

Understanding the Venezuelan Displacement Crisis

Written by Luisa Feline Freier

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LUISA FELINE FREIER, JUN 28 2018

On June 20, on World Refugee Day, we commemorated the strength, courage, and perseverance of millions of refugees worldwide. A displacement crisis that remains sidelined in Western media is the forced displacement of millions of Venezuelans in Latin America. Although estimates about the magnitude of the Venezuelan exodus vary widely, it is increasingly certain that the Venezuelan exodus qualifies as the largest forced displacement of people in the history of Latin America. According to a December 2017 poll by *Consultores 21*, 4 million Venezuelans were living outside of Venezuela. The vast majority left since the country's 2014 political and economic downturn, and thousands more emigrate each day.

Economic Migrants or Refugees?

There has been some debate as to whether Venezuelans should be considered economic migrants or refugees. Only a relatively small percentage of the Venezuelan displaced file asylum claims. As of June 15th, 2018, the UNHCR registered 279,902 asylum applications by Venezuelans worldwide, up from 1157 at the end of 2013. Peru currently hosts by far the highest number of asylum seekers, amounting to 126,997 individuals, followed by the USA (68,270), Brazil (32,744), and Panama (17,851). The position of the UN Refugee Agency (UNHCR) on the question of how to categorize the Venezuelan diaspora has been somewhat contradictory. On the one hand, the UNHCR has stressed that Venezuelans should be considered economic migrants rather than refugees. At the same time, it is assisting NGOs across the region in making the case for Venezuelan asylum claims based on the Cartagena definition.

Here, it is crucial to point out that most countries in the region have adopted not only the 1951 refugee definition of Geneva but also the Cartagena definition of 1984 in their domestic refugee and asylum laws (Freier 2015). The Geneva Refugee Convention defines a refugee as:

A person who owing to a 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 Cartagena Declaration, on the other hand, extends the right to protection for victims of generalized violence, foreign aggression, internal conflicts, massive violation of human rights or other situations that have seriously disturbed the public order. Venezuela is one of the most violent countries in the world and human rights violations such as arbitrary arrests, the torture of prisoners, attacks against journalists, and the excessive use of force have been common practice since the protests against the Maduro regime intensified in 2017. Despite this, Mexico is the only country in the region that approves almost all Venezuelan asylum applications, applying the Cartagena refugee definition. As will be discussed below, the reasons for the lack of application of Cartagena are mostly political. At the same time, it has also been pointed out that Latin American refugee status determination bodies generally lack training, efficiency and expertise (Fischel De Andrade 2014).

Venezuelan 'Survival Migration'

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Beyond the question whether Venezuelans meet the criteria of the Cartagena refugee definition, it is clear that the Venezuelan exodus cannot accurately be described as voluntary economic migration and rather constitutes what Alexander Betts would call 'survival migration' – people who are outside their country of origin because of an existential threat for which they have no access to a domestic remedy or resolution (Betts 2013).

The humanitarian crisis in Venezuela is beyond comprehension and is spiraling out of control so quickly that the available data hardly reflects the growing misery of the Venezuelan people. According to *Reuters*, in February of this year Venezuelans had lost an average of 11 kilograms of body weight during the past year. According to *El País*, at the end of 2017, 87% of the population in Venezuela lived in poverty, and food insecurity affected 80%.

When interviewing Venezuelan immigrants on the northern border of Peru in Tumbes last May, I met many individuals, couples and families who fled from hunger in Venezuela, leaving everything behind; their belongings, their houses, their parents, their children. I interviewed men and women with sunken cheeks who had lost 15kg, 20kg in recent months. When telling me their stories, many began to cry, out of emotional pain and physical exhaustion. Others did not want to talk: 'This just hurts too much', they explained.

In Venezuela, the official exchange rate on June 20 was 79,890 Venezuelan bolivars for one US dollar. But official access to the USD is severely restricted. Consumer prices in Venezuela had increased 13,379 percent year on year in April 2018, according to estimates by the opposition led Venezuelan congress. On the black market the price for the USD increases daily. On June 20, one US dollar cost roughly 2,580,623 bolivars, up from roughly 200,000 in mid-January. In May, the monthly minimum wage was approximately 2.5 million bolivars (raised to 3 million on June 19), but 1 kg of meat cost 1.5 million bolivars. If you do not have access to USD through remittances, it is almost impossible to survive.

Trying to hide his tears, a 68-year-old man in Tumbes told me about his grandchildren and that he decided to migrate because his son-in-law suffered a heart attack and his grandchildren did not eat: 'They are smart kids. And I do not say this because they are my grandchildren. But no malnourished child develops well. We have not eaten more than plain rice, twice a day, for months. First it was rice with butter, but we could no longer afford the butter', when he was interrupted by a middle-aged woman, who exclaimed: 'Rice is a luxury! We have not eaten anything other than corn starch mixed with water.'

According to Caritas, there were already 280,000 malnourished children at risk of starving in Venezuela by the end of 2017, with six dying every week in Caracas alone. Ninety percent of households could not afford children's daily meals, and 33 percent of children showed irreversible mental and physical developmental delays. Infant formula is scarce and inaccessible for most, which puts newborns and babies whose mothers cannot breastfeed with the greatest risk of dying of starvation.

