

# Venezuela troops patrol shops to keep rising prices under control

President Nicolás Maduro warns profiteering retailers, enforces heavy discounts, and encourages shoppers to empty stores

**Jonathan Watts and Virginia López in Caracas**

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[An updated version of this article is available here.](#)

The Venezuelan authorities have called in the army in an attempt to shore up the economy, deploying troops in shops to rein in rising prices in a country where shortages are rife and inflation has soared to around 50%.

Soldiers have been sent into stores run by the country's largest electronic retailer, and the president, Nicolás Maduro, warned that his policy to stem rising prices would extend to shops selling shoes, clothes and other goods.

"We can't just close the businesses; the owners have to go to jail," Maduro said in a televised speech.

The military-enforced, pre-Christmas discounts have attracted long lines of shoppers, some of whom have camped overnight to get bargains on computers, plasma TVs and other goods.

But the intervention has raised fresh concerns about an economy that is plagued by inflation running at about 50% per year, a black market that trades dollars at nine times the official rate, and shortages of food, medical supplies and other necessities.

Maduro, who took over from Hugo Chávez in April, says his country is fighting an "economic war" against the opposition, the CIA and other enemies who are trying to destabilise Venezuela.

Underscoring the mood of paranoia, Venezuelan authorities detained US journalist Jim Wyss of the Miami Herald for two nights after he tried to cover a border area notorious for illegal currency transactions and food smuggling. He was released on Saturday.

Facing municipal elections on 8 December, the president appears to be attempting to assert his authority by launching initiatives with the boldness - and occasional eccentricity - of Chávez. He has announced the creation of a ministry of supreme social happiness and stepped up controls on so-called profiteers.

His latest target has been three electronic chain stores: Daka, a retail chain similar to Best Buy or Currys, alongside JVG and Mundo Samira both of which sell household appliances.

All are accused of excessive profiteering. Although the government says it granted Daka a preferential exchange rate of 6.3 bolívars to the dollar to import goods, the company's shops allegedly sold the commodities at a similar rate to retailers who have to rely on higher black market rate.

Maduro said the retailer was guilty of theft and encouraged shoppers to empty its stores. Five shop managers were arrested.

"This is for the good of the nation," he said. "Leave nothing on the shelves, nothing in the warehouses ... Let nothing remain in stock!"

Following his call, YouTube clips posted on Saturday showed people looting a Daka store in Valencia.

The military have moved to restore order and ensure that shops keep prices low.

At the JVG store in the Los Caminos neighbourhood of Caracas on Monday, people queued up for three blocks to snap up goods. The items were marked down by up to 60% under the supervision of about a dozen national guards in olive green uniforms with assault rifles.

The troops took the names of those waiting and let them in the store 10 at a time. One man, who gave the name Joel Morón, said he has been in the line since Saturday.

"Importers have been indiscriminately raising prices. I wanted to buy a refrigerator for my mum. Before it cost 50,000 bolívars. Today I was told it cost 16,000," he said. "We had given up. We thought prices would continue to hike. These measures make me recover my dignity."

As a washer-dryer was wheeled out of the storeroom for a buyer, the crowd of consumers chanted, "Sí se puede!" ("Yes we can!").

Not everyone was happy. An importer, Iván Pérez, was at the shop to collect merchandise he had bought before the prices were marked down.

"Everything here works like the rest of the country - like crap," said Pérez. "This is evidently a political move, but I think it's actually just dividing society more; some will be happy, but others understand it damages us and the economy. This will increase scarcity."

The president of the private enterprise chamber Fedecamaras has admitted some cases of overpricing in the retail industry.

Although Venezuela is one of the world's biggest oil exporters, other industries are suffering as a result of price controls, government mismanagement and land appropriations. Shortages of staples have become apparent through the year, and power cuts are frequent.

At least one trade partner is experiencing delays in payments. Uruguay's president José Pepe Mujica is reportedly scheduled to meet Maduro early this week to try to resolve the late reimbursement for beef chicken and other goods his country provided.

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