



# Humanitarian Crisis in Venezuela

Discussion Paper by Gilberto M. A. Rodrigues

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## Context

There is no South American precedent for the current humanitarian crisis in Venezuela. The combination of a prolonged internal political crisis (which escalated after the death of President Hugo Chavez in 2013) and the deepening of the country's economic crisis have caused a never-before-seen wave of forced migration in the region, which is rooted in three principal factors:

1. Shortages of food and essential goods (hygiene)
2. Shortages of medicines and vaccines
3. Persecution for political opinions

The data and indicators from UN agencies on the Venezuelan humanitarian crisis are alarming, including:

1. Increased infant mortality
2. Increased childhood malnutrition
3. Decreased average body weight of 11 kilograms (24.25 pounds)
4. Return of eradicated diseases (measles, diphtheria)

The combination of these changes reflect a situation of massive human rights violations in which the state has failed, by action or omission, to protect the basic rights of its population.

Migration has directly affected two of the principal bordering countries, Colombia and Brazil. Ecuador, Peru, Chile, and Argentina have been secondary recipients of migrants,

in addition to Caribbean and Central American countries (e.g., Costa Rica and Panama).

Colombia has received nearly one million migrants fleeing Venezuela; Brazil has received nearly 160,000. These countries face internal political and economic difficulties in absorbing such large flows of migrants and have taken increasingly securitized and militarized actions within their legal frameworks and migratory reception mechanisms.

Politically, the Venezuelan government faces isolation within the region; it has been suspended from Mercosur and has no space for dialogue in a politically weakened Union of South American Nations. However, it does have support among various Caribbean and Central American countries.

The Trump administration, in an unprecedented move to dismantle diplomacy in the hemisphere, has directed belligerent rhetoric toward Venezuela, threatening military intervention. The US State Department has debated plans for a military coup against President Nicolas Maduro with military dissidents.

The secretary general of the Organization of American States (OAS), Luis Almagro, has assumed a position strongly critical of the Maduro government and has declared that "all options are on the table," which has been interpreted as implicit support for possible outside intervention.

The Lima Group, created in 2017, is the main mediation group in the region, with 17 participating countries. It has played a proactive yet cautious role opposing any military



solution and seeking a peaceful outcome for the Venezuelan humanitarian crisis. However, it has not established direct negotiations with the Maduro government, and its proposals for humanitarian aid for Caracas have been rejected.

## Challenges

President Maduro's government does not recognize the existence of a humanitarian crisis in the country. In multilateral, regional, and global settings, Venezuela has the support of a considerable group of countries: within the OAS, it has the support of several Caribbean and Central American countries, and in the United Nations, it receives the support of the Non-Aligned Movement, which Venezuela is chairing. In Geneva, Venezuelan diplomats led the approval of a UN Human Rights Council (UNHRC) resolution against unilateral sanctions by a wide margin (28–15). But it was not able to prevent the approval of a UNHRC resolution urging the country's government to accept humanitarian aid (23–7, with 17 abstentions). In the UN Security Council, Caracas has the support of China and Russia (both members of the permanent five).

The election of President Ivan Duque Marquez in Colombia, with his confrontational discourse against the Maduro government and interventionist defense actions, creates a real threat of armed conflict in the region. Colombia has a precedent of intervention in Ecuador in 2008, which nearly erupted into a regional conflict.

## Proposals

- The new special representative of the UN Refugee Agency (UNHCR)/International Organization for Migration for Venezuelan refugees and migrants, Eduardo Stein, can foster dialogue and specific actions to confront the regional humanitarian crisis.
- The new president-elect of Mexico, Andres Manuel Lopez Obrador, who is ideologically closer to Maduro, may play a role in any potential mediation initiative with Caracas.
- The recently elected president of Brazil—Jair Bolsonaro, who took office in January 2019—must play a proactive role in negotiations with Venezuela in the interest of mitigating the humanitarian crisis.
- China—a Maduro government ally and economic partner, and a global power—should be involved in negotiations to mitigate the regional humanitarian crisis.

## Recommendations

- The Venezuelan humanitarian crisis must be technically evaluated and monitored by specialized regional organizations such as the Pan-American Health Organization, which can help create spaces for dialogue with civil society organizations.
- Bordering countries must not close their borders or restrict the entry of Venezuelans and their integration in local communities for any reason—in accordance with international refugee law and the policies of the UNHCR—and ensure human rights are protected.
- Bordering countries should not proceed to repatriate or promote the repatriation of Venezuelan migrants unilaterally, or even worse, in agreement with the Venezuelan government.
- The countries of Latin America and the Caribbean should adopt the expanded definition of refugee from the Cartagena Declaration (1984) in their National Committees on Refugees (CONAREs) to assign refugee status to Venezuelans based on the massive violation of human rights in their country.
- A negotiated and peaceful solution must be initiated with the Venezuelan government (through official diplomatic channels or through other parallel forms of diplomacy, including citizen diplomacy) to make humanitarian assistance possible through international cooperation.

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