

# Where Are Venezuelan Migrants and Refugees Going? An Analysis of Legal and Social Contexts in Receiving Countries

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## I. Executive Summary

Almost 5.5 million Venezuelans have fled their country since 2014, when the nation's population was 30.1 million (Response 4 Venezuela ("R4V") Platform 2020).<sup>1</sup> The unprecedented flow of Venezuelans has put "further pressure on regional hosts Colombia, Ecuador, and Peru, where rising restrictions and xenophobia are already making life harder for refugees and migrants" (Dupraz-Dobias 2019). According to the US Congressional Research Service (CRS), "[w]hile responses to the Venezuelan arrivals have varied by country and continue to evolve with events on the ground, the displacement crisis has affected the entire region, as neighboring countries, particularly Colombia, strain to absorb arrivals often malnourished and in poor health." (CRS 2020a).

The mass exodus has drained Venezuela of a substantial portion of its professional and educated workforce. The severe mismanagement of Venezuela under the Nicolas Maduro regime has turned the once richest nation in South America into a failed state. According to the United Nations (UN) Under-Secretary-General for Humanitarian Affairs, the Venezuelan economy has been ravaged to the point that "millions cannot afford the bare minimum of food, water, and health care." (Cortes 2019).

In response, the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) is calling upon nations to help support Venezuelan migrants and their host nations, particularly Colombia, Brazil, and Peru (UN Refugee Agency 2020). Host nations have granted legal status to over 2.4 million Venezuelans. The continued influx, however, has stretched the resources of these countries to dire levels and has prompted sporadic xenophobic reactions, enhanced migration restrictions, and barriers to legal status.

Host countries have also been stretched to their limits by the COVID-19 pandemic. As a result, these nations have turned their resources inward to help sustain their social infrastructure. These trying times have all but exhausted the political will to help refugees. As jobs have disappeared, large numbers of Venezuelans lack the means to sustain themselves.

Humanitarian aid received thus far has amounted to about \$125 per Venezuelan, which is less than a tenth of the aid per person dedicated to the Syrian crisis (about \$1,500 per refugee) (Bahar and Dooley 2019). The R4V Coordination Platform for Refugees and Migrants

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<sup>1</sup> The Scalabrini Congregation, which assists Venezuelan migrants and refugees throughout Latin America, projects that the number of refugees by the end of 2020 could reach 6.7 million. (Scalabrini Congregation 2020, 3). Similarly, before COVID-19 border closures, R4V predicted that there would be approximately 6.5 million Venezuelan migrants and refugees by the end of 2020. (R4V 2020).

from Venezuela (“R4V Platform”) projects that an additional \$775 million billion in funding is required to assist local NGOs and volunteer organizations that are helping to provide food, shelter, and medicine to Venezuelan refugees across various host countries (R4V Platform 2020). The insufficient international response to alleviating the humanitarian crisis has made the Venezuelan crisis “the largest and most underfunded in modern history.” (Bahar and Dooley 2019).

This paper outlines conditions in Venezuela, the refugee, asylum, and immigration policies in the countries where Venezuelans are settling, and the challenges faced by Venezuelan migrants and refugees, as of December 1, 2020.

## II. Conditions in Venezuela

According to the World Justice Project’s Rule of Law Index for 2020, Venezuela now ranks last in its adherence to the rule of law (128 of 128 countries ranked), including ranking last on constraints on government powers, regulatory enforcement, and criminal justice.<sup>2</sup> (World Justice Project 2020). The country is bankrupt, and widespread undernourishment has driven people to seek refuge elsewhere, causing the largest exodus in Latin American history. *Human Rights Watch* reports that “[n]o independent government institutions remain today in Venezuela to act as a check on executive power.... Severe shortages of medicines, medical supplies, and food leave many Venezuelans unable to feed their families adequately or access essential healthcare.” (HRW 2020).

The COVID-19 pandemic has compounded the suffering. Venezuela was woefully unprepared for the pandemic because years of economic mismanagement exhausted their healthcare infrastructure and medical supply reserves. As one resident reported, “The government says wear masks, wash your hands often, and stay inside. But we don’t have water, we often don’t have electricity, and there are no masks” (Mesones Rojo and Collins 2020). Last year, 70 percent of hospitals reported receiving water only intermittently and 20 percent reported getting almost no water (*Id.*). A fellow Venezuelan resident added, “No one goes to the hospital in Venezuela. The hospitals are a death sentence.” (Mesones Rojo and Collins 2020).

