

Venezuela gives 3 U.S. diplomats 48 hours to leave the country

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USPA News - Venezuela on Monday gave three American diplomats 48 hours to leave the country after they were declared 'persona non grata' over allegations that the diplomats were conspiring against the Venezuelan government, a claim the U.S. State Department denied. At a press conference with international media, Venezuelan Foreign Minister Elias Jaua accused U.S. diplomats Brent Mary McCusker, Elsen Gordon, and Clark Christopher Lee of using a visa program as a cover to meet with youth organizers "for training, financing and creating youth organizations through which violence is promoted in Venezuela." Jaua said the Venezuelan government "has an obligation to restore law and order, citizens' peace within the purview of our Constitution."

But the United States denied the accusations and said it had not yet received "formal notification" of the expulsions. "The allegations that the United States is helping to organize protesters in Venezuela is baseless and false," U.S. State Department spokeswoman Jen Psaki said. "We support human rights and fundamental freedoms - including freedom of expression and of peaceful assembly - in Venezuela as we do in countries around the world." The expulsions come at a time of growing tension within Venezuela, with student protests and violent demonstrations last week that resulted in the deaths of three people. Authorities in Caracas have since issued an arrest warrant for opposition leader Leopold Lopez on charges of conspiracy and murder in connection with the violence. In an interview with the Miami Herald, Jaua claimed that the United States has "harassed" the Venezuelan government about the need to respond to demonstrators such as Lopez. "Venezuela is facing a fascist attack promoted by groups that have previously been trained to generate violence," he said, as quoted by the newspaper. The Venezuelan Foreign Ministry has placed heavy blame on the Obama administration for the outbreak of violence. Jaua alerted nations across the world to "threats, constraints, and direct interference of President Barack Obama in the ongoing violence and destabilization which aims to create a political crisis in Venezuela," according to a government website. Just hours before the expulsions were announced, U.S. Secretary of State John Kerry attempted to reason with the Venezuelan government. "We call on the Venezuelan government to provide the political space necessary for meaningful dialogue with the Venezuelan people and to release detained protesters," he said in a statement. Kerry added: "We urge all parties to work to restore calm and refrain from violence. Freedoms of expression and peaceful assembly are universal human rights. They are essential to a functioning democracy, and the Venezuelan government has an obligation to protect these fundamental freedoms and the safety of its citizens." It is not the first time that Venezuela has expelled American diplomats. Three U.S. embassy officials accused of plotting to "sabotage" the economy and electrical infrastructure of Venezuela were expelled from the country in October 2013, coming just months after Venezuelan President Nicolás Maduro ordered the expulsion of two U.S. military attaches after claiming that they attempted to infiltrate the armed forces.

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UPA United Press Agency LTD

483 Green Lanes
UK, London N13NV 4BS
contact (at) unitedpressagency.com
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