

Forum: UN High Commissioner for Refugees

Issue: Alleviating the ongoing Venezuelan refugee crisis

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Introduction

Venezuela is a typical example of a petrostate whose government is heavily dependent on fossil fuels or natural gas. A country on the northern coast of South America, once a beacon of economic prosperity in Latin America, has steadily deteriorated over recent years, in which 7.7 million people have fled Venezuela in an attempt to escape the ongoing humanitarian emergency. Originating from a convergence of political turmoil, economic collapse, and humanitarian distress, this crisis has become the second-largest international displacement crisis in the world.



Figure 1: A picture of refugees and migrants from Venezuela waiting at the borders of Colombia (CSIS)

Over the years, the hyperinflation within the country has been reduced with the relief of the U.S. sanctions, however, the number of people fleeing Venezuela does not seem to decrease but increases over time. With the Venezuelan government confirming its 2024 presidential election, the international community needs to understand and provide essential support to those displaced and in dire need of humanitarian aid.

Definition of Key Terms

Humanitarian crisis

A humanitarian crisis refers to a situation where there is widespread human suffering, often resulting from a combination of factors such as natural disasters, armed conflict, political, instability, socio-economic stability, collapse, or other emergencies that disrupt basic living conditions.

Exodus

An exodus refers to a mass departure or emigration of people from a particular place.

Inflation/Hyperinflation

Inflation is a phenomenon where the prices of goods and services in an economy increase due to a decrease in the purchasing power of money, causing a reduction in the value of the currency in the economy. Hyperinflation occurs when the aforementioned monetary inflation is rapid, extreme, and out of control. These occurrences are generally caused by factors such as excessive money supply growth due to the government's rapid printing of money in a short period of time to finance budget deficits, economic instability, political upheaval, or collapse in the country's currency value.

Economic Recession

An economic recession refers to a significant and widespread decline in economic activity across a nation's economy, normally detectable in GDP, income, employment, resource availability, production of goods, and wholesale retail sales.

Political repression

Political repression refers to the use of authoritarian or oppressive measures by a government or ruling authority to restrict, control, or intimidate individuals or groups who oppose the government's policies or ideologies.

Background

Venezuela struck oil in 1922 at La Rosa, a field in the Maracaibo Basin. Dictator General Juan Vicente Gómez started investing heavily in foreign companies, which soon resulted in Venezuela having the second-largest total output of petroleum in 1929. Annual production was at a peak high, and soon, the Dutch disease settled in the Venezuelan economy. The Venezuelan bolívar ballooned, and petroleum took account of 90% of the country's exports. Amid wealth-fueled economic growth, in 1958, Venezuela elected its first stable democratic government. In 197, President Carlos Andrés Pérez nationalized the oil production industry by establishing the state-owned Petróleos de Venezuela, S.A. (PSVSA) to oversee all production, exports, and operations of oil. In the 1980s, oil prices began the plummet, and inflation rates surged in Venezuela's economy.

Chávez, Maduro, and the economic recession

Hugo Chávez was a military officer who, after being dissatisfied with the Venezuelan political system, led two failed military coups in 1992. However, Chavez rose to fame rapidly, and after being released from prison in 1994, he was elected president. Chavez began to direct the profits of PDVSA and contributed them to social programs and spending to eliminate corruption, help the poor, and reduce the power of elites. This resulted in overspending, lower oil prices, and political unrest, which resulted in an economic recession. When Chávez's death was announced in 2013, his hand-picked successor: Nicholas Maduro was elected as president. In 2014, global oil prices plummeted once more, and Venezuela's economy fell into a seven-year economic recession. The inflation rose to 50%, and basic goods such as toilet paper, milk, and flour became too expensive to purchase; the GDP fell even more than the United States during the Great Depression, and the vast majority of people were unable to afford food or were struggling with resource shortages. In frustration with the management of the economy, the people began having protests and demonstrations against President Maduro.

