

Forum: Advisory Panel

Issue: The Venezuelan Exodus

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Introduction

The Venezuelan exodus, or “the Venezuelan crisis”, represents a case of a magnitude which is unparalleled the Latin American continent. According to registered data only, since 2014, over 3.4 people have left Venezuela in migration. There are, of course, cases that are unaccounted for, meaning that the number does not include many other migrants; some sources estimate it to be around 4 million. There are many reasons for the emigration of Venezuelans from their home countries, as well as a variety of countries to which they choose to migrate, including other Latin American countries, the Caribbean and Europe. The country’s inflation rate, which is around 1 million per cent, is one of them. The collapse of the Venezuelan economy as well as an oppressive authority have contributed to the ignition of the crisis, and many Venezuelans have been flooding to neighbour countries, seeking asylum.

The decision to migrate and the process of reaching a host country is hard enough, but many migrants face xenophobia, financial hardships and difficulty of obtaining a legal status in the country to which they choose to migrate. Many Latin American countries have had welcoming policies in the past and still accept thousands of migrants through their borders every day, but even these countries seem less eager to aid Venezuelans in fear for their own national security or the well-being of their citizens, or even because of the protests of their own locals. Each day, thousands of migrants seek to flee Venezuela, and the number has grown exponentially since the initiation of the crisis in 2014, equating to around 7 per cent of the country’s population. The reasons behind the crisis, the difficulties of obtaining a passport and the lack of freedom of expression in Venezuela, the circumstances faced by Venezuelan migrants including the responses of host countries, and the trouble with obtaining a legal status as a refugee will be outlined in this report.

Definition of Key Terms

Exodus: The movement of many people from a place at the same time., describes the event of millions of Venezuelans fleeing their country.

Legal refugee: According to Article 1 of the 1951 UN Convention, as modified by the 1967 Protocol, a refugee is defined as a person who 'owing to well-founded fear of being persecuted for reasons of race, religion, nationality, membership of a particular social group or political opinion, is outside the country of his nationality and is unable or, owing to such fear, is unwilling to avail himself of the protection of that country.'

Crimes against humanity: Crimes against humanity consist of various acts—murder, extermination, enslavement, torture, forcible transfers of populations, imprisonment, rape, persecution, enforced disappearance, and apartheid, among others—when, according to the ICC, those are “committed as part of a widespread or systematic attack directed against any civilian population.”

Xenophobia: fear and hatred of strangers or foreigners, resulting in discrimination and/or attacks against those from another country.

Nonrefoulement: a principle of international law providing a refugee or asylum seeker with the right to freedom from expulsion from a territory in which he or she seeks refuge or from forcible return to a country or territory where he or she faces threats to life or freedom because of race, religion, nationality, membership in a particular social group, or political opinion.

General Overview

Reasons Behind the Exodus

The reasons behind the exodus can be categorised as economic, humanitarian, and political. The three are intertwined, as President Nicolas Maduro's and his predecessor Hugo Chávez's policies have contributed to the collapse of the Venezuelan economy. This began with Venezuela's revenue from petrol decreasing with oil prices beginning to plummet in 2014, making it harder to meet the government's spendings. With their petrol industry performing far below its capacity, the Venezuelan government decided to resolve the issue by printing more money. Needless to say, this led to high rates of inflation, ending 2018 at around 1 million percent. Chávez and Maduro's solution for the inflation caused by the increased circulation of their currency at the time, the bolívar, was to replace the currency with the bolívar fuerte meaning the “strong bolívar” in 2008. The newer currency was referred to in this way because it was around 1000 units of the original bolívar. Ten years later, the currency was replaced once more, this time by the bolívar soberano, the sovereign bolívar. One unit of the newest currency is equivalent to one million units of the original bolívar, which did not serve as an effective approach to decrease the inflation which is still on the rise. In 2014, 1 US dollar was worth around 100 VEF (Venezuelan Bolívar Fuerte). Today, 1 USD is exactly 248488 VEF. With the

current inflation rate, prices of basic goods, especially food at supermarkets, have risen so much that many Venezuelans could not afford essential goods, even with the government's food subsidies. Medication has also been hard to obtain, with 80% of the World Health Organisation's vital medications being unavailable in the country.

