

**Congress of the United States**  
Washington, DC 20515

March 6, 2026

General Frances L. Donovan  
Commander  
U.S. Southern Command (SOUTHCOM)  
U.S. Department of Defense

Dear General Donovan:

We write to express our concerns around reported civilian casualties during U.S. Operation Absolute Resolve in Caracas, Venezuela on January 3 and to inquire about SOUTHCOM's policies, procedures, and staffing related to civilian harm mitigation and response (CHMR).

At least seven civilian deaths or injuries were publicly reported by multiple independent media outlets after Operation Absolute Resolve. According to civilian harm watchdog Airwars, at least two civilian women and two civilian men were reported killed across separate U.S. strikes, with additional reports of serious injuries to at least one elderly civilian woman. Extensive damage was also [identified](#) to civilian infrastructure, including almost complete destruction of civilian homes.

It is Department of Defense [policy](#) to receive reports of civilian harm and conduct civilian harm assessments to assess whether civilian harm occurred, enable learning to improve DoD operations, and facilitate acknowledgements and other appropriate responses to civilians harmed by U.S. military operations. This policy was mandated by Congress on a bipartisan basis in 2019 and developed largely under the first Trump Administration. In accordance with this policy, combatant commands developed new positions to advise commanders on key civilian harm issues. Kinetic combatant commands such as CENTCOM and AFRICOM also developed civilian harm assessment cells to receive, assess, respond to, and learn from civilian harm reports from their operations.

Military leaders have validated the strategic value of these efforts and resourcing. Retired four-star General Joseph Votel, former Commander of US CENTCOM, [stated](#), "If you cause so many civilian casualties and you cause so much civilian harm here, it can actually undermine the mission that the military has been sent in to do... In my view, I think the benefit to be gained by supporting these [CHMR] positions, I think it outweighs the movement of resources to other places." SOCOM Commander General Bryan Fenton [told](#) the Senate Armed Services Committee last year that protecting civilians is "part of who we are and what we stand for," and these efforts have supported SOCOM's operations. Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff Gen. Dan Caine also [told](#) the Committee that "the combatant commands see positive impacts from the [CHMR] program," including the creation of a CHMR workforce, updates to doctrine, and ongoing education and training.

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However, it is our understanding that due to broader Department-wide cuts to the CHMR workforce, SOUTHCOM currently has only one contractor assigned to CHMR, down from at least four staff. Additionally, as a Command that was not previously engaged in kinetic operations, SOUTHCOM does not have an established civilian harm assessment cell.

Therefore, we request information on your plans for mitigating and responding to civilian casualties from U.S. military operations in the SOUTHCOM area of responsibility and to supporting their implementation. Specifically, we request your answers to the following questions by March 20:

1. How many full-time staff does SOUTHCOM currently have dedicated to civilian harm mitigation and response (CHMR)? What are their roles?
2. What steps is SOUTHCOM taking to implement DoD Instruction 3000.17, “Civilian Harm Mitigation and Response”?
3. What resources does SOUTHCOM require to fully implement DoD Instruction 3000.17 and improve its capacity to mitigate and respond to civilian harm?
4. What steps did SOUTHCOM take to anticipate, prevent, and mitigate civilian harm during Operation Absolute Resolve?
5. Is SOUTHCOM aware of reports of civilian harm from Operation Absolute Resolve?
6. How many civilians does SOUTHCOM assess were killed, injured, or suffered property damage during Operation Absolute Resolve? Please list the incidents, including locations.
7. How does SOUTHCOM plan to receive, assess, learn from, and respond to reports of civilian harm from Operation Absolute Resolve? Does SOUTHCOM plan to establish a Civilian Harm Assessment Cell (CHAC)?
8. How can individuals or civil society organizations with information about civilian harm incidents report these to SOUTHCOM?
9. How does SOUTHCOM plan to respond to credible instances of civilian harm, including through acknowledgements, apologies, and *ex gratia* payments?
10. U.S. law requires the Department of Defense to annually report to Congress on civilian casualties caused as a result of U.S. military operations. CENTCOM and AFRICOM also regularly report on civilian casualty assessments and findings as a matter of policy in periodic public press releases. When does SOUTHCOM plan to publicly report on the status of its civilian harm assessments?
11. What is SOUTHCOM’s relationship with the Civilian Protection Center of Excellence (CPCOE)? What is the role of the CPCOE in supporting SOUTHCOM’s civilian harm mitigation and response efforts?
12. DoD Instruction 3000.17 emphasizes the role of DoD engagement with civil society organizations and humanitarian groups to enhance understanding of civilian presence and risks. What is SOUTHCOM’s relationship with civil society organizations? What steps is SOUTHCOM taking to expand meaningful engagement with civil society actors operating in the SOUTHCOM area to better mitigate and respond to civilian harm?

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We respectfully request this information and documentation no later than March 10, 2026. Thank you for your attention to this important matter and we look forward to your response.

Sincerely,



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Sara Jacobs  
Member of Congress



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Joaquin Castro  
Ranking Member  
Subcommittee on the Western  
Hemisphere  
House Committee on Foreign  
Affairs