Despite the accusations of intimidation and the nation's ongoing economic struggles, President Maduro succeeded in his 2018 re-election. At this point, there was not a single branch in the National Assembly that President Maduro didn't have legislative power over. The Maduro government exploited the electoral popularity and enabled his government to rewrite the constitution to its advantage. Moreover, the Maduro regime constantly disregarded and persecuted the opposition voices of the people, and sought authoritarian control over the country.

Authoritarian Control of the Maduro Regime

Maduro's regime as an authoritarian government has failed to address the humanitarian crisis, in fact, Maduro's regime exacerbated most of the exhaustion of humanitarian aid and resources. Maduro's government "seized control of the Supreme Court and undercut the ability of journalists, human rights defenders, and other Venezuelans to exercise fundamental rights." Maduro's concentration of power and control over the country enabled him to have the "free rein to intimidate, censor, and prosecute" individuals and organizations that attempted to criticize and thwart his actions and agendas. With many of Maduro's followers being placed in a wide range of prominent branches of society, the damage of corruption, such as judicial independence and press freedom, has been felt in all of Venezuelan society. Maduro's government's neglect of the humanitarian and economic emergency within the country has resulted in difficulty in obtaining medicine, food, and other essential goods and services. As of March 2022, "Venezuela had the highest prevalence of undernourishment in South America," and 8.4 million "gravely ill people" due to the exhaustion of medical resources, lack of electricity, and running water in hospitals and healthcare services, according to the National Survey of Hospitals.

Economic Sanctions on Venezuela

The United States has imposed various economic sanctions on Venezuela for more than 15 years, which has forced the South American country to endure the largest economic contraction in the history of the Western Hemisphere. Over the past few years, the Trump administration ramped up US sanctions while the Biden administration sought to ease and leverage sanctions reliefs to negotiate fairer and more democratic elections in the

country. The United States has imposed multiple sanctions such as terrorism and drug-trafficking-related measures, however, the financial sanctions that prohibit Venezuelan companies, transactions, and assets from accessing the U.S. financial market are the source of the deadly consequences that have devastated Venezuela. According to the Center for Economic and Policy Research, sanctions resulted in 40,000 deaths from 2017-2018, and Former UN Special Rapporteur Alfred de Zayas had estimated over 100,000 deaths by 2020. Currently, \$5.5 billion of Venezuelan funds in international accounts are frozen; as a result, 300,000 Venezuelans have been denied access to healthcare, food, and medical supplies. Among the United States's financial sanctions, oil sanctions have had the most devastating impacts on Venezuela's economy. As 90% of Venezuela's revenue originates from oil, Venezuela's already very minimal social programs and humanitarian assistance are inadequate for pursuing support for the people.

Mass displacements and exodus

The compounded effects of economic collapse, political turmoil, and social instability forced millions of Venezuelans to leave their homes for better opportunities and futures. This led to a mass exodus, with millions of Venezuelan refugees and migrants fleeing to neighboring countries in Latin America, such as Colombia, Brazil, Peru, and Ecuador. As of 2023, 7.7 million people have fled from Venezuela to other host countries predominantly in Latin America, the Caribbean, and the United States. A majority of displaced Venezuelans currently live in Colombia (2.89 million), Peru (1.54 million), Brazil (477,500), Ecuador (474,900), and Chile (444,400).

Humanitarian crisis

The humanitarian emergency and crisis is prevalent within Venezuela and in other host countries. Within Venezuela, approximately 25% of the population is in dire need of humanitarian assistance. Despite Venezuela's neighboring countries having demonstrated solidarity in welcoming refugees and migrants, strained resources, social tensions, and difficulties in integration are immense challenges for both refugees and host countries to overcome. Moreover, due to the COVID-19 pandemic, many Venezuelan refugees and migrants were stripped of their support systems and basic needs.

