

Panama won't block Venezuelan ships despite U.S. sanctions



Panama City, August 15 (RHC)-- The Panama Canal will continue authorizing vessels coming from Venezuela provided they present the necessary paperwork, the waterway's chief said on Wednesday, suggesting a new round of U.S. sanctions on the South American nation should not make a difference to canal traffic.

Panama Canal Authority Chief Jorge Quijano told reporters that the waterway authorities should not submit to pressure from third countries on the issue of whether or not vessels could use the canal, which connects the Atlantic and Pacific oceans.

"We are signatories to a treaty of neutrality, also signed by the United States," he said. "We have to continue with that commitment as long as they follow the rules of the game, and the rules of the game are that it's an innocent passage."

This clarification happens after Venezuela's Vice President Delcy Rodriguez denounced last week that a ship containing 25 thousand tons of soy-made products has been seized in the Panama Canal due to the U.S. blockade while calling on the United Nations to take action against the "serious aggression" that impede Venezuela "right to food."

President Donald Trump's administration last week issued an executive order freezing all Venezuelan government assets in the United States. Shortly after, U.S. officials ratcheted up threats against companies that do business with Venezuela.

The measure did not explicitly place sanctions on non-U.S. firms linked to Venezuela. But it threatened to freeze the U.S. assets of any person or company determined to have "materially assisted" President Nicolas Maduro's government.

Panama earlier this year withdrew its flag from dozens of vessels linked to Iran and Syria. One of the tankers, the Grace 1, was later seized in Gibraltar's waters on suspicion of violating sanctions, raising tensions in the Gulf, where Iran detained a UK-flagged ship in retaliation.

Panama's Maritime Authority last month said the country will continue de-flagging vessels that violate sanctions and international legislation, but it has so far continued to permit passage through the canal on the basis of neutrality.

Under international law, every merchant ship must be registered with a country, known as its flag state, which is responsible for safety and the crew's working conditions. When a vessel loses its flag, it typically triggers loss of insurance and classification if it does not immediately find another flag.

The United States in July imposed sanctions on Cuba's state-run Cubametales, which receives shipments of Venezuelan oil, over accusations of "providing support, including defense, intelligence and security assistance" to Maduro. Cubametales' fleet escaped the sanctions, however.

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