Politically, Maduro's opposition has been covertly growing and the number of his critics have been increasing. Many believe his re-election to be rigged, and a referendum to remove him from power has recently been overruled. Maduro's mismanagement of the economic crisis has been extremely compromising to his citizens and has resulted in numerous demonstrations against the current regime. These demonstrations have been brutally suppressed, as it has been reported that the Venezuelan police forces has killed 131 protesters between 2014 and 2017. The government is estimated to have arrested 12,000 citizens, as well as tortured approximately 300 and executed 8,292 since 2013. These are considered as crimes against humanity, and it has been recommended that the government is examined by the International Criminal Court (ICC). Many citizens are thus reluctant to exercise their freedom of speech in fear of arrest, torture or execution. Maduro has also replaced the country's National Assembly, their legislative branch in which the opposition held significant power, with the Constituent Assembly, which is controlled entirely by the regime. His re-election has been claimed to be fraudulent, with a majority of the country no longer supporting him after the rise in hunger, poverty and inflation. He was sworn in for his second six-year term in January 2019 after his victory with a surprising majority. The scarcity, humanitarian crisis and inability to be part of an effective political opposition have pushed many Venezuelans to migrate.

Hardships Faced by Venezuelan Migrants

Migrants face many difficulties when leaving Venezuela, crossing borders and trying to obtain a legal status in host countries. Many become victims of xenophobia, exploitation and discrimination regardless of their legal status. Some challenges include being able to find a job and being legally allowed to work, finding housing and a school to send children to, or gaining access to healthcare. Although many of them cannot obtain legal permits, even those who do do not have the ability to exercise their rights. According to the Human Rights Watch (HRW), many are vulnerable to being exploited sexually or through human trafficking, as well as less likely to report crimes committed against them due to their illegal status. As it occurs in many other places in the world, many locals of host countries tend to blame migrants for increased rates of violence and authorities and locals alike are known to have abused Venezuelan migrants in host countries. For example, in various cities of Brazil, there have been protests against Venezuelan refugees and many Venezuelans have been beaten, haven their dwellings

or property burned or destroyed or have been assaulted in other ways. Following such an event in Pacaraima, around 1200 Venezuelans had felt forced to return.

Many migrants travel on foot for up to hundreds of kilometres with little to no personal belongings or cash. They struggle to take care of their families and children and find essential necessities such as food, clothing or water. Because of their vulnerability, they can be exposed to crime networks and forced into prostitution or swept up in human trafficking. They tend to have to work illegal jobs as most have lost their money with the hyperinflation within the country or have had to bribe or pay smugglers to be able to cross certain borders and controls.

Obtaining Refugee Status

The 1951 Refugee Convention determines whether or not an individual has the right to remain as a host country by whether or not they can be legally considered a refugee. The Cartagena Declaration, on the other hand, is recognised by around 15 countries in the Latin American continent and is a bit more flexible. The former defines a refugee as an individual who “owing to well-founded fear of being persecuted for reasons of race, religion, nationality, membership of a particular social group or political opinion, is outside the country of his nationality and is unable or, owing to such fear, is unwilling to avail himself of the protection of that country; or who, not having a nationality and being outside the country of his former habitual residence as a result of such events, is unable or, owing to such fear, is unwilling to return to it.”

The latter, the Cartagena Declaration, allows more room for interpretation, giving access to more asylum seekers by defining a refugee as: “persons who have fled their country because their lives, safety or freedom have been threatened by generalised violence, foreign aggression, internal conflicts, massive violation of human rights or other circumstances which have seriously disturbed public order”. This is clearly more applicable to the situation stemming from Venezuela, since many migrants have fled in fear for their lives or personal freedom because of the oppressive regime. Despite this, many citizens who have fled Venezuela thus far have not fit either of these definitions and are thus not eligible for work, legal protection or asylum from their host countries. Many Latin American countries, for this reason, have developed special permits which allow Venezuelan immigrants to legally reside within borders. Even though hundreds of thousands of refugees have been given these permits, as the number of those who have left Venezuela is estimated to be around 4 million, many of those who do not fit the definition of a refugee have also had trouble obtaining any legal permits. Countries such as Chile, Peru and Ecuador have required asylum seekers to present a passport and a visa within entrance, which limits Venezuelans greatly as getting a passport or even an appointment from an office in Venezuela can take up to two years.

