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Easing Venezuela's crash

By Jackson Diehl

For months, Venezuelans have been reading reports that one of the most powerful figures in their autocratic and virulently anti-American government, National Assembly president Diosdado Cabello, is a principal target of a U.S. criminal investigation into a Caracas-based drug trafficking cartel. So imagine their surprise when media linked to Cabello began displaying a photograph of the alleged kingpin meeting with a smiling senior State Department official in Haiti this month.

Why would Thomas Shannon, a senior counselor to Secretary of State John F. Kerry, have met and then posed for photographs on June 13 with Cabello, who according to numerous news reports has been targeted by prosecutors in New York and Miami for allegedly leading a cartel that has shipped hundreds of tons of cocaine to the United States?

Cabello and his nominal boss, President Nicolás Maduro, were quick to trumpet their versions. The meeting, Maduro said, was part of a “normalization” of relations between his increasingly beleaguered regime and the Obama administration. Cabello offered it as proof that the reports that he is a U.S. criminal suspect are false. U.S. officials, meanwhile, sounded confused. Both the White House and State Department spokesmen said they were unaware that Cabello had met with Shannon.

I heard another story: that the meeting was part of what has become an increasingly urgent attempt by the administration to broker a soft landing for a collapsing Latin American state. Already deep in crisis before the collapse of oil prices last year, Venezuela now lacks the funds to pay for essential imports of food and medicine as well as its huge foreign debts. It boasts what are probably the world's highest inflation and murder rates. After a violent crackdown on dissent, the regime is holding more than 70 political prisoners — the most prominent of whom, Leopoldo López, is four weeks into a hunger strike.

It was the threat that López, a moderate leftist and strong advocate of democracy, could soon die in prison that prompted the decision to have Shannon meet with Cabello, sources told me. The former ambassador to Brazil has been leading the administration's engagement with Venezuela since April, when he was dispatched to Caracas to head off a confrontation between Maduro and Obama at a hemispheric summit meeting. A subsequent conversation with Maduro at the summit convinced Obama that it was worth another attempt to engage a regime that has made anti-Americanism one of its political foundations.

In the short term, the U.S. diplomacy has a modest goal: to prevent López's death. Shannon told Cabello the continuance of the dialogue between the two governments depended on López remaining alive and being convinced to end his hunger strike, sources said. The former mayor and presidential candidate is demanding the release of political prisoners and the setting of a date for elections to the National Assembly, which are supposed to be held this year.

The longer term U.S. aim is to persuade Maduro and Cabello to hold a fair legislative election, with monitoring by international observers. Since the opposition would be likely to win a fair vote, that could provide a democratic way out of a crisis that otherwise could end in revolution or mass bloodshed.

The Venezuela initiative parallels Obama's outreach to Cuba, which has been the political tutor of the Maduro regime and that of Hugo Chávez before it. But the attempt to come to terms with Venezuela is more of a long shot than a deal to reopen the U.S. embassy in Havana. Fidel Castro seeded Caracas with his hard-line cadres, who now oversee the persecution of the opposition and the catastrophic mismanagement of the economy. If Raúl Castro represents a somewhat more pragmatic version of Cuba's Communist regime, then it might be said that "*Fidelismo*" is making its last stand in Venezuela.

The Obama administration has little leverage. Maduro and Cabello want the lifting of U.S. sanctions imposed on Venezuelan officials for involvement in human rights abuses as well as drug trafficking. But the administration's answer is that the visa denials and asset freezes were mandated by congressional legislation and won't be revoked without Capitol Hill's support. The only way to win that, Maduro and Cabello were told, was to release the political prisoners and agree to an election with international monitoring.

The U.S. criminal investigation of Cabello, too, is unstoppable — and the prospect of being ousted from his post at the National Assembly while he is subject to indictment gives him powerful reason to resist a fair election. Maduro and Cabello are known to lead different factions within an increasingly splintered regime, but it's not evident that either is willing or able to meet Washington's terms.

For now, Cabello and Maduro are reaping the propaganda benefits of the meeting in Port-au-Prince. If political prisoners are released in the coming days, and López ends his hunger strike, that would be evidence that the U.S. outreach to a suspected drug lord had produced a positive result.