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## As More Venezuelans Leave, Neighboring Countries Take Notice

by Janelle Conaway

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With Venezuela's political, economic, security, and humanitarian crisis deepening, South America is seeing a growing wave of Venezuelan migrants ([NotiSur, March 17, 2017](#), and [April 21, 2017](#)). These are no longer the most privileged Venezuelans—many of those left in the early years of the Bolivarian revolution—but often the more desperate. Some are making perilous journeys into the hinterlands of Brazil, while tens of thousands more have poured into Colombia—in many cases, returning to the country their families had fled decades ago. On a much smaller scale, some Venezuelans have even set out to sea in rickety boats to try their luck in Aruba or Curaçao. The Inter-American Commission on Human Rights (IACHR) recently called on countries in the region to take special measures to protect Venezuelan migrants ([NotiSur, July 8, 2016](#)).

“At a time when the building of walls and the closure of borders is being encouraged, it is critical for the protection of migrants and refugees that states provide legal and safe channels for people to migrate,” said Margarette May Macaulay, the IACHR's rapporteur on the rights of migrants. In a news release on the situation of Venezuelan migrants, she called for countries to “promote regularization of migration for those who have been forced to recur to irregular migration channels,” and suggested such alternatives as humanitarian admission, refugee resettlement, or guest worker programs, among others.

Some countries are already taking action. Brazil's National Immigration Council announced in March that it would grant two-year residence permits to Venezuelans, “a move that could ease pressure on the overwhelmed Brazilian asylum process if adequately implemented,” noted a report by Human Rights Watch.

Earlier this year, Peru began issuing special temporary resident permits to Venezuelans, allowing them to study, work, access health services, and pay taxes while their immigration papers are being processed, or until they can return home. When *The New York Times* asked the head of Peru's immigration agency, Eduardo Sevilla, why the country had taken such a step, he paused and said, “Because we Peruvians are a people who remember.”

Indeed, Venezuela took in massive numbers of Peruvians and other South Americans in the dark years of the 1970s and 1980s. As Argentine Foreign Minister Susana Malcorra recalled recently—during one of several contentious meetings on Venezuela at the Organization of American States (OAS)—Venezuela “embraced many of our citizens who were fleeing and seeking refuge in times of dictatorships, compatriots who were politically persecuted, whose human rights were violated, and who were welcomed and embraced by Venezuelans.”

At another OAS meeting, on April 26, Malcorra referred to Venezuelan migrants looking for alternatives for their families when she said, “Nobody sets out for new horizons, leaving the homeland, if they have not lost hope.” Warning that the migrant situation could have a serious impact on the region, Malcorra argued that this alone was a good enough reason for the

hemisphere's foreign ministers to hold a meeting to consider the situation in Venezuela. (That day, the OAS Permanent Council voted to convene such as meeting—19 countries voted in favor and 10 against, with four abstentions and one absence—and shortly thereafter Venezuela announced it would leave the OAS.)

## *Refugee surge*

According to figures from the office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), at mid-2016, there were 25,114 Venezuelans seeking refugee status worldwide—compared with just 505 at the end of 2012. Reports from various sources indicate that the flow accelerated in late 2016, so the end-of-the-year number is likely to be much higher.

In its recent report “Venezuela: Humanitarian Crisis Spilling into Brazil,” Human Rights Watch said more than 12,000 Venezuelans had entered and stayed in Brazil since 2014. Citing Brazilian government statistics, the report said the number of Venezuelans requesting asylum in Brazil has “skyrocketed,” from 54 in 2013 to 2,595 in the first 11 months of 2016.

“The backlog of unresolved claims from Venezuelans is slowing the processing of all asylum claims throughout Brazil,” the report noted. More than 4,000 Venezuelans in Roraima state, which borders Venezuela, are on a waiting list for appointments to file asylum requests, according to the report, which detailed the migrants’ desperate circumstances and the strain on Roraima hospitals caused by Venezuelans seeking medical care. In December of last year, the federal police in Roraima tried to deport around 450 Venezuelan migrants, most members of the Warao indigenous people, but the Public Defender’s Office filed a habeas corpus petition and a judge stopped the deportation at the last minute.

A growing number of Venezuelans are seeking asylum in the US—more than 18,000 in 2016. That made them the top group seeking “affirmative asylum,” not to be confused with the “defensive asylum” cases filed in response to deportation proceedings. According to the website of the US Citizenship and Immigration Services, affirmative asylum applicants are rarely detained and may remain in the country while their applications are pending, but most are not authorized to work.

