

Deaths in Venezuela unrest hit 102 as polarizing vote nears

CARACAS, Venezuela (AP) — Days before a polarizing vote to start rewriting its constitution, Venezuela is convulsing to a rhythm of daytime strikes and nocturnal clashes. The most recent violence drove the death toll from nearly four months of unrest above 100 Thursday.

Most of the dead in anti-government protests that began in early April have been young men killed by gunfire. The toll also includes looters, police allegedly attacked by protesters and civilians killed in accidents related to roadblocks set up during demonstrations.

The count by the county's chief prosecutor has been highly politicized, with the opposition and other government agencies reporting varying tolls and causes of death that focus blame on the other side.

When Neomar Lander, 17, was rushed bloody and



AP Photo/Ariana Cubillos
Pedestrians walk past closed shops and a barricade set up by demonstrators on the second day of a 48-hour general strike in protest of government plans to rewrite the constitution, in Caracas, Venezuela, Thursday.

lifeless to a hospital in early June, officials came out within hours to say he had been killed by a homemade bomb he was carrying. Opposition leaders maintained he was hit by a canister of tear gas fired by National Guard troops standing above the bridge

where he was found dead.

"They try to question the humanity of the other side as a political tactic, and I think that ends up discouraging and dismaying people," said David Smilde, a Tulane University expert on Venezuela.

The protests began following a Supreme Court ruling that stripped the opposition-controlled National Assembly of its remaining powers. Though quickly reversed, the decision ignited a protest movement against socialist President Nicolas Maduro fueled by anger over triple-digit inflation, hours-long lines to buy basic food items and deadly medical shortages.

Addressing a multitude of government supporters dressed in red Thursday, Maduro called on Venezuelans to vote in Sunday's controversial election for delegates to an assembly that is to rewrite the constitution.

He posed the vote as a choice that Venezuelans must make between being either "a free country or a colony of the empire" — Maduro's term for the United States.

Earlier, officials announced a host of security measures

that were being enacted including an order that no political protests be held between through Tuesday. The opposition called for a mass demonstration in Caracas on Friday, raising the potential for further clashes amid the rising tensions. Washington ordered relatives of U.S. diplomats to leave the Venezuelan capital ahead of the divisive vote.

Opposition leaders are urging Venezuelans to boycott the vote, saying the election rules were rigged to guarantee Maduro a majority and arguing that a new constitution could replace democracy with a single-party authoritarian system.

The mounting deaths of demonstrators have now become a separate source of outrage for the young people who march during the day and assemble nightly to fight police officers and national guardsmen at improvised

barricades across the country.

"The ones who have fallen fighting repression motivate us to keep fighting," said Sandra Fernandez, a 21-year-old university student.

The country's chief prosecutor reported Thursday on Twitter that a 16-year-old was killed at a protest in the capital overnight and a 23-year-old man died at a demonstration in Merida state. A 49-year-old man in Carababo, west of Caracas, was reported killed during a protest Thursday afternoon, and a 16-year-old died from a head wound suffered Wednesday at a protest in the capital.

The four killings pushed the death toll of the political crisis to 102. The oil-rich South American country, which was in the second day of a two-day general strike that shuttered businesses nationwide, has also seen thousands of injuries and arrests.

BRIEFLY

House GOP passes \$788 billion bill for Pentagon, border wall

WASHINGTON (AP) — The House passed a \$788 billion spending bill Thursday that combines a \$1.6 billion down payment for President Donald Trump's controversial border wall with Mexico with a whopping budget increase for the Pentagon.

The 235-192 vote both eases a large backlog of unfinished spending bills and gives Trump and his House GOP allies political wins heading into the August recess. Challenging hurdles remain in front of the measure, however, which will meet with more powerful Democratic opposition in the Senate.

The 326-page measure would make good on longtime GOP promises to reverse an erosion in military readiness. It would give veterans programs a 5 percent increase and fund a 2.4 percent military pay raise.

GOP leaders used the popularity of the Pentagon and veterans programs to power through Trump's border wall.

"Every single dime the President requested to start building a wall on our southern border he's going to get," said House Majority Leader Kevin McCarthy, R-Calif. "Most importantly, we're sending more to the VA to fix veterans' health care and reform outdated VA systems."

Russia sanctions bill exposes Trump's legislative tug of war

WASHINGTON (AP) — President Donald Trump is likely to sign a tough new sanctions bill that includes proposed measures targeting Russia — a remarkable concession that the president has yet to sell his party on his hopes for forging a warmer relationship with Moscow.

Trump's vow to extend a hand of cooperation to Russian President Vladimir Putin has been met with resistance as skeptical lawmakers look to limit the executive power's leeway to go easy on Moscow over its meddling in the 2016 presidential election.

The Senate voted decisively on Thursday to approve the new package of financial sanctions against Russia, Iran and North Korea two days after the House pushed the measure through by an overwhelming margin.

The proposed measures target Russia's energy sector as part of legislation that prevents Trump from easing sanctions on Moscow without congressional approval.

Two administration officials say that Trump is likely to sign the bill, despite last-minute wrangling over language and bureaucracy. Faced with near-unanimous bipartisan support for the bill in both the House and Senate, the president finds his hands are tied, according to two administration officials and two advisers with knowledge of the discussions.

Boy Scout leader apologizes for Trump's political rhetoric

NEW YORK (AP) — The Boy Scouts' chief executive apologized Thursday to members of the scouting community who were offended by the aggressive political rhetoric in President Donald Trump's recent speech to the Scouts' national jamboree.

The apology came in a statement from Chief Scout Executive Michael Surbaugh, three days after Trump's speech to nearly 40,000 scouts and adults gathered in West Virginia.

Other U.S. presidents have delivered nonpolitical speeches at past jamborees. To the dismay of many parents and former scouts, Trump, a Republican, promoted his political agenda and derided his rivals, inducing some of the scouts in attendance to boo at the mention of Barack Obama, his Democratic predecessor.

"I want to extend my sincere apologies to those in our Scouting family who were offended by the political rhetoric that was inserted into the jamboree," Surbaugh said. "That was never our intent... We sincerely regret that politics were inserted into the Scouting program."

Surbaugh noted that every sitting president since 1937 has been invited to visit the jamboree.



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