

Elders warn against a return to a ‘might-is-right’ world

09 January 2026

We are witnessing the breakdown of the long-standing principle, enshrined in the UN Charter after the devastation of World War II, that the use of force is justified only in self-defence.

The armed intervention in Venezuela to capture Nicolás Maduro is illegal under international law. It is a violation of the UN Charter, which prohibits the use of force against the territorial integrity or political independence of any state. It does not meet the legal threshold of self-defence. (There has been no armed attack.)

Evidence of grave human rights violations, including crimes against humanity, by the Maduro regime are well-documented, notably by the Independent International Fact-Finding Mission reporting to the UN. Those responsible should be held to account by the International Criminal Court (ICC). We urge the ICC to act on the evidence, and for all states to respect the independent operations of the Court.

If Venezuelans are to escape the vicious cycle of illegality, autocracy, and repression which they have long endured, it is essential to restore their democratic freedoms. There are currently worrying signs that this may not happen, and that the illegitimate regime will survive. Continuing political turmoil and armed conflict are a risk, as we have seen following other foreign interventions. The release of some political prisoners is welcome. All such prisoners must be freed. Elections should be held as soon as possible and meet the highest standards of accountability and transparency (as we called for after the 2024 elections). Venezuelans must choose their own leaders.

Stability in Latin America, as elsewhere, depends on consistent respect for state sovereignty. Disputes should be resolved by peaceful means, and in conformity with the principles of justice and international law. Yet the US intervention is the latest in a growing list of breaches of international law by powerful states, with more being threatened. Equally troubling is the idea that powerful states can carve up the world into spheres of influence. History should teach us the consequences of these trends.

When viewed alongside the subsequent U.S. withdrawal of membership of or funding to another 66 international organisations, these actions signal a broader retreat from multilateralism.

Political leaders must robustly defend the fundamental principles of the UN Charter, in particular sovereignty, political independence, and the territorial integrity of states. These principles have helped prevent a third world war for over 80 years. Leaders must do so consistently - not just when it suits them - or international law becomes meaningless, and the world drifts towards anarchy and chaos.

The consequences of this breakdown not being stopped could be very adverse for all the peoples of the world, including for those who live in powerful states. World stability is in danger. It is in everyone's interests for the international rule of law to be defended when it is under threat, as it is now.

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