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A year under the gun

By Editorial Board

A year after Venezuela was rocked by bloody anti-government demonstrations staged by civilian protesters who unsettled the faltering regime of Nicolás Maduro, students again took to the street last week in yet another sign that the government can't deal with its political and economic challenges.

As in the past, authorities mobilized their troops to squelch the demonstrations. That response, which led to several civilian deaths last year, provoked yet another episode of violence this time around.

As if that weren't bad enough, embattled President Maduro said his administration foiled a coup attempt that was supposed to take place Thursday. He alleged that the plotters, a retired air force general and 13 others, had U.S. support (of course) and claimed they were detained for conspiring to use a military jet to bomb the presidential palace.

This latest flare-up of street violence occurred in San Cristóbal, where demonstrators clashed with members of the military. They threw projectiles at police officers clad in riot gear, who responded with tear gas and rubber bullets. The authorities said several demonstrators suffered only superficial injuries, but Spanish-language media said many were seriously wounded and others hauled away under arrest.

Last week's events are more proof, if any were needed, that Miraflores, the Venezuelan White House, does not tolerate freedom of expression, the right to assemble and peaceful demonstrations anywhere in Venezuela. It also shows that the Maduro government only knows one way to respond to legitimate grievances — with more repression.

That's why President Obama in December signed legislation imposing sanctions on government officials in Venezuela responsible for human-rights violations in the wake of earlier anti-government protests. It will allow the president to freeze assets and deny or revoke visas of Venezuelan officials.

The protests that spread across Venezuela last year left at least 43 dead and hundreds injured or under arrest. Among those taken into custody was opposition leader Leopoldo López, who on Feb. 18 will mark one year of imprisonment without legal recourse. He is stuck in a remorseless, unending judicial process.

Crimes committed last year against civilians who oppose President Maduro, meanwhile, remain unpunished. Despite government promises, the perpetrators have not been touched. At this rate, they never will be.

The fundamental causes of the public outcry that culminated in February 2014 not only remain unresolved, they've become worse. All the symptoms of the Venezuelan crisis — including insecurity and scarcity of commodities — have worsened. The fall in global fuel prices, Venezuela's main export, has made the government's problems intractable.

Meanwhile, allegations of corruption involving President Maduro's administration and his circle of cronies multiply. Clearly, Venezuela has become a dysfunctional country, a kleptocracy of incompetents and leftist ideologues.

The opposition leader and former deputy Maria Corina Machado said Thursday that more than 80 percent of Venezuelans want "profound change," meaning a "transition to democracy."

So a year after popular protests that were violently repressed, the economic and social situation in Venezuela has worsened. President Maduro can no longer ignore the national disaster and his people's voice. Time is running out for a solution.