Major Parties Involved and Their Views

Colombia

Colombia is one of the 15 countries that has recognised the refugee definition of the Cartagena Declaration and incorporated it to its legal system. As the Colombian border is closer and easier to access to Venezuelans than other Latin American countries, Colombia is the recipient of the largest number of Venezuelan migrants in the world. Colombia also has the aforementioned legal permits to allow Venezuelan emigrants to stay, but as previously mentioned, they are still not always easy to obtain. Still, as of now, over 400,000 Venezuelans have received some kind of legal/work permit to stay in Colombia and the Colombian government has taken certain measures to provide them with medicine, education, shelter and nutrition. The Colombian government's relatively welcoming approach could be owed to the fact that Venezuela had provided refuge to many Colombians during the armed conflict between the government and guerrilla forces in Colombia which started in the 1960s and lasted for decades. The total number of emigrants is estimated to be over 2 million, and some estimates show that around 4,000 cross the Colombian border each day. Still, as with any other country that has accepted a large wave of immigrants, xenophobia is a prevalent issue that many Venezuelans have to face.

Peru

The second largest recipient of Venezuelan migrants, Peru hosts a staggering number of around 1.4 million refugees. Although, as with Colombia, Peru has accepted many Venezuelans with open arms, but have since been tightening regulations since after contemplating the long-term implications of hosting so many migrants, the government has decided to make it harder to migrate. Until June 2019, Venezuelans can receive a permit called the PTP to receive basic services such as healthcare, education as well as work permits; however, Peru has made it required to present a passport upon entrance. With the collapsing infrastructure and dysfunctional government offices in Venezuela, presenting a passport is very difficult, so this also poses a problem for those wishing to emigrate to Peru despite their previously welcoming policies.

Ecuador

As with Peru, Ecuador has accepted many refugees through its borders. Venezuelans cross Colombia to reach Ecuador as they are not neighbouring countries, but the number of those who have entered Ecuador now exceeds half a million. As with migrants continuing from Colombia to Ecuador, many who come to Ecuador choose to continue to Peru or Chile.

Ecuador has also begun to implement the requirement for a passport and does not accept only an ID card. This poses a problem for many migrants who cross several borders, trying to reach their families. Many can get stuck within the borders of a certain country before reuniting with families as policies of these countries often change, and some are forced to return home. This results in starvation, deprivation and fear for their own survival. There is a limit, of course to how many asylum seekers these Latin American countries can host, but the policies shifting and becoming more and more limited makes the journey dangerous as well as unsuccessful for those trying to flee Venezuela.

Timeline of Events

January 2010	President Chávez devalues the bolívar currency to increase economic growth and revenue.
April 2013	Chávez dies, with Nicolas Maduro elected as his successor.
2014	Oil prices plummet and Venezuela's economy enters a recession.
September 2016	Hundreds of thousands protest the inflation and the mishandling of the economic situation of the country in Caracas.
May 2018	President Maduro is victorious in the elections and begins his current term as president.
March 2019	Protests, migration and the crisis in general ensue. Host countries have become more and more reluctant to provide asylum as the situation within the Venezuelan borders grows more dire.

UN Involvement

As one of the UN organs which are the most occupied with the Venezuelan crisis, the UNCHR (The United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees) is working closely with the International Organisation for Migration (IOM) in Venezuela. The UNHCR seeks to aid in the registration of refugees in many recipient countries and provide them with means for sanitation and shelter. They have been launching campaigns and initiatives in host countries which display xenophobic behaviour in order to alleviate the strain on migrants reaching their target countries both physically and mentally.

Many other organs such as the Human Rights Watch (HRW) and The Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR) have been reporting the changes, statistics and figures in Venezuela as well as occasional aid; however, the United Nations Security Council has failed to pass any recent resolutions which could alleviate the situation, primarily due to the conflicting viewpoint of nations such as the United States and Russian Federation. Interventions cannot be made from the outside to the economic policy of Venezuela, which is shaped by the current regime, which means that the widespread famine and poverty can only be interfered with by aiding host countries with the help of UN organisations.