COVID-19 Effects on Refugees

Many Latin American countries that welcomed Venezuelan refugees were already incompetent to handle mass migration into their societies. The Covid-19 pandemic had simply exacerbated preexisting conditions of informality and inequality in these host countries. Furthermore, the adverse effects of the pandemic have forced more refugees and migrants to leave their homes across Latin America; "as of October 2021, violence, insecurity, and a lack of food, medicine, and other necessary services in Venezuela forced more than 5.9 million people to flee the country." On the other hand, border closure and lockdowns upon the restrictive measures of the pandemic have forced hundreds of Venezuelan refugees who sought refuge in other Latin American countries to return home due to their declining financial lifelines. This makes more Venezuelans prone to persecution, violence, and poverty, and overall a life of uncertainty due to the abrupt reversal in migratory flows.

Major Parties Involved

The United States

The United States has been heavily involved in Venezuela's political and humanitarian crisis. The U.S. refused to recognize President Maduro as the leader of Venezuela and, as a result, imposed harsh sanctions on Venezuela during the 2018 re-election of Maduro's government. In addition, these sanctions have restricted the economic activity of Venezuela's state-run oil company PVDSA as well as oil production in Venezuela. In 2023, the Biden administration, in response to the deal between the government and opposition parties for the 2024 election, agreed to ease the sanctions imposed on Venezuela's oil sector.

Regardless of the United States's involvement in Venezuela's oil sector, the U.S. is the largest single donor for the humanitarian response to the Venezuelan refugee crisis and has been a host country to 545,500 Venezuelans (2021). With the recent surge of Venezuelan refugees and migrants from South America, the Biden administration has extended temporary legal status to an estimated 472,000 Venezuelans currently in the United States for a month and has planned to accept approximately 24,000 Venezuelan asylum seekers.



Figure 2: A map of the number of Venezuelan refugees and migrants in neighboring South American countries (IMF)

Colombia

Colombia is the largest host country for refugees and migrants from Venezuela. Colombia shared a 2,20 share with Venezuela and has welcomed about 2.5 million to settle within the country since the crisis began. Colombia has responded to this influx with policies and projects aimed at integrating Venezuelans with the funding of the global Concessional Financing Facility (GCFF) of The World Bank. Colombia’s migration and refugee policy has been deemed “the most important humanitarian gesture” in decades by the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees.

While Colombia aims to commit to its policies, recent years of escalated conflict and violence fueled by the global pandemic calls for the urgent need for international support to sustain Colombia’s commitment to Venezuelan refugees and migrants.

Latin America and Caribbean countries

Out of the 7.7 million migrants and refugees, 84% are Venezuelans: and 6.5 million are hosted by countries in Latin America and the Caribbean. As of mid-2023, there were over 300,000 recognized refugees and approximately 1.2 million asylum-seekers. The massive exodus of refugees and migrants into the host countries will have to be managed by these countries, despite being over-burdened and unaccustomed to receiving such a large influx of people. Latin America has a history of humanitarian solidarity and the protection of migrants, as a result, it implemented new regional policies, innovations, and regulations that attempt to ensure displaced Venezuelans with the necessary resources and access to the labor market, health services, and basic education.

However, due to the unchanging flow of migrants and refugees, many neighboring host countries are unable to manage their already strained borders, systems, and resources; hence, are limited in their response frameworks.

United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR)

The UNHCR has funded and administered humanitarian needs for Venezuelan refugees and migrants since the beginning of the crisis. The UNHCR has aimed to improve reception conditions, promote access to asylum, mitigate protection risks, provide access to basic services, and advocate legal stay arrangements and socio-economic integration. In 2019, The UNHCR and the International Organization for Migration (IOM) launched a \$1.35 billion regional plan in response to the escalating humanitarian needs in Venezuela and other neighboring host countries. In 2020, the regional Refugee and Migrant Response Plan (RMRP) was launched in Colombia, which was established and implemented by 137 organizations, to coordinate the assistance provided to displaced Venezuelans.