Venezuela is not unique in having insufficient resources to combat the COVID-19 pandemic. Most of Latin America is also facing potential catastrophe. Economies are shut down, and governments are approaching bankruptcy. Argentina has declared bankruptcy. According to UNHCR, “[h]ost countries have been generously welcoming [Venezuelan migrants], but their capacity is reaching a saturation point.” (UN Refugee Agency 2020). As these neighboring countries begin to close their borders, many migrants are forced to choose “irregular routes” (Stein 2020, 11). Given Venezuela’s deterioration and the coronavirus pandemic, refugees face

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<sup>2</sup> To rank countries, the index relies on national surveys of more than 130,000 households and 4,000 legal practitioners and experts to measure how the rule of law is experienced and perceived in countries around the world. The Index assesses the rule of law based on four universal principles: accountability, just laws, open government, and accessible and impartial dispute resolution. (World Justice Project 2020).

two untenable choices: to adapt to life in the host countries or to return to Venezuela (Turkewitz 2020).

### **III. Crisis Response: Where Venezuelans Are Going and What Conditions They Face**

Venezuelan migrants and refugees have dispersed across Latin America, with smaller, but significant numbers making their way to North America and Europe. Latin American nations have issued residence permits or regular stay status to more than 2.4 million Venezuelans (R4V Platform 2020), with more than an additional 800,000 asylum or residency cases pending (Stein 2020, 11). However, many of Venezuela's neighbors have nearly exhausted their resources.

#### ***A. Structure***

An examination of the countries where Venezuelan migrants and refugees have settled sheds light on the immigration status, availability of social support programs, and living situations.

The United Nations Human Rights Council ("OHCHR") and the R4V Platform track and publish information on where Venezuelan refugees have settled (R4V 2020). By mid-2020 Venezuelan migrants and refugees had made their way across Venezuelan land borders into the neighboring countries of Colombia, Brazil, and Guyana; traveled (often on foot) down to the southern cone of Peru, Chile, and Argentina; north towards Panama, the Caribbean, Mexico, and the United States; and even to Spain.

For information on legal status, this paper relies on UNHCR's Operation Portal for Refugee Situations. This tool defines "regular status" as having "arrangements, outside the asylum system, for Venezuelans to reside for an extended period (one to two years) with access to work and social service," including "temporary residence permits, labour migration visas, humanitarian visas, and regional visa agreements." (R4V 2020). It also provides information on the number of Venezuelan refugee/asylum claims per country.

For insight into the legal, social and economic conditions facing Venezuelan migrants, this paper primarily relies on information provided by the R4V Platform, which seeks to facilitate a coordinated response to Venezuelan migrants and refugees from non-governmental organizations (NGOs), UN agencies, and other organizations. The platform publishes annual plans and periodic updates that detail the conditions faced by Venezuelans in host countries in the region. R4V also provides estimates of future flows of Venezuelan migrants and refugees by country.

The R4V platform identifies where Venezuelan migrants and refugees have fled, the protections available to them, and where additional migrants and refugees are expected to head. Migration data and refugee status information primarily comes from the host countries. Discussion of the local conditions and the availability of legal protections and services comes from local NGOs that are members of the R4V platform.

This paper provides the latest statistics available through the R4V platform website and supplements them by relying on additional primary sources to discuss the current conditions in the host countries. The below chart identifies how many refugees and migrants with status are in each of the following:

	Venezuelans (Est. in Nov. 2019)	Regular Status (as of Nov 5. 2020)	Pending Asylum Claims (as of Nov 5 2020)	Recognized Refugees (as of Oct. 02 2020)
Colombia	1,800,000	766,296	8,824	425
Peru	870,000	477,060	496,095	1,282
Ecuador	385,000	178,246	29,078	374
Chile	371,000	472,827	2,861	14
United States	351,000	-	104,989	15,706
Brazil	224,000	148,782	102,504	46,343
Argentina	145,000	210,071	3,698	312
TOTALS	4,500,000	2,486,222	803,786	112,446

*Source: Created by the author with data from R4V 2020 report, the R4V website, R4V platform data, and Human Rights Watch for updated information on Venezuelans with pending asylum claims in the United States. The number of Venezuelans in Colombia is as of September 2020 (USAID 2020b).*

The R4V platform and table define “Venezuelans” as the total number of Venezuelans who have entered the host country for either permanent or temporary purposes. The term “regular” refers to Venezuelans who have received legal status in host countries, including of a transitory nature. “Pending asylum claims” refers to the number of Venezuelan refugees who have filed and are awaiting formal asylum adjudication. “Recognized refugees” refers to Venezuelans who have been formally recognized as refugees and issued permanent residency cards, social security numbers, or other country-specific status indicators to enable them to stay and access public services on a long-term/permanent basis.