Relevant UN Documents

Unfortunately, due to disagreements between Member States and the inability of the UN to intervene with certain aspects of the crisis within Venezuela, no resolutions have passed on the matter since its rise in 2014. There are, however, frequent debates in the UN General Assembly and the UNSC, for which the links will be provided as follows:

<https://www.france24.com/en/20190228-venezuela-maduro-un-russia-china-veto-us-resolution-urging-new-elections>

<https://news.un.org/en/story/2019/02/1033832>

<https://www.voanews.com/a/un-security-council-fails-to-find-consensus-on-venezuela-crisis/4808495.html>

Evaluation of Previous Attempts to Resolve the Issue

All current endeavours are directed at addressing the urgent needs of the refugees within the borders of different host countries, rather than Venezuela. Neighbouring countries and non-governmental organisations have been utilising the resources that they have to provide sanitation, shelter, nutrition, work permits and education, but the internal affairs of Venezuela including the state of economic recession and the human rights violations that occur within borders are difficult to interfere with. It has been suggested that the Venezuelan government should be tried in the ICC, but the prospects of such an event are low, meaning that the proper treatment of the Venezuelan citizens must be ensured in a different way.

It seems that the crisis must be resolved at its source: Venezuela. This seems simple in theory, but with a government which does not seek to commit to serious changes in their economic

policies, it is difficult to resolve from the inside. Some nations, such as the United States, have offered to opt for a more offensive approach, such as taking military action, but this could further harm those who have not had the chance to flee the borders of Venezuela. As the crisis is fairly recent, the current priority of countries and organisations has been to aid the millions of Venezuelans who have fled their homes and make sure that they reach their families, have food to eat and are not exploited or being discriminated against. Nevertheless, it has been difficult to root out the problem from the source with an administration which has yet to comply with the pleas of their citizens or any organisation or nation with global influence.

Possible Solutions

Below are several solutions to the problem, given in bullet form. You may choose to take one of these ideas and develop it into a clause or to incorporate several of them to give a more well-rounded solution:

- The response to the exodus must be organised in the sense that host countries must develop a cohesive network which will allow Venezuelan citizens to reach a certain destination if they desire, find and reach missing family members, find work within a certain host country etc.
- The permits which are different in each country should be more applicable and uniform in the sense that many migrants have yet to qualify as refugees and are unable to move between borders, so these permits should be easier to obtain as a temporary solution by making them more similar to one another to avoid confusion and difficulty for those who seek asylum.
- Though such an approach should not be preferred under normal circumstances, as the Venezuelan administration has yet to make the necessary changes to ensure that its citizens can return, several sanctions can be imposed. Venezuelan officials who are known to be associated with the human rights violations can be kept within borders by cancelling visas, and the overseas assets of the government can be frozen. Multilateral relationships and trade can also be a tool to coerce the government into taking action regarding rectifying their policies against the protests and the economy.
- A legal mechanism which allows for the persons who have not been given the “refugee” status and are awaiting aid should be developed under the supervision of UN organisations such as the Human Rights Watch, the UNHCR and the OHCHR. An intermediate, temporary legal status for those in urgent need should be developed to ensure that no individual is left completely unaided, as this would lead to circumstances such as them being carried away in illicit activity such as human trafficking or death by starvation. This status would be applicable

to individuals who would be in danger if returned to Venezuela and cannot be considered a “refugee” within the parameters of the legal definition.

- Governments who have set limitations on Venezuelans by asking for documents such as passports should develop an alternative system as this inhibits many of those who qualify for asylum to be left unaided, as the system in Venezuela prevents them from acquiring the necessary papers.
- The Hague should once again assess whether the acts of the Venezuelan government are considered as crimes against humanity and act accordingly.
- The United Nations Security Council should aim to reach a consensus that can be more conclusive, yielding to some form of intervention rather than leaving the Venezuelan government to its own devices.

Notes from the Chair

When writing your position papers, do not forget to take your country’s stance into account. Although the aim is to provide refuge for all migrants who need it, many countries’ policies would not give way to this and your statements and clauses must also be realistic and something that your delegation would advocate for.

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