

Venezuela

US steps up blockade of Venezuela by seeking to board third oil tanker

Trump administration escalates campaign of pressure against Nicolás Maduro



A US military helicopter flies over the Panama-flagged Centuries, which was boarded on Saturday © Kristi Noem/X/AFP/Getty Images

Jamie Smyth in New York, **Joe Daniels** in Bogotá and **Alex Rogers** in Washington

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The US coastguard stepped up its enforcement of a blockade on Venezuelan oil on Sunday by trying to board a sanctioned tanker in the Caribbean.

The coastguard was pursuing the tanker Bella 1, a sanctioned and unregulated vessel en route to Venezuela to load a cargo of oil, according to a US official. The operation followed the boarding of Centuries, a Panamanian ship, in a pre-dawn raid on Saturday and the seizure of Skipper near Venezuela on December 10.

“The United States Coast Guard is in active pursuit of a sanctioned dark fleet vessel that is part of Venezuela’s illegal sanctions evasion,” the official said. “It is flying a false flag and under a judicial seizure order.”

Kpler, a real-time data and analytics firm, said Bella 1 was one of four tankers heading towards Venezuela that reversed course on December 15 after the Skipper was seized. But it later turned around again and resumed its voyage towards Venezuela, it said.

A US official told The New York Times the vessel did not submit to being boarded and continued sailing.

Bella 1 was sanctioned by the US Treasury’s Office of Foreign Assets Control in June 2024 for its involvement in Iranian oil transport and is currently listed by the International Maritime Organization as having a missing flag, said Kpler.

The tanker seizures follow Donald Trump’s order this week for “a total and complete” blockade of sanctioned oil tankers travelling to and from Venezuela. It comes as the president weighs taking military action on Venezuelan soil, expanding his campaign to crack down on drug traffickers based in the country and raising pressure on autocratic president Nicolás Maduro to step down.

Schreiner Parker, head of emerging markets at Rystad Energy, an energy consultancy, said the apprehending of two ships in quick succession demonstrated the Trump administration’s resolve to choke off oil exports. Modern radar and satellite capabilities meant that oil tankers could no longer evade detection by disabling transponders or using false flags and were vulnerable to interception, he said.

“In practical terms, a serious Trump blockade could amount to a near-total shutdown of Venezuela’s crude exports, aside from the 150,000 barrels per day produced by Chevron under an Ofac-specific licence,” said Parker.

About 80 per cent of exports go to China via intermediaries.

The interdictions have prompted questions from lawmakers, including from the US president's own party.

"I consider it a provocation and a prelude to war," said Republican senator Rand Paul on ABC. "And I hope we don't go to war with Venezuela."

The US has amassed its largest military build-up in the Caribbean Sea since the 1962 Cuban Missile Crisis to enforce the blockade.

An effective embargo on oil exports, which surpassed 900,000 barrels a day in November, would have a devastating impact on Venezuela's economy.

Maduro, a Cuban-trained revolutionary socialist in power since 2013, relies on black market oil sales for desperately needed foreign exchange, and to prop up the patronage networks that in part keep him in power, according to analysts.

Maduro is regarded by the US and its allies as having stolen re-election last year. Washington has designated him as the head of the Cartel of the Suns, a drug trafficking organisation allegedly run by Venezuela's military and political elites.

Maduro has cast the US naval build-up as a pretext for his ousting.

A spokesperson for the Venezuelan government would not confirm the interception of a third vessel on Sunday morning, though described the Centuries as a "Chinese vessel with 40 Chinese crew members".

The Venezuelan government condemned the "theft and hijacking of a private Venezuelan oil tanker" in a statement on Saturday night, in reference to Centuries.

"The colonialist model that the US government seeks to impose through such practices will fail and be defeated by the Venezuelan people."

The US interception of the Centuries highlights that even vessels which do not appear on the US sanctions list are vulnerable to seizure if they carry a cargo of sanctioned oil.

Satellite images showed that Centuries loaded crude at Venezuela's Jose Oil Terminal in recent days and had been spoofing its automatic identifying positioning system, said Kpler. The tanker had also previously loaded sanctioned cargos, it said.

The US has indicated it intends to seize sanctioned oil intercepted by its flotilla, including the 1.85mn barrels on board the Skipper — a tanker which had previously been placed under sanctions for allegedly being part of an oil-smuggling network funding Hizbollah and Iran's Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps.

TankerTrackers.com, a maritime tracking service, said on Sunday the Skipper is now situated near the US Gulf coast where its oil would probably be transferred to refineries in the Houston region.

Oil prices rose when markets resumed trading on Sunday with prices of Brent crude, the international benchmark, up by about 0.6 per cent at \$60.87.

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