According to the R4Vplatform, as of November 5, 2020, the number of Venezuelan migrants and refugees is approximately 5.5 million and is likely to continue to increase as countries reopen their borders. Below we provide additional background, discuss the legal environments, and identify the efforts that these countries have taken to assist and integrate Venezuelan migrants and refugees.

## **B. Top Host Countries**

### **i. Colombia**

Colombia shares its eastern border with Venezuela and has borne the brunt of the Venezuelan exodus due to a combination of factors. First, its geographic proximity means that most Venezuelans need to first cross through Colombia in order to arrive in other countries such as Peru, Ecuador, Chile, Argentina, and Panama. Second, Colombia had left its borders open and relatively easy to cross, although COVID has caused Colombia to temporarily close all of its land

borders. Third, the countries share a common history of taking in refugees, as Venezuela has a history of receiving Colombian refugees (World Politics 2019).

Traditionally, Colombia has been a net exporter of migrants and refugees and does not have experience as a receiving country or the infrastructure or developed resources to support such a massive influx. Despite these limitations, Colombia has extended legal status to some of the 1.8 million Venezuelans, with 766,296 receiving regular status as of August 31, 2020. Of those who have received regular status, approximately 12 percent have been granted permanent or humanitarian visas and 88 percent Special Stay Permits (*Permiso Especial de Permanencia*) that enable them to remain and work in Colombia. (R4V 2020, 70) Other Venezuelans that do not have regular status can apply for temporary work permits (*Permiso especial de permanencia para el foment de la formalization*).

Venezuelan migrants and refugees also have access to Colombia's universal healthcare system and education system. Importantly, Colombia recognizes the educational and professional degrees acquired in Venezuela. By October 2019, 198,597 children from Venezuela were enrolled in Colombia's formal educational system. (R4V 2020, 75). There were 90,200 emergency medical consultations for Venezuelan migrants registered between January and September 2019. (R4V 2020, 70). Colombia also seeks to promote cooperation and access to its private sector and financial institutions in order to help secure jobs and social integration.

Colombia provides special transit permits (*Permiso de Ingreso y Permanencia Transito Temporal*) that provide 15-days to transition through Colombia to other places. This helps establish regular mobility paths to enhance safety and help prevent smuggling. Colombia also offers a Border Mobility Card (*Tarjeta de Movilidad Fronteriza*) that allows Venezuelans to enter Colombia for up to seven days to obtain basic goods and services. In less than a year, more than 2.6 million Venezuelans registered for the program. (R4V 2020, 70). Many of the Venezuelans in Colombia identify as intending to return eventually to Venezuela.

On August 5, 2019, Colombian President Ivan Duque declared that all Venezuelan children born on Colombian soil since 2015 would receive Colombian citizenship to prevent them from becoming stateless (Acosta, Cobb and Lewis 2019), effective immediately. President Duque also requested that Colombians welcome migrants as their brethren and that Venezuelans who cross into Colombia informally register with local authorities so that Colombia can better provide them with public services.

Colombia projects that over 200,000 Venezuelan migrants could enter Colombia in the coming months (Salazar 2020). To help these refugees, R4V is prioritizing three main objectives:

1. Provide and improve access to critical goods and services.
2. Increase integration opportunities for the refugee and migrant population, including access to dignified employment, public services, and a secure livelihood.

3. Prevent and mitigate protection risks, strengthen access to basic services, and respond to protection needs. (R4V 2020, 72).

These objectives apply to assisting migrants and refugees in each host country.

## ii. Peru

Peru is located south of Colombia and does not share a border with Venezuela. Nevertheless, Peru has received the second largest number of Venezuelans and has taken many measures to support them. Peru is the country with the highest number of asylum requests by Venezuelan nationals, with more than 496,095 requests from the 870,000 Venezuelans who were present in the country on June 30, 2020. (R4V Platform).