Regional Policy Reactions

Regional governments have responded to Venezuelan displacement through a mosaic of policies and legal arrangements. Argentina and Uruguay have been the most welcoming countries for Venezuelan migrants in the region, granting Venezuelans legal residence based on the MERCOSUR Residency Agreement in force since 2009 (see Acosta & Freier 2018). Several countries have devised special legal arrangements as a result of Venezuelan immigration. In Peru, the *Permiso Temporal de Permanencia* (PTP) has been granting temporary residence to Venezuelans since January 2017. Venezuelans who will arrive until 31 December 2018 can apply for this visa until June 2019. Colombia initially took a similar approach, introducing a temporary permit, *Permiso de Permanencia* (PEP), and Border Mobility Cards in 2017, but both programs have been suspended. As for Brazil, *Resolução Normativa CNlg No. 126* of March 2017 grants Venezuelans temporary residence for two years. Most recently, Chile announced the entry into force of the 'Visa of Democratic Responsibility' for Venezuelan citizens in April 2018.

Other countries, such as Ecuador, Mexico, and Panama, did not make any additional legal arrangements for the reception of Venezuelan migrants, opting instead to provide them legal stay using pre-existing immigration categories. This has led to mixed results. In the case of Mexico, many Venezuelans have applied for refugee status,

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where most applications have been accepted. However, it is clear that Mexico is currently facing a backlog in the processing of asylum applications, and there also have been reports of forced returns and extortion by Mexican border officials.

In theory, Ecuador grants temporary residence to Venezuelans for a period of two years through the UNASUR visa scheme. Venezuelans can also gain temporary residence through the 2011 *Estatuto Migratorio Ecuador-Venezuela*, on the condition that they show the ability to financially support themselves. However, access to these visas is severely limited in practice as a result of the high fees associated to them; 50 USD for the visa application cost, and 500 USD for the visa itself. On the other hand, clearly restrictive reactions to Venezuelan immigration can be observed in Panama. Most notable, Decree No. 473 (effective 1 October, 2017) and Decree No.269 (effective 31 May, 2017) have respectively added visa requirements for Venezuelan citizens and shortened the period of time they can stay in the country.

Understanding Policy Reactions

Although only Mexico applies the Cartagena refugee definition and many of the special policies lack implementation, as has been reported on by Parent (2017) and Mahlke et al. (2017), the reactions by Latin American countries to the Venezuelan exodus, overall, have been surprisingly welcoming. This doesn't mean that the region's leaders have a particularly big heart for migrants. Rather, immigration and refugee politics always have an ideological foreign policy dimension. In the early 2000s, Latin American countries started questioning the restrictive immigration policies of migrant receiving countries in the Global North (Acosta & Freier 2015; Cantor et al. 2015). Especially, leftist governments (including Venezuela) wanted to clearly distinguish themselves from the migration policies in the US and Europe. For example, former Argentine president Cristina Kirchner publicly declared at the height of the European refugee crisis: 'I do not want to resemble countries that let children die on their beaches!'

Such policy liberalization made political sense, as long there were large Latin American diaspora communities in the United States and Europe but few immigrants, asylum seekers and refugees within the region (Freier & Acosta 2015). The foreign policy context of the Venezuelan displacement crisis, of course, is another. Accepting Venezuelan migrants – and especially refugees – or creating special visas, such as Chile's 'Visa of Democratic Responsibility', sends an unequivocal political message against the government in Caracas, and is especially attractive for countries that are now governed conservatively, or by self-declared liberals such as former Peruvian president Pedro Pablo Kuczynski. It is not by chance that countries still aligned with Venezuela, such as Bolivia and Ecuador, deny the existence of a regional Venezuelan migration crisis, let alone offer Venezuelan immigrants special visas or assistance.

The domestic price of welcoming, accepting, or at least tolerating Venezuelan immigrants has been manageable for a long time. The growing numbers of Venezuelans have started to provoke resentment and xenophobia in some neighboring countries such as Colombia and Ecuador. While a restrictive shift towards the closure of borders is unlikely – except, perhaps, in the case of Colombia – the region has so far been characterized by a certain inertia towards Venezuela's political and humanitarian, and the resulting regional migration crisis. A first initiative towards regional responsibility sharing was the meeting on Venezuelan displacement within the Lima Group, a multilateral body of 14 countries (notably excluding Bolivia, Ecuador and Nicaragua) that was established following the Lima Declaration of August 8, 2017 and seeks to find a peaceful exit to the Venezuelan crisis. While Colombia and Peru are calling for regional cooperation and solidarity to manage the Venezuelan exodus, it seems that most governments in the region are too preoccupied with managing domestic political transitions and crises to seriously engage in coherent foreign policy efforts against the Maduro regime, and support each other in the reception and integration of the displaced Venezuelan people.

Latin American governments would do well to see the Venezuelan exodus as an opportunity. Despite the failure of the Venezuelan Bolivarian project, the fact is: Venezuelans educational attainment lies significantly above the regional average and given their strong motivation to work and send home remittances, Venezuelan migrants and refugees are well equipped to contribute to the economic development of countries across the region.

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