



Venezuela military take over distribution of food, seize control of five biggest ports

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CARACAS, Venezuela (AP) – Venezuela's military is getting a major promotion as the socialist-run country struggles to combat severe shortages and stave off food riots.

President Nicolas Maduro on Monday created a new government initiative to boost production and guarantee the smooth distribution of food supplies in the face of what he called economic sabotage by his opponents. He said the Great Mission of Sovereign Supply will be headed by Defense Minister Vladimir Padrino, who will coordinate the work of every ministry.

As part of the new campaign, control of the country's five biggest ports was handed to a top military official Tuesday. Maduro said he was tapping army Gen. Efrain Velasco to head the nation's port authority in order to root out corruption and mismanagement at the point of entry for imported food. Previously, the agency had been under civilian control.

Maduro said he was acting under the authority of an economic emergency decree he declared earlier this year.

As food shortages have worsened this year, Maduro has leaned more on the military and community groups of government supporters to organize food distribution and ease the blocks-long lines that are a focal point for spontaneous unrest and bouts of looting when hungry shoppers are turned away. He has also tried to tighten a rationing system that gives Venezuelans access to staples only on certain days.

It's not clear if the strategy is working.

In June, there was an average of 24 protests each day, according to a study published Tuesday by the local group Venezuelan Observatory of Social Conflict. About a third of the protests were sparked by severe food shortages.

Padrino, an army general and one of the few U.S.-trained officers still occupying high positions in Venezuela's military, has long been one of Maduro's most-trusted aides. On his first day on the new job, he vowed to bring better control and discipline up and down the food supply chain.

"It's not about militarizing," he said Tuesday. "I don't like to see military intervention in areas that aren't of military nature, but this is a question of national security and defense of the fatherland."

The deeply unpopular Maduro is battling to fend off a recall drive in the face of an economic crisis marked by triple-digit inflation and forced austerity by households and government agencies alike.

Maduro lacks the military background of his predecessor and mentor, the late President Hugo Chavez, and since taking office in 2013 he has courted support from the military, greatly expanding its role running the oil-dependent economy. In addition to giving active and retired generals key Cabinet posts, he has awarded troops several inflation-beating pay raises, given the armed forces its own television network and created a military-run bank.

The military helped the government quash a wave of deadly anti-government protests organized by the opposition in 2014, but the latest unrest is spontaneous and appears to be erupting among poor Venezuelans once loyal to Chavez.

In the past month, at least five people have been killed in clashes with security forces sparked by food riots that recall the two days of deadly looting in 1989 that left over 300 dead. That tragedy, known as the Caracazo, is burned into Venezuelans' collective memory and at least some divisions of the military have resisted firing on poor Venezuelans ever since.

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