

Congress of the United States
Washington, DC 20515

October 27, 2020

The Honorable Michael R. Pompeo
Secretary
U.S. Department of State
2201 C Street NW
Washington, D.C. 20520

The Honorable Steven T. Mnuchin
Secretary
U.S. Department of the Treasury
1500 Pennsylvania Avenue NW
Washington, D.C. 20220

Dear Secretary Pompeo and Secretary Mnuchin:

We write to share our grave concern regarding the looming environmental disaster posed by the sinking Venezuelan oil tanker *Nabarima*, and to urge the administration to grant the necessary exceptions to United States sanctions that would facilitate emergency operations to stabilize and safeguard the tanker.

The *Nabarima* -- operated under a joint venture by Venezuelan state-owned oil company Petróleos de Venezuela (PDVSA) and Italy's energy company Eni -- currently sits in the Gulf of Paria with 80 million gallons of oil on board. If the oil spills, it is estimated the damages would be five times worse than the Exxon Valdez oil spill in 1989. It would cause long term ecological harm to the rich biodiversity of the region, jeopardize the livelihood of more than 50,000 fishermen, and threaten the entire ecological system of the Southern Caribbean. We understand Eni has offered to ensure the safe offloading of oil from the *Nabarima*, using state-of-the-art solutions. However, the company is seeking assurance from the U.S. government that such activities would not risk sanctions violations for Eni and its contractors.¹

Reports of water leaking on board the *Nabarima* and of the tanker tilting began to emerge in July. In September, the tanker had taken on ten feet of water and a five-degree tilt, and recent footage showed the tanker has tilted to an estimated 25 degrees. According to experts, the 2020 hurricane season has been the second most active on record, with 26 named storms so far. With prevailing currents and wind directions, an oil spill of this magnitude could threaten the entire Southern Caribbean for years to come, including long-term genetic damages on coastal ecosystems.² Three major oil leaks in Venezuela's national parks and refineries have occurred in the past three months as years of mismanagement and corruption have brought the country's aging infrastructure to the brink of collapse. The state-owned PDVSA was responsible for more than 46,000 spills of crude and other pollutants between 2010 and 2016, according to one estimate.³ The *Nabarima* is an environmental catastrophe in the making that we must prevent.

¹ *A Venezuelan vessel carrying 1.3 million barrels of oil is tilting — and it could lead to a catastrophic oil spill*, CBS News (October 22, 2020) (online at <https://www.cbsnews.com/news/venezuela-oil-tanker-nabarima-tilting-spill-feared/>).

² *Caribbean Threatened By 1.3 Million Barrels Of Oil From Sinking Oil Tanker*, Forbes (October 21, 2020) (online at <https://www.forbes.com/sites/nishandegnarain/2020/10/21/caribbean-threatened-by-13-million-barrels-of-oil-from-sinking-oil-tanker/#26e0657b1c3b>).

³ *Venezuela's Broken Oil Industry Is Spewing Crude Into the Caribbean Sea*, Washington Post (September 24, 2020) (online at https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/the_americas/venezuela-oil-spills/2020/09/23/5613c996-f793-11ea-a275-1a2c2d36e1f1_story.html).

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The Trinidad and Tobago government's assessment -- following an inspection on October 20 -- that the tanker remains intact and poses a minimum risk of any oil spills is extremely troubling. These statements directly contradict images and reports provided by local oil workers, fishermen, and environmental groups. Moreover, after questions emerged over the independence of the Trinidad and Tobago's inspection and findings, Trinidad and Tobago's Energy and Foreign Affairs Ministers confirmed on October 25 that Venezuela had filmed and supplied the video footage of the inspection.⁴ Therefore, we cannot rely on information provided by the Trinidad and Tobago government as assurance.

The United States must heed cries for assistance and help prevent a looming economic and environmental disaster. The threat posed by a potential spill merits an exception to U.S. sanctions policy.

We thank you in advance for your attention to this letter and look forward to receiving your response.

Sincerely,



Gerald E. Connolly
Member of Congress



James P. McGovern
Member of Congress

⁴ *Trinidad Ministers: Footage of Nabarima Visit Supplied by Venezuela*, Stabroek News, (October 25m 2020) (online at <https://www.stabroeknews.com/2020/10/26/news/regional/trinidad/trinidad-ministers-footage-of-nabarima-visit-supplied-by-venezuela/>).