

All-powerful Venezuelan assembly opens amid protests, celebration

By **JORGE RUEDA**
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Associated Press

CARACAS, Venezuela — Defying criticism from Washington to the Vatican, Venezuela's ruling party on Friday installed a new super assembly that supporters promise will pacify the country and critics fear will be a tool for imposing dictatorship.

The constitutional assembly's first order of business was selecting its head — former Foreign Minister Delcy Rodríguez, a loyal follower of President Nicolas Maduro.

The nomination was approved unanimously by the 545 delegates, who marched to the neo-classical legislative palace accompanied by hundreds of red-shirted government supporters carrying roses and giant portraits of the late Hugo Chavez, Maduro's predecessor and mentor.

Some shouted, "He's returned!" as a job at the opposition, which had ordered images of Chavez removed from an adjacent building when it won control of congress in 2015.

The assembly was scheduled to meet again Saturday, and Rodríguez pledged it would be taking action against Maduro's political opponents.

"Don't think we're going to wait weeks, months or years," she said. "Tomorrow we start to act. The violent fascists, those who wage economic war on the people, those who wage psychological war, justice is coming for you."

The installation of the all-powerful constitutional assembly is virtually certain to intensify a political crisis that has brought four months of protests that left at least 120 people dead and hundreds jailed. Maduro vows the assembly will strip



AP Photo/Wil Riera
A supporter of Venezuela's President Nicolas Maduro is tossed into the air before the start of a march to the National Assembly for the swearing-in ceremony of the Constitutional Assembly, in Caracas, Venezuela, Friday. Venezuelan President Nicolas Maduro is heading toward a showdown with his political foes, preparing to seat a loyalist assembly that will rewrite the country's constitution and hold powers that override all other government branches.

opposition lawmakers of their constitutional immunity from prosecution, while members of congress say they will only be removed by force.

But the opposition is struggling to regain its footing in the face of the government's strong-armed tactics and the re-emergence of old, internal divisions. Several opposition activists have been jailed in recent days, others are rumored to be seeking exile and one leader has broken ranks from the opposition alliance to say his party will field candidates in regional elections despite widespread mistrust in Venezuela's electoral system.

In a sign of its apparent demoralized state only a few hundred demonstrators showed up for Friday's protest against the constitutional assembly, one of the smallest turnouts in months. They were halted by security forces firing tear gas and rubber bullets.

"This is what the constitutional assembly will bring: more repression," said opposition lawmaker Miguel Pizarro.

However, Maduro accuses his opponents of using violence and argues that the constitutional assembly is the best way to restore peace. On Friday he heralded members of the security forces who've been on the front lines of the daily street battles, claiming that 580 of them had suffered serious injuries from brutal attacks by "terrorist" protesters.

"I feel deeply the wounds of each one of you," Maduro said addressing a small group of injured national guardsmen scarred with burns, on crutches and wearing neck braces. "With your bodies as your shield, you have defended the right to peace."

Amid the rising tensions, an increasing number of foreign governments have sided with the opposition,

refusing to recognize the constitutional assembly and further isolating Maduro's government.

On Friday, the Vatican urged Maduro to suspend the new body, expressing "deep worry for the radicalization and worsening" of the turmoil in Venezuela. President Donald Trump and his French counterpart, Emmanuel Macron, agreed that Maduro must restore the rights of the Venezuelan people in a phone call Friday to discuss several ongoing international crises, according to a readout of the conversation by the White House.

Foreign ministers from several South American nations said they will gather Saturday in Brazil for an emergency meeting to decide whether to evict Venezuela from the Mercosur trade bloc for violating its democratic norms. Venezuela was suspended from the group in December.

BRIEFLY

Chicago to sue DOJ over funding threat

CHICAGO (AP) — Chicago Mayor Rahm Emanuel on Friday said the city will sue the federal government in defense of its status as a so-called sanctuary city and against threats to withhold U.S. grant funds.

Emanuel told "Connected to Chicago" on WLS-AM the city will be in federal court Monday arguing grants can't be withheld from cities the administration says aren't cooperating enough with U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement officials. The interview will air Sunday.

Attorney General Jeff Sessions announced last month local governments would lose the money if they do not give advance notice when immigrants in the country illegally are about to be released from custody. He also wants immigration agents to have access to local jails.

Officials say Chicago this year expects to receive \$3.2 million in Byrne Justice Assistance Grants. The money would mostly be used to buy police vehicles.

"We're not going to actually auction off our values as a city, so Monday morning the City of Chicago is going to court; we're going to take the Justice Department to court based on this," he said. "We find it unlawful and unconstitutional to be, as a city, coerced on a policy."

Sessions this week announced letters were sent to four cities struggling with gun violence, telling them they would not be eligible for a program that provides money to combat drug trafficking and gang crime unless they follow through on his suggestions. The cities were Baltimore, Albuquerque, and Stockton and San Bernardino in California.

None of the four has declared itself a "sanctuary city," a term associated with ordinances aimed at shielding illegal immigrants.

Sessions vows crackdown on leaks of classified information

WASHINGTON (AP) — Attorney General Jeff Sessions pledged on Friday to rein in government leaks that he said undermine American security, taking an aggressive public stand after being called weak on the matter by President Donald Trump.

The nation's top law enforcement official cited no current investigations in which disclosures of information had jeopardized the country, but said the number of criminal leak probes had more than tripled in the early months of the Trump administration. Justice Department officials also said they were reviewing guidelines put in place to make it difficult for the government to subpoena journalists about their sources, and would not rule out the possibility that a reporter could be prosecuted.

"No one is entitled to surreptitiously fight to advance their battles in the media by revealing sensitive government information," Sessions said in an announcement that followed a series of news reports this year on the Trump campaign and White House that have relied on classified information. "No government can be effective when its leaders cannot discuss sensitive matters in confidence or talk freely in confidence with foreign leaders."

Media advocacy organizations condemned the announcement, with Bruce Brown, the executive director of the Reporters Committee for Freedom of the Press, saying the decision to review existing guidelines was "deeply troubling."

Meanwhile, a White House adviser raised the possibility of lie detector tests for the small number of people in the West Wing and elsewhere with access to transcripts of Trump's phone calls.

Diplomat: U.N. would ban \$1B in exports from North Korea

By **EDITH M. LEDERER**
Associated Press

UNITED NATIONS — A proposed new U.N. sanctions resolution would significantly increase economic pressure on North Korea to return to negotiations on its nuclear and missile programs by banning mineral and seafood exports worth over \$1 billion — a third of its total exports last year, a Security Council diplomat said Friday.

The draft resolution, obtained by The Associated Press, would also ban countries from giving any additional permits to North Korean laborers — another source of money for Kim Jong Un's regime. And it would prohibit all new joint ventures with North Korean companies, and ban new foreign investment in existing joint ventures.

Egypt, which holds the Security Council presidency, said a vote on the draft resolution has been scheduled at 3 p.m. EDT on Saturday.

The proposed new sanctions follow North Korea's first successful tests of intercontinental ballistic missiles capable of reaching the United States on July 3 and July 27. The Security Council has already imposed six rounds of sanctions that have failed to halt North Korea's drive to improve its ballistic missile and nuclear weapons capabilities.

The draft resolution condemns the launches "in the strongest terms" and reiterates previous calls for North Korea to suspend all ballistic missile launches and abandon its nuclear weapons and nuclear program "in a complete, verifiable, and irreversible manner."

The United States spent weeks following the initial ICBM launch negotiating the text with China, North Korea's neighbor and ally.



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