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Venezuela Defies ICJ Ruling with Referendum on Essequibo Annexation, Escalating Dispute With Guyana

Venezuelan citizens vote in favor of expanding territory into Guyana's Essequibo

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Venezuelans took part in a march in Los Guayos, Venezuela, on November 21, advocating for a referendum on the Essequibo. By. JUAN CARLOS HERNANDEZ/ZUMA PRESS

The [border dispute](#) between Venezuela and Guyana shows no sign of abating as Venezuelan citizens overwhelmingly approved of their country's expansionist ambitions and rejected the authority of the International Court of Justice (ICJ).

On Friday, the ICJ ordered Venezuela to "refrain from taking any action which would modify that situation that currently prevails," referring to the dispute over Essequibo, land long held by Guyana. Venezuela has laid claim to the Essequibo region since 1811, when it gained independence from Spain. It has never accepted the border between Venezuela and what was then British Guiana, established by international arbitrators in 1899.

Ignoring the ICJ's warning, on Sunday Venezuela's President Nicolas Maduro went ahead with a planned referendum that sought the public's opinion on the annexation of Guyana's Essequibo region.

Reports from Venezuelan authorities are that over 10 million votes were cast in favor of the idea of creating a new Venezuelan state in the Essequibo and conferring Venezuelan citizenship on inhabitants of the region. [Reuters](#) cites electoral authority president Elvis Amoroso as estimating 95 percent approval on all questions on the "consultative" referendum.

In response, Guyana held a rally on Sunday, where throngs of residents waving their country's flags were joined by President Irfaan Ali. Dr. Ali welcomed the ICJ's ruling on Friday, declaring that it prevents Venezuela from taking concrete steps to annex territory long held by Guyana.

Meanwhile, teams of U.S. Department of Defense officials [visited Guyana](#) last week ahead of the referendum, and Dr. Ali says that more officials from the DOD and other agencies are expected to visit Guyana in the coming weeks. Vice President Bharat Jagdeo has promised that Guyana will defend itself "by any means whatsoever" should Venezuela ignore the decision of the ICJ.