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**U.S. Responds to Maduro with Fresh Sanctions on Venezuelan Officials**

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“We are sending a clear message that human rights abusers, those who profit from public corruption, and their families are not welcome in the United States,” U.S. State Department spokeswoman Jen Psaki said Monday in a statement.

Washington’s decision comes after Maduro accused the U.S. vice president of planning to overthrow him at a rally this weekend.

According to the Venezuelan president, Biden spoke about the plan at a recent energy conference in Washington with Caribbean leaders.

Most Caribbean countries are part of “Petrocaribe”, the Venezuelan plan for subsidized oil launched in 2005 by then-Venezuelan President Hugo Chavez to export cheap oil to the countries of the bloc in exchange for cash, goods and services.

Experts, however, have warned that falling crude oil prices could prompt Venezuela to begin to reduce support for the plan which could have possible repercussions on the Caribbean countries.

The International Monetary Fund has forecast a recession of 7 percent in 2015 for the troubled Venezuelan economy which is reeling under an alarming inflation rate of over 50 percent due to the sharp drop in revenues from oil, Venezuela’s main export product.

Calling Maduro’s accusations “unfounded and false”, the State Department said, “The

Venezuelan government should focus on the legitimate complaints of its people, which include repeated violations of the freedoms of expression and assembly, as well as due process under the law.”

However, Washington avoided publicly revealing the number and identities of those affected by the travel restrictions in compliance with U.S. visa confidentiality laws.

It was not the first time that the U.S. has imposed sanctions against Venezuelan government officials.

In July, the U.S. imposed visa restrictions on 24 Venezuelan officials for their alleged involvement in human rights violations and the repression of anti-Maduro protests.

In December, U.S. President Barack Obama signed a bill passed by the Congress to impose visa sanctions on those Venezuelan officials.

The restrictions include the freezing of assets and a ban on visas for Venezuelan officials linked to the violence and suppression of the student protests in February last year in which 43 people died and hundreds were injured.

U.S.-Venezuelan relations have been strained since 1999, when the now-deceased Hugo Chavez, Maduro’s mentor and predecessor, came to power.

Neither country has had an ambassador in the other’s capital for the past four years.

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