Timeline of Events

Date	Description of event
2013	President Hugo Chávez died on March 5. Chávez’s hand-picked heir, Nicholas Maduro was elected president, however, accusations and claims of corruption had the

	National Assembly refuse to recognize his presidency. Maduro’s continued unrestrained spending exacerbates the economic spiral in the country.
2014	The oil plunge caused oil reserves in Venezuela to drop, creating deficits that damaged the economy. A series of protests from opposition leaders and the people initiated a campaign to remove Maduro from office due to his lack of management of the ongoing economic recession. Venezuela’s Central Bank confirms that the country has entered a recession; the inflation rate in 2014 peaked and soon surpassed 63%.
2015	Massive numbers of Venezuelans began to flee the country due to the unemployment rates, food and medicine shortages, and political turmoil caused by hyperinflation.
2016	Maduro declared an “economic emergency” in January due to the falling oil prices.
2017	The Venezuelan Supreme Court bans opposition parties from participating in elections, and the establishment of the Constituent Assembly stripped the National Assembly of its power and autonomy. This decision was responded to with a series of mass demonstrations all over the country that lasted for months.
2018	Maduro secured his reelection, which was deemed to be unfair and undemocratic.
2019	Maduro declared himself as the rightful president, however, the United States, several European countries, and the people of Venezuela refused to recognize Maduro as president. However, the president of the National Assembly Juan Guaidó attempts to overthrow Maduro, initiating the presidential crisis of 2019.
2020	By 2020, more than 6.1 million refugees and migrants have left Venezuela. The exacerbation of the crisis by COVID-19 pandemic resulted in the estimated number of migrants to 7 million in 2021.
2021-2022	<p>Maduro took full control of the remaining opposition-controlled sectors in the government, and in 2022, after years of support, the opposition voted for the dissolution and removal of Guaidó.</p> <p>In the midst of Maduro’s dictatorship, in an attempt to offset the rising prices of energy resources due to the Russo-Ukrainian war, the United States relieved the operation restrictions of the U.S. oil giant Chevron within the country in exchange for dialogue between the two governments.</p>
2023	As of 2023, the Venezuelan refugee crisis had an exodus of more than 7.71 million people, and 25% of the population within Venezuela, requires imminent humanitarian assistance.

Previous Attempts to Resolve the Issue

The Inter-American Commission on Human Rights (IACHR) adopted *Resolution 2/18 Forced Migration of Venezuelans* in 2018, which addresses the forced migration crisis of Venezuelans due to severe crises in the country. The resolution emphasizes the urgency for regional and international cooperation for the protection of refugee status, humanitarian aid, and asylum procedures. The resolution measures to prevent refoulement, expand legal migration channels, address vulnerability among specific groups, and combat xenophobia and discrimination; the resolution in addition offers the IACHR's assistance in monitoring and providing technical cooperation to address the needs of displaced Venezuelans.

At the 39th session of the Human Rights Council from September 10th- 28th, 2018, the Human Rights Council passed the 39/... *Promotion and protection of human rights in the Bolivarian Republic of Venezuela*. This resolution recognizes the "serious human rights violations in a context for a political, economic, social and humanitarian crisis" and calls for the Venezuelan government to act upon the necessary humanitarian needs and requests the High Commissioner to create a report on the human rights situation in Venezuela for the 41st session of the UNHRC. This resolution was followed up with the 48th Regular Session of the OAS General Assembly of its General Assembly in Washington D.C. from June 4th-5th, 2018. This resolution consisted of Article 10 which enabled the Permanent Council to undertake the "necessary diplomatic initiatives" to restore democracy and have the Venezuelan government respond to the dire humanitarian situation in the country.

At the second meeting on the situation in *Venezuela in the Security Council on February 28, 2019*, two competing resolutions produced by the United States and Russia were presented. The US draft resolution sought the hold of new elections and the recognition of President Guaidó. Meanwhile, the Russia draft resolution called for a dialogue between Maduro's government and the opposition. The United States' draft resolution *S/2019/186* was vetoed by China and Russia, and Russia's draft resolution *S/2019/190* failed to produce enough votes.

