



By: TA | AP Insight

Cuba under growing pressure due to US seizures of Venezuela-linked tankers



As U.S. **seizures of Venezuela-linked oil tankers** surge, concerns grow in Cuba about whether the island's government and economy will survive.

Experts warn that a sudden halt in **Venezuelan oil shipments** to Cuba could lead to widespread social unrest and mass migration following the stunning U.S. military raid that resulted in the capture of former President Nicolás Maduro.

"I'd be lying if I told you that I don't want to leave the country," said 16-year-old Cuban student Amanda Gómez. "We're all thinking about leaving, from the youngest to the oldest."

Long before the Jan. 3 attack, severe blackouts were sidelining life in Cuba, where people endured long lines at gas stations and supermarkets amid the island's worst **economic crisis** in decades.

The lack of Venezuelan oil could push Cuba over the brink, experts say.

"This will take an already dire situation to new extremes," said Michael Galant, senior research and outreach associate at the Center for Economic and Policy Research in Washington, D.C. "This is what a collapsing economy looks like."

Galant said he believes that's the goal of the Trump administration: "to cause such an indiscriminate suffering in the civilian population as to instigate some sort of uprising, regime change."

"This sort of besiegement of Cuba is very intentional. Will it work from their perspective? I think that the Cuban people have experienced suffering for a very long time, and the Cuban government is very well versed in how to handle these situations," Galant said. "I think it's very difficult to predict what will and will not spark actual regime instability. From the perspective of (U.S. Secretary of State Marco) Rubio, it's a sort of wait them out. ... There's always a breaking point."

'Someone is going to have to take the big pill'

From 2020 to 2024, Cuba saw its population drop by 1.4 million, which experts largely attribute to migration spurred by the worsening crisis.

Juan Carlos Albizu-Campos, a Cuban economist and demographics expert, noted that while Cubans with means have already left, migration will continue.

"Fuel is a factor that affects everything," he said. "People are going to feel that they are in worse conditions, and people who hadn't considered leaving will feel the need to do so."

At the Spanish embassy in Havana on Friday, Ernesto Macías, a 53-year-old doctor, stood in line behind dozens of people to request a family member visa for his daughter, having already obtained his Spanish citizenship.

"I wouldn't want Cuba to be invaded or anything like that. I hope it doesn't happen, but I'm sure people will continue to emigrate because there is no other way," he said.

Cuba's gross domestic product has fallen 15% in the last six years, and President Miguel Díaz-Canel noted in December that there was a 4% decrease in 2025 alone.

Although the Cuban economy never fully recovered after the fall of the Soviet Union in the 1990s, it experienced relative prosperity between 2000 and 2019, fueled by a boom in tourism and exports of services, nickel, rum and tobacco.

Then the COVID-19 pandemic hit, and coupled with a radical increase in U.S. sanctions under Trump's second administration to pressure for political change – stifling every imaginable sector – Cuba's crisis erupted with force.

Through it all, Cuba remained dependent on Venezuela for oil, receiving an estimated 35,000 barrels a day from the South American country before the U.S. attacked, along with some **5,500 barrels daily from Mexico** and

roughly 7,500 from Russia, according to Jorge Piñón, of the Energy Institute at the University of Texas at Austin, who tracks shipments using oil tracking services and satellite technology.

Even with all those shipments, **blackouts** persisted, experts noted.



At the end of the day, someone is going to have to take the big pill for not being able to solve the problems - President Miguel Díaz-Canel

“An indefinite shutdown of the electrical system, which is no longer so impossible to imagine, can be envisioned under a total suspension of oil shipments from Venezuela, which seems to be the current strategy of the American government,” said Jorge Duany, with the Cuban Research Institute at Florida International University. “It would lead us to imagine the possibility of mass protests,” he said.

Andy S. Gómez, retired dean of the School of International Studies and senior fellow in Cuban Studies at University of Miami, said that even if protests do occur, he doesn’t envision the downfall of Cuba while Raúl Castro is still alive and running the military.

“Are they concerned? You bet,” Gómez said. “They’re not well armed; their equipment is outdated.”

But Gómez noted that civilians aren’t armed, and that it’s unlikely one of the three factions of Cuba’s army would break with the ruling elite.

“At the end of the day, someone is going to have to take the big pill, and it’s either going to

be Díaz-Canel or (Prime Minister) Manuel Marrero Cruz for not being able to solve the problems,” Gómez said.

Food, electricity and a home

On Friday, U.S. forces **seized their fifth tanker** as part of a wider push by Trump’s administration to control the distribution of Venezuela’s oil products globally.

It’s not clear if any of the seized tankers were bound for Cuba, but experts believe any obstruction in the supply line would be a shock given the fragility of the island’s economy.

As the uncertainty continues, Gómez said Cuba only has one card to play with the U.S.: mass migration.

I don’t think that Cubans are going to provoke the United States at this time - Andy S. Gómez

“I don’t think that Cubans are going to provoke the United States at this time,” he said, adding that Cuban authorities “can absolutely control that.”

“Cuban military forces are on high alert,” he said.

Gómez added that even if the worsening crisis does lead to unrest and the ouster of a top government official, that person would likely be replaced by a well-known figure.

“It would just be a continuation of the government,” he said, adding that he doesn’t believe it would bother a majority on the island. “The Cuban people only care about one thing right now, unfortunately....they want to put food on the table, have electricity, have a place to live, have a job and then what do we do about the government.”