

News in brief

◆ Colombian President

Gustavo Petro said yesterday he was ready to "take up arms" in the face of threats from US counterpart Donald Trump, who over the weekend seized the leader of neighboring Venezuela in a military strike. Petro, a former guerrilla who for months been the target of insults and threats from Trump, said on X: "I swore not to touch a weapon again... but for the homeland I will take up arms again." Trump said over the weekend that Petro should "watch his ass" and described Colombia's first-ever leftist leader as "a sick man who likes making cocaine and selling it to the United States." Petro, whose M-19 urban guerrilla group disbanded under a 1989 peace agreement, has traded barbs with Trump ever since the Republican's return to the White House in January.



Colombian president ready to 'take up arms' in face of Trump threats

◆ Zelensky ousts Ukraine top intel chief amid security shake-up

Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky yesterday ousted the country's security service chief in the latest change to Kyiv's top intelligence positions, almost four years into the Russian invasion. Zelensky and Vasyl Maliuk, a popular military leader who won praise for overseeing ambitious operations against Russian forces, said that Maliuk was stepping down as head of the Security Service of Ukraine (SBU). Zelensky said on social media he had met Maliuk and thanked him for his service, posting a photo of the two men shaking hands. Maliuk said he was "stepping down" but would remain "within the SBU system to carry out world-class asymmetric special operations that will continue to inflict maximum damage on the enemy."

SPOTLIGHT

Iran says no leniency for 'rioters' as protests persist



Protesters in the Malekshahi district of Iran's western Ilam province.

AFP | Paris, France

Iran will offer no leniency to "rioters", though the public has a right to demonstrate, the head of the country's judiciary said on Monday, following more than a week of sometimes-deadly protests.

The remarks came after US President Donald Trump warned Iran would "get hit very hard by the United States" if the authorities killed more demonstrators.

The protests began on December 28 when shopkeepers in Tehran staged a strike over high prices and economic stagnation, but they have since spread to other places and expanded to include political demands.

"I instruct the attorney general and prosecutors across the country to act in accordance with the law and with resolve against the rioters and those who support them... and to show no leniency or indulgence," Gholamhossein Mohseni Ejei said, according to the judiciary's Mizan news agency.

He went on to add that Iran "listens to the protesters and their criticism, and distinguishes between them and rioters".

Demotions have taken place in 25 of Iran's 31 prov-

inces and affected, to varying degrees, at least 45 different cities, most of them small or medium-sized and concentrated in the west, according to an AFP tally based on official statements and media reports.

At least 12 people have been killed since December 30 in localised clashes, including members of the security forces, according to official announcements.

Since the protests began, officials have publicly struck a conciliatory tone when it comes to protesters' economic demands, while vowing to take a hard line against any chaos or destabilisation.

Iran's economy has been hit hard by tough international sanctions, with the national currency, the rial, losing more than a third of its value against the US dollar over the past year and inflation in double digits.

On Sunday, the government announced a monthly allowance for every citizen to alleviate economic pressure, equivalent to around 3.5 percent of the average monthly wage.

The reformist newspaper Arman Melli said Monday that the authorities had "heard the voices of the protesters", while the conservative papers Javan and Kayhan accused the United States and Israel of financially supporting rioters.

Maduro arrives for first US court appearance after capture

Maduro faces narcotrafficking charges along with his wife, Cilia Flores



Members of the media gather outside the Daniel Patrick Moynihan United States Courthouse as ousted Venezuelan president Nicolas Maduro awaits his arraignment hearing

● Trump said US was "in charge" of the South American nation

● The White House indicated Sunday that it does not want regime change

● Venezuelan military, loyal to Maduro, announced it recognized Rodriguez

AFP | New York, United States

Deposed Venezuelan president Nicolas Maduro arrived at a New York court yesterday, just days after being seized in Caracas in a shock US military operation that paved the path for Washington's plans to control the oil-rich country.

Maduro, 63, faces narcotrafficking charges along with his wife, Cilia Flores. The pair were forcibly taken out of Caracas in a US assault Saturday, in which commandos swooped in on helicopters, backed by fighter jets and naval forces, to capture them.

On Monday morning, Maduro was escorted by heavily armed law enforcement officers to a courthouse in New York, having been transported by helicopter and armored car.

All eyes are on Venezuela's response to the swiftly moving events, and late Sunday, interim leader Delcy Rodriguez stepped back from her initial defiance by offering to work with Trump.

"We extend an invitation to the

US government to work together on an agenda for cooperation," the former vice president said.

Some 2,000 Maduro supporters, including rifle-wielding men on motorcycles, rallied Sunday in Caracas, with crowds shouting and waving Venezuelan flags.

The Venezuelan military, loyal to Maduro, announced it recognized Rodriguez and urged calm.

No Venezuela death toll has been announced, but Defense Minister Vladimir Padrino Lopez said a "large part" of Maduro's security team was killed "in cold blood," as well as military personnel and civilians.

Trump said late Sunday that the United States was "in charge" of the South American nation, while US Secretary of State Marco Rubio said that discussions of Venezuela holding elections following Maduro's ouster were "premature."

'Need access to oil'

When asked what he needs



A supporter of ousted Venezuela's President Nicolas Maduro standing above a motorcycle gestures he takes part in a demonstration in Caracas

from interim leader Rodriguez, Trump said: "We need total access. We need access to the oil and other things in their country that allow us to rebuild their country."

Venezuela has the world's largest proven oil reserves, and more Venezuelan crude in the market could exacerbate oversupply concerns and add to recent pressure on prices.

But analysts say that alongside other major questions about the South American country's future, substantially lifting its oil production will not be easy, quick or cheap.

Oil dipped as investors weighed the impact.

The Trump administration says it retains economic leverage by blockading oil tankers from Venezuela. Trump has also threatened additional military attacks.

While there are no known US forces left inside Venezuela, a huge naval presence, including

an aircraft carrier, remains off the coast.

Leading opposition figure Edmundo Gonzalez Urrutia said that while the US intervention was "important," without the release of political prisoners and acknowledgement that he won the 2024 election, it was simply "not enough."

Details of the US operation were still emerging Monday, with Havana saying 32 Cubans were killed in the attack and Trump adding that Cuba itself was ready to fall after Maduro's capture.

"I don't think we need any action. It looks like it's going down," Trump said.

The UN Security Council will hold an emergency session on Monday at Venezuela's request.

Maduro allies remain

The White House indicated Sunday that it does not want regime change, only Maduro's removal and a pliant new government -- even if it is filled with his former associates.

Anointed by his mentor Hugo Chavez before the latter's 2013 death, Maduro kept a tight grip on power until his capture by US forces on Saturday.

He ruled alongside Flores and three other powerful figures: Rodriguez, now Venezuela's interim leader, her brother Jorge, and their rival, hardline Interior Minister Diosdado Cabello.

"It's like a club of five," a diplomatic source in Caracas told AFP under the condition of anonymity.

The US position leaves the Venezuelan opposition, which the Trump administration says was robbed of victory by Maduro, out in the cold.