In a typical scenario, a Venezuelan family might fly into Miami on a tourist visa, then apply for asylum. Even though they may eventually be found not to qualify—to be eligible, applicants must establish that they have suffered or could suffer persecution based on certain factors—they’ve at least bought themselves some time, given an administrative backlog of several years.

Julio Henríquez, an immigration lawyer in Boston, told LADB that many Venezuelans are arriving in the US with “very reasonable asylum claims. A lot of them are here with obvious asylum claims, and they are actually fleeing for their lives.” But, he said, others are being encouraged to go the asylum route even if they have no chance of prevailing. “One of the worrisome situations that we’ve seen is that people who have no real basis for a claim of asylum are looking for ways to apply,” said Henríquez, who heads the nonprofit Refugee Freedom Program. “You don’t qualify for asylum because of your nationality.”

Henríquez has heard reports indicating that some organizations in Florida take Venezuelans’ money before even hearing their stories, and in some cases coach applicants to include “alternative facts” on their asylum requests—in other words, to engage in fraud. It’s too early to say how the latest arrivals will fare in the US immigration system—cases now under review were filed more than

three years ago, Henríquez said—but the influx of Venezuelan cases shows no sign of subsiding. Those without legitimate asylum claims have few good options. “The US immigration system is not providing a lot of avenues for anyone, Venezuelan or from any nationality,” Henríquez said, adding that the problem is worsening under the Trump administration.

### *Economic migrants*

Venezuelans with means have been relocating to other countries for well over a decade; the US has been the top destination, followed by Spain. What is different today is the volume of asylum seekers and economic migrants—those fleeing Venezuela’s collapsing economy, with its hyperinflation and shortages of food and medicine.

Last year, Patricia Andrade opened a small donation center in Doral, Florida (such a magnet for Venezuelans that people call it “Doralzuela”), after seeing so many newcomers with so little to their name. Some had left their home country because they were targeted for harassment or persecution, Andrade told LADB, while others had seen their quality of life deteriorate and wanted a better future for their children. For one couple, both high school teachers, the last straw was when one of their children came down with tonsillitis, and they were unable to obtain antibiotics in Venezuela. The couple sold everything they owned and bought plane tickets. “Sometimes I have 100 people in line here,” said Andrade, who doles out donated bedding, cookware, and items such as baby bottles and child car seats.

Of course, many economic migrants head for points closer to home. Estimates of the number of Venezuelans who have decamped to Colombia range from the tens of thousands to the hundreds of thousands. R. Evan Ellis, a research professor of Latin American studies at the Center for Strategic Leadership of the US Army War College, wrote recently that an estimated 300,000 people have emigrated from Venezuela to Bogotá, though only 30,000 are officially registered. “Many of those who have fled Venezuela, ironically, are Colombians who had immigrated there decades ago to escape Colombia’s own civil war when Venezuela, awash in oil dollars, was a relatively peaceful and prosperous place to earn a living. Yet as the crisis in Venezuela has worsened, those born in Venezuela have started to flee as well,” Ellis wrote in an article for the website [LatinAmericaGoesGlobal.org](http://LatinAmericaGoesGlobal.org).

Many potential emigrants have dual Venezuelan-Colombian citizenship, and some Venezuelans are otherwise eligible to live in Colombia. Others find ways to cross illegally. Official border crossings between the two countries are usually closed, but when given the opportunity, Venezuelans stream over in droves to buy supplies. Many end up staying. In January, Colombian President Juan Manuel Santos told Radio Caracol that the flow of Venezuelans into Colombia was “worrisome.” He said it was in Colombia’s interest for Venezuela to come through its current situation “without an implosion, which would cause a mass migration that would affect us.”

Newspapers around the region have reported on the issue, in some cases blaming the migrants for rising crime and other problems. Last year, The New York Times reported that some Venezuelans in dire straits were paying smugglers to take them in fishing boats to Aruba or Curaçao, a crossing “filled with backbreaking swells, gangs of armed boatmen and coast guard vessels looking to capture migrants and send them home.” The same story described the unfolding situation in the Brazilian border town of Pacaraima, where it said entire Venezuelan families were sleeping on the streets.

“It’s hard to see a solution to this problem because hunger is involved,” Pacaraima Mayor Altemir Campos told The Times. “Venezuela doesn’t have enough food for its people, so some are coming here.”

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