When the Venezuelan crisis began, Peru was viewed as the most accommodating country for refugees in South America. Originally Venezuelan refugees were able to enter with just a national identification card and to apply for work permits (*Permisos Temporal de Permanencia*) that allowed them to work for up to one year, after which they could apply for extensions. Venezuelans who entered the country legally and had no criminal record were eligible for these permits. Approximately 85 percent of Venezuelans in Peru settled in Lima, the capital city. (Millman 2019). Work permits have allowed many Venezuelans to obtain more consistent income than those who work in the “informal” economy. (Felerstein and Winfield 2019, 10). In addition to providing work permits, Peru also established afternoon shifts to schools through programs such as *Lima Aprende* which helped Venezuelan refugees who arrive in the middle of the year to catch up on schoolwork.

Despite providing refugees with the opportunity to obtain legal employment, the vast majority of Venezuelan refugees in Peru need some form of assistance. A Joint Needs Analysis conducted by the Government of Peru and partners, including the World Bank and the UNICEF, concluded that Venezuelan migrants and refugees need access to: (1) safe shelter that meets minimum standards; (2) Food, nutrition, water, sanitation, and hygiene; (3) health services, protection and education; and (4) assistance with integration. (R4V 2020, 110-11).

After approximately half a million Venezuelans entered Peru in 2018, the country began to face hardships from the volume of refugees it was receiving given its own needs and began to tighten entry requirements. A passport was required as of October 31, 2018, and visas were required as of June 19, 2019. These tightened refugee policies were enacted because Peru lacked the infrastructure and resources to cope with the increasing number of Venezuelans that were entering the country (Camino and Lopez Montreuil 2020).

Venezuelans have also encountered formal barriers to integration in Peru, such as onerous certification processes for foreign lawyers and doctors. High unemployment rates also mean that work is hard to find, with many jobs in the “informal” sector without benefits or minimum wages.

## iii. Ecuador

Ecuador is located southwest of Colombia and does not share a border with Venezuela. To reach Ecuador, Venezuelans have to cross Colombia, which they often do by foot. Many Venezuelans chose to settle in Ecuador between 2016 and mid-2019 when favorable entry and temporary residency policies, including being able to enter by presenting identification issued by their home country. Approximately 385,000 Venezuelans entered Ecuador by November 2019. Venezuelans are expected to continue to enter and settle in Ecuador as long as it maintains comparatively lax immigration policies.

Those who entered Ecuador from Venezuela before July 26, 2019 were admitted if they were able to present a valid or expired passport, did not have a criminal record, and registered with the migratory registry to apply for a two-year residence permit (*exceptional temporary visa for humanitarian reasons*). Venezuelans who overstayed their tourist visas were able to benefit from the registry process, without having to pay a fine, as long as they met the other criteria. The two-year residency permit provides Venezuelans with access to services and citizen rights.

The refugee-friendly admittance policy was amended by Ecuadorian Executive Decree No. 826 on July 26, 2019, which created an immigrant visa entry requirement for Venezuelan nationals seeking refuge in Ecuador. The resulting reduction in Venezuelan refugees entering Ecuador was dramatic, falling from over 2,000 per day before the Executive Decree, to an average of 23 per day in September 2019 (R4V 2020, 90). This policy led more Venezuelans to enter through irregular channels.

Venezuelans in Ecuador continue to face difficulties accessing labor markets and integrating. While the Ecuadorian Constitution guarantees universal access to healthcare and education, migrants often face obstacles to accessing them, including a lack of resources and social networks to help facilitate access. A study conducted in October 2018 found that 55 percent of Venezuelans in Ecuador did not generate enough income to cover their basic needs such as shelter and food. (Ecuador CCD et. al. 2018).

#### **iv. Chile**

Chile is the southern neighbor of Peru, which means Venezuelan refugees need to cross at least two countries (Colombia and Peru) in order to arrive in Chile. Venezuelans typically settle in either of Chile's two northern provinces, Arica and Parinacota, or in the capital city of Santiago de Chile. By mid-2019 a total of 371,000 refugees had settled in Chile, a country with a total population of about 19 million.

