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OAS seeks to increase pressure on Venezuela's Maduro at meeting

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MEDELLIN (Reuters) - Latin American leaders will seek to increase pressure on Venezuelan President Nicolas Maduro and further isolate the embattled leader when the Organization of American States (OAS) begins two days of meetings on Thursday in Medellin, Colombia.

The organization will also debate eventual sanctions on the oil-producing country, OAS secretary Luis Almagro said late on Wednesday, without giving further details.

Most of the 35 OAS members back Maduro's rival Juan Guaido, the head of the opposition-controlled National Assembly. Guaido in January invoked the constitution to assume a rival interim presidency after rejecting the 2018 election due to massive irregularities.

But some countries still back Maduro or regularly abstain from votes on Venezuela and may prevent the body from reaching a consensus resolution.

"We need to keep working on an incremental process of pressure and this meeting is part of that process," Almagro told journalists. "But we also recognize that every country has a sovereign right they can use on any of the items on the agenda."

Venezuela, which has the world's largest oil reserves, has remained in political limbo as its economic and humanitarian crises have worsened. Hyperinflation and shortages of food and medicines have led four million Venezuelans to flee.

Colombia has borne the brunt of the exodus, receiving an estimated 1.3 million migrants.

Although Venezuela announced its withdrawal from the OAS in April 2017, its political situation has dominated recent meetings.

The OAS accepted Guaido appointee Gustavo Tarre as a representative to the body from Venezuela's National Assembly.

Almagro, a diplomat from Uruguay, said earlier on Wednesday that Maduro was destroying democratic institutions and the rule of law. He highlighted child malnutrition and the deaths of patients in hospitals due to lack of medical treatment.

Maduro has accused the OAS, which is based in Washington D.C., of being a pawn of the United States.

The assembly will also address the situation in Nicaragua, which is facing a political crisis amid protests against President Daniel Ortega.

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