Possible Solutions

President Maduro's socialist government has succeeded in reducing the inflation rates, however, it has no interest in addressing the humanitarian emergencies within the country. In other words, as long as Maduro's regime stays in power, the Venezuelan refugee crisis will only continue. Therefore, it is imminent for the Venezuelan government and the opposition to make realistic preparations to hold a free democratic election in 2024. Instead of the current U.S. government's statement to be willing to re-intensify sanctions if there is no progress on the Maduro government, lifting certain conditions of other sanctions could be more effective in pursuing the election. The United States and countries in the European Union can make agreements and negotiations with the Maduro government regarding specific reforms and legitimate progress: reciprocation of the relaxation of sanctions, details of the proceedings and dates of the election, aid, and funding towards humanitarian emergencies in and out of the country, and a united opposition front to organize their primaries. Such agreements can be further accelerated through the initiation of opposition talks with the current Maduro government by implementing more legitimate humanitarian accords and treaties. The current progress of the Maduro government would allow for the relief of suspended conferences and discussions between Western forces and the opposition in Venezuela. This method would not involve an accumulation of additional instability within the country and may encourage further extensive

dialogue between the United States, the opposition, and the European Union. In addition, it wouldn't require further sanctioning the economy to provide an opportunity for significant economic recovery. Furthermore, this method would enable the establishment of effective humanitarian aid, funding, and support administered by the United Nations (UN) and other organizations as such accords and agreements would provide the necessary foundations for external assistance to help the people within the country. This would address the refugee crisis in Venezuela and to an extent rehabilitate Venezuelan refugees in other countries with the guarantee of humanitarian and economic aid.

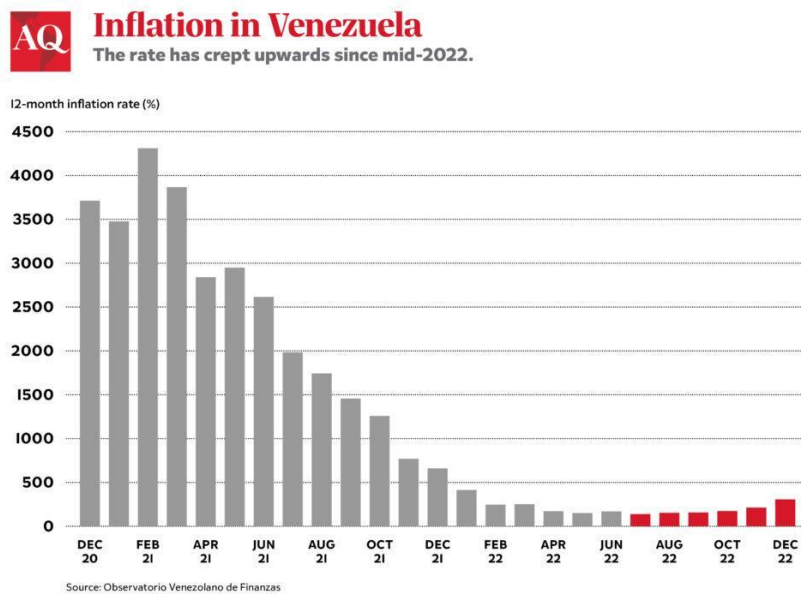


Figure 3: A bar chart illustrating the trend of the inflation rate in Venezuela from 2020 to 2022 (Americas Quarterly)

On the other hand, the United States could continue to re-impose sanctions if no progress is perceived. However, this would require a joint coalition and framework to administer due to the accumulative consequences of reducing the already restricted economic activity in the country. Despite the appropriate international pressure being imposed on the Venezuelan government, the domestic and regional crisis would remain due to debts with private creditors, preventing them from entering financial markets and being unable to attract foreign direct investments.

The International Organization for Migration and UNHCR's Regional Refugee and Migrant Response Plan (RMRP) can strengthen their international cooperation framework with neighboring countries to manage the costs of living, the complexities of finding refuge, exacerbating poverty and undernourishment rates, and other lingering impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic, such as and the vulnerability of refugees and migrants from Venezuela. Such plans can be pursued by the United Nations, which can discuss with other host countries the lack of proactive strategies and communication with Venezuelan refugees and migrants when finding refuge and integrating into society, as well as, maintaining their livelihoods in the country.

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