

U.S. Military Action in Venezuela Triggers Caribbean Airspace Closures and Flight Disruptions

January 6, 2026

On January 3, 2026, U.S. military and law enforcement agencies executed [a joint operation](#), which involved the capture and extraction of Venezuelan leader Nicolás Maduro and his wife. In response, the Federal Aviation Administration (FAA) issued an emergency Notice to Airmen (NOTAM) to prohibit all civil flight operations of U.S. aircraft in Venezuelan airspace, which includes all airspace over the land borders of Venezuela and airspace over a portion of the southern Caribbean Sea. Air service between the United States and Venezuela has been [suspended since May 2019](#). On January 3, 2026, the FAA also took action to close the airspace it directly controls in the Eastern Caribbean, known as the San Juan flight information region (FIR), which overlies Puerto Rico, the U.S. Virgin Islands, and surrounding waters, as well as other Caribbean FIRs that are controlled by various other air navigation service providers and not directly by the FAA. Although the closure of Venezuelan airspace had little effect on U.S. air carriers, the temporary closure of the San Juan FIR and the closure of other FIRs in the Caribbean to U.S. operators disrupted numerous airline flights. Because the prohibitions in the San Juan FIR affected U.S.-controlled airspace, they applied to both U.S. and foreign air carriers and aircraft operators. On January 4, 2026, the FAA lifted these prohibitions and replaced them with advisories warning of a potentially hazardous situation persisting in the region, similar to prior warnings that had been issued in November 2025.

Prior to the day-long flight prohibitions that were issued on January 3, 2026, it had been reported that increased U.S. military flight operations in and near Venezuelan airspace had resulted in [near misses](#) between military aircraft and civilian aircraft, including airliners and private aircraft operating between the United States and the Dutch Caribbean islands of Curaçao and Aruba, which are close to Venezuela. The FAA issued alerts of potential hazards due to the increased U.S. military presence in the Caribbean prior to the reported times of these near misses.

It is common for the FAA to issue alerts and flight restrictions surrounding military operations and in conflict areas around the world. In the Caribbean region, the FAA has maintained prohibitions barring most U.S. civil aircraft from operating in [Haitian airspace](#) due to ongoing instability in that country. Similarly, international security restrictions exist for [numerous flight regions throughout the world](#), including Ukraine, the Russian Federation, Somalia, Yemen, Iraq, Iran, and in the Persian Gulf and the

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Gulf of Oman. While these notices and restrictions issued about regions not directly controlled by the FAA apply to U.S. pilots and aircraft only, the information is available to other countries and to international operators who may voluntarily follow the FAA guidance outside of FAA-controlled airspace.

The performance of the [NOTAM system](#) used to notify aircraft operators of these warnings and restrictions has been under congressional scrutiny for several years, though there were not any reported issues regarding the dissemination of the flight prohibitions issued on January 3, 2026. In [January 2023](#), a [brief systemwide failure of the NOTAM system](#) resulted in an hours-long ground stop and widespread flight disruptions across the entire United States. Stemming in part from this incident, the NOTAM Improvement Act of 2023 (P.L. 118-4) was enacted, which directed the FAA to modernize the NOTAM system based on input from a task force charged with identifying system improvements and to implement a backup system. Despite a mandate to complete these actions by the end of FY2024, NOTAM modernization is ongoing, and the [FAA requested](#) roughly \$81 million in FY2026 to continue this work, noting that “the current NOTAM environment is fragmented and outdated.”

Tensions between the United States and Venezuela and insecurity in Venezuela have affected air travel between the two countries for several years. All direct commercial passenger and cargo flights between the United States and Venezuela have been suspended since 2019, when the U.S. Department of Homeland Security [determined](#) that “conditions in Venezuela threaten the safety and security of passengers, aircraft, and crew, and that the public interest requires an immediate suspension of all commercial passenger and cargo flights between the United States and Venezuela.” Accordingly, the Department of Transportation (DOT) issued an [order](#) suspending air transportation for passengers or cargo to or from any airport in Venezuela, effective May 15, 2019.

As a result of the airspace closure on January 3, 2026, airlines [reportedly](#) cancelled hundreds of flights across the Caribbean—flights were cancelled to and from Puerto Rico, the U.S. and British Virgin Islands, Aruba, Curaçao, and more than a dozen other destinations. This travel disruption also coincided with the busy New Year holiday travel period. It was [reported](#) that on Saturday, January 3, 2026, about 60% of all flights destined for a few popular Caribbean airports—in Aruba, San Juan, and St. Thomas—were canceled. After temporary airspace restrictions expired at midnight early on Sunday, January 4, 2026, U.S. airlines moved to resume scheduled service and add capacity by adding flights and operating larger aircraft to accommodate passengers whose flights had been cancelled, although it [may take several days](#) to rebook and clear stranded passengers.

Generally, airlines are not [required](#) by DOT [aviation consumer protection](#) rules to compensate passengers for cancellations that are beyond the airlines’ control. Airlines also are not required to offer meal vouchers or pay for lodging under those circumstances. It was [reported](#), however, that many airlines would waive flight change fees when rebooking travelers who had been scheduled to fly in or out of the affected region over the weekend of the U.S. operation in Venezuela.

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