trump's envoy, Rick Grenell, was in Caracas, I believe, negotiating directly with Nicolás Maduro over Chevron's drilling licence. And now it looks like negotiations have collapsed or there may have been negotiations that were interrupted by this military raid. We also witnessed the US end negotiations with Iran by supporting Israel's strike on that country, a completely unprovoked attack. How does this affect your vision and the Venezuelan government's vision of negotiating with the US? Can they be negotiated with in good faith?

JA: I think that we have a chance, the United States of Venezuela, and not only Venezuela, but all of our America, Latin America, to build a new kind, a new type of negotiation terms with the United States. I believe that we can respect each other when we sit down around the table and discuss certain topics. And not by barbaric methods and warfare against the peoples of these countries, of our countries, but by sitting down pragmatically, but with principles, each one of our countries has its own principles, trying to reach agreements and respect the agreements. It's not easy to trust the United States, not only during the Trump's administrations, and historically it's difficult because they never comply. But still, in spite of that, I believe that this opportunity, difficult circumstances give us a chance to try to civilise the relations with the United States. And we need our circumstances also to lead us to sit down and try to convince the United States, as President Maduro said one million times, that we would like to have a good relationship with the United States, that would like to sell more oil to the United States. For the oil market prices, we would like the United States to invest in a minority that we would like the United States to invest in the Venezuelan economy, but respecting our legal framework and respecting international law. So I believe we have another chance and we hope that the United States understands this in spite of also what they have done. I think we have an opportunity, a window to sit down and make agreements that we can both respect.

MB: Presidents Chávez and Maduro gave several speeches focused on explaining to the Venezuelan people what the meaning of the Bolivarian Revolution was. I think about

Chávez's 2012 Strike at the Helm speech as one of those calling for a renewal of socialism. What could you say the meaning of the Bolivarian revolution is today after the kidnapping of President Maduro? What is Venezuela fighting for?

JA: Well, we have a historical confrontation. Ours is a region that has been under dispute. We have the Monroe Doctrine from the United States, and we have the Bolivarian Doctrines from South America. We believe that the peoples and the countries of Latin America and the Caribbean should be independent, we should come together in an integration process and we can establish a civilised dialogue with the other powers in the world including the United States. But the Monroe Doctrine and the new Trump corollary that was added recently to the security doctrine of the United States, and they want to annex our economies, our military forces, our cultural system. But that won't happen. It's going to be eternal. This dispute can be eternal. We are very Bolivarians, we believe that we have to be independent and we hope that the United States understands that they have to establish a new kind of relationship with Latin America and the Caribbean, and that we can share in the terms that the economy of the world and the system of commerce of the world and trade of the world establishes, we can share our wealth, our natural resources, but not imposing governments, not annexing countries, not bombing countries and not controlling governments. Now, that's not the way, that's going to happen. That's not the right way to do things. So we have been in this confrontation for 200 years now. It will probably last some other decades, but at some point this is going to be solved and I'm sure that Bolívar is going to prevail and Monroe is not going to win this battle.

MB: Donald Trump has threatened, as you said, to attack again if Venezuela's government does not fulfil his demands. What can Venezuela's military and people do to deter that possibility? And what is the strategic plan from your point of view?

JA: First of all, the most important consequence of this attack is that Venezuela is at peace. Everything is calm. And that's a challenge for us to maintain not only the control, but peace, the economic system producing and activated, classes, universities, jobs, everything going in normality, that's what we are trying to keep. And the response of the Venezuelan people has been with a very high level of awareness of what is happening at the moment. Second thing, we have to make the world and our people first and the world that we are in charge, that we are running the country. We have a government that was elected. The president is not here for now. He will come back. But for the moment, with President Delcy Rodríguez as acting president, we are continuing with our plans and with our ideology and defending the Venezuelan sovereignty. That's a second challenge. And the other challenge is we have to bring back President Maduro because he's the president. And we will make our best in complying with each one of these challenges and objectives that we have.

MB: Jorge Arreaza, thank you so much for joining us at The Grayzone.

JA: Thank you, Max. And I hope that we can have another interview soon and that things are better, not only in Venezuela, but in the whole world. And that the hegemonic pretension of the United States stops, pauses and understands that a new world has emerged and you have

to respect the world and the peoples when they make such a revolutionary change in the international system.

MB: Absolutely. We will see you again here soon. Thanks again.

JA: Thank you very much.

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