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Rick Scott is using a word to describe Venezuela that no one else is. Is he right?

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Rick Scott is not the type of politician to make an off-hand comment.

The Florida Republican chooses his words carefully, much to the chagrin of reporters at times, often repeating answers over and over again to drive home the point he wants to make.

And over the past week, amid calls for U.S. military intervention in Venezuela and a naval blockade of Cuba after Juan Guaidó's unsuccessful attempt to drive Nicolas Maduro out of power, Scott is using a word to describe the crisis in Venezuela that President Donald Trump, National Security Advisor John Bolton, Secretary of State Mike Pompeo and Sen. Marco Rubio won't use.

Genocide.

"We're seeing genocide happen right in front of our eyes and we're not aggressive enough," Scott said to the Miami Herald on April 30, the day that Guaidó called for Operation Liberty to begin.

Scott has repeated the call on national television, where he's appeared multiple times a day since April 30, and in visits to South Florida. The first time he used the word genocide to describe Venezuela publicly was at the end of an interview with CNN's Jake Tapper on April 14. He also used the term in an interview with the Miami Herald while visiting Colombia on April 25.

But experts who study genocide and fellow lawmakers say Scott's use of the term is misguided.

"What's going on in Venezuela is not a genocide. Not every terrible thing dictators do constitutes a genocide," said Eric Weitz, a history professor at The City College of New York and the author of a book on the causes of genocide. "If one follows the UN definition, which has force in international law, genocide includes an intent to destroy, in whole or in part, an ethnic, religious or national group. I don't see any of that going on in Venezuela as far as I can see. What we have is totally failed economic policies that have driven the population in a downward spiral."

The word genocide was coined in 1944 by a Polish lawyer as a hybrid of the Latin prefix *genos*, meaning race or tribe, and *cide*, meaning killing. It was used to describe and distinguish the Holocaust from other violent actions and wars that did not specifically aim to wipe out certain groups of people, and has been used to describe various atrocities before and after World War II.

In the past two years, Congress has nearly unanimously declared two genocides, one against the Yazidi ethnic and religious group in Iraq and Syria by the Islamic State, and the other against

the Rohingya people in Myanmar by the country's military and police. In the case of Myanmar, the Trump administration has hesitated to use the term, prompting criticism from Democrats and Republicans in Congress.

Scott said the deaths of children due to malnutrition and a lack of medicine in Venezuela meets his standard of genocide.

“Little kids are starving to death because Maduro won't give them food,” Scott said. “That's called genocide. I'm very comfortable with [calling] what's going on in Venezuela... genocide. I believe Maduro is intentionally starving his citizens.”

When informed that he's the only lawmaker, Cabinet member, or senior White House official using the term Scott said, “you'll have to ask everybody else why they're not.”

Michael Dobkowski, a historian at Hobart and William Smith Colleges who studies genocide and the Holocaust, said there's some debate among academics and policymakers about what constitutes genocide, mainly about whether the deaths must be intentional or not and how to identify targeted groups of people, but even the most expansive definition would not include the crisis in Venezuela.

“If we start calling everything a genocide, when we really face a genocide nobody's going to pay attention,” Dobkowski said. “I really worry that we are cheapening the term.”

He said terms like civil war, authoritarian oppression or politically-targeted murders would be a better description of what's happening in Venezuela, and that none of them are genocide.

Ted Galen Carpenter, a senior fellow at The Cato Institute, a libertarian think-tank founded by Charles Koch, said Scott's words are “a gross misuse of the term genocide” and that Venezuela's crisis “amounts to a mundane struggle for political power, not a campaign to slaughter a hated target group.”

Even supporters of a hardline approach to Venezuela who argue that the situation there has grave national security implications for the United States hesitate to use the word.

“There is a technical definition of genocide... I couldn't tell you exactly what it is,” said South Florida Republican Rep. Mario Diaz-Balart, who represents one of the largest Venezuelan communities in the United States. “Would I use a specific term that might have a specific meaning? Yes, if I knew exactly the limitations or parameters of that.”

Diaz-Balart laid out the threats to the U.S. present in Venezuela, from a migration crisis to the presence of Russian, Iranian and Cuban interests in the country, and acknowledged the deaths of children. But he hesitated to use the word genocide in an interview.

“What you have in Venezuela is babies dying because of lack of basic care. So, I don't know what the definition parameters are of genocide but what I can tell you is it as inhumane and dangerous of a situation that this hemisphere has seen in decades.”

Some Venezuelans have used the term on social media to describe conditions in the country and on signage in rallies in Miami, but Scott is the most prominent individual to use the term.

Injecting genocide into discourse about Venezuela could have implications beyond ratcheting up rhetoric, Weitz said. The U.S. signed the Genocide Convention in 1948, a treaty that puts an

obligation on state actors to prevent and punish the crime of genocide, whether committed by other countries, non-state actors or individuals.

“That doesn’t necessarily mean military intervention, but it does necessitate some kind of intervention,” Weitz said. “The problem here is, you call everything terrible genocide you really diminish the suffering that some populations have undergone and their very difficult efforts to reconstruct their communities afterward. I think it’s very disrespectful to what happened in the Yazidis under ISIL and the Rohingya under Myanmar.”

The U.S. has also faced criticism for failing to call out genocide and act upon it, most notably in 1994 when President Bill Clinton’s administration privately used the term to describe the elimination of Tutsis in Rwanda but did not do so publicly because it did not want to intervene. Calling Maduro an agent of genocide adds additional credence for U.S. intervention, a position Scott supports.

“Rick Scott has to measure his words,” said Miami Rep. Debbie Mucarsel-Powell, the first member of Congress born in South America. “Let’s not use words to get attention politically, let’s do the right thing to help the people that are living in Venezuela right now that need our assistance.”