Despite the considerable tension and financial impact that having a large refugee population has created, the Chilean government has worked to respond to the needs of refugees, migrants, and their host communities. Venezuelans were able to enter Chile for tourist purposes or apply in-country for work authorization under visa-exempt status. In April 2018, Chile introduced a "Democratic Responsibility Visa" for which Venezuelans from Caracas or Puerto Ordaz could apply. The program was later expanded to all Chilean consulates. (R4V 2020, 60). Chile also issues permissions (*salvoconductors*) to enter and stay in exceptional cases

at the border. These are typically provided to Venezuelans that are entering Chile to unite with their families but do not have appropriate documentation to enter Chile.

While Chile generally has migration-friendly policies, it began requiring Consular Tourist Visas in June 2019 to regulate the volume of Venezuelans entering the country (Fragomen 2019). These entry visas replaced Venezuelan's previous visa-exempt status. While applying for the Consular Tourist Visa adds lead time and a barrier to migration, Chile has continued its policy of accepting expired passports and identification cards from Venezuelans to enter.

Chile provides unrestricted access to education for all children, irrespective of the child's migrant status or that of their parents. The education system helps migrants integrate and gain access to labor markets. It also provides universal access to emergency healthcare and health insurance through the National Health Fund (FONASA) for low-income households. Beyond education and healthcare, however, Venezuelan migrants and refugees often lack access to safe shelter, food, water, and adequate nutrition. (R4V 2020, 63).

#### **v. United States**

The journey to the United States is difficult for Venezuelan migrants due to the distance, perilous routes, and US enforcement policies. Venezuelans seeking to enter the United States need to enter through the formal visa application process or have preexisting visas. In normal circumstances, Venezuelans could request asylum at the border. However, since January 2019, the Migrant Protection Protocols (MPP) have forced asylum seekers to wait for their US asylum hearings in Mexico, and for most of 2020, COVID-19 border closures have prevented them from requesting asylum.

Since the start of the Venezuelan exodus in 2014, approximately 351,000 Venezuelans have entered the United States. Many began to establish roots in the United States during the Chavez era. They typically chose to settle in places with significant Latino communities, such as Florida and Texas, which account for 53 percent and 12 percent of the Venezuelan diaspora in the United States (Gallardo and Batalova, 2020).

In fiscal year (FY) 2019, Venezuelans were the top source of US asylum claims; with 27,576 filed and 6,821 granted. Nearly 105,000 Venezuelan asylum claims were pending as of December 31, 2019 (Trump 2020, 8) Access to the US asylum system has been severely restricted in recent years, and the United States has not extended Temporary Protected Status to Venezuelans in the country. In addition, the "Presidential Determination on Refugee Admissions for Fiscal Year 2021" does not identify Venezuelans (ibid.).

The United States has been supporting the Venezuelan refugees through financial assistance to host countries. Since 2017, the United States has provided roughly \$611 million for Venezuelan refugees in Argentina, Aruba, Brazil, the Caribbean, Chile, Colombia, Costa Rica, Curacao, Dominican Republic, Ecuador, Guyana, Mexico, Panama, Paraguay, Peru and Trinidad and Tobago, Uruguay, and Venezuela. (USAID 2020a). This funding has assisted host governments and NGOs to provide food, shelter, and medicine for the refugees and other humanitarian aid.

Congress also appropriated \$30 million in FY2020 to support democracy and human rights programs in Venezuela. (CRS 2020b, 30). On September 18, 2020 US Secretary of State Michael Pompeo announced another the United States would contribute an additional \$348 million for Venezuelan refugees and the countries hosting them (US DOS 2020), bringing the total US contribution to more than \$1.2 billion since 2017.

#### **vi. Brazil**

Venezuela shares a large border with Brazil in the Amazon rainforest. Most refugees arrive through the border city of Pacaraima which is located in the northern state of Roraima, Brazil. Pacaraima is geographically isolated from the rest of Brazil by the Amazon rainforest, which makes onward movements for refugees difficult, costly, and risky. The state of Roraima also has the lowest per capita income in Brazil and there are few economic opportunities available for refugees. Brazil has a different culture and language than Venezuela, which also complicates life for refugees. These difficulties help explain why, of the more than 454,800 Venezuelan refugees who have arrived in Brazil since 2017, approximately 269,800 have since migrated elsewhere. (R4V 2020, 42).

Despite facing its own economic difficulties, Brazil thus far has remained committed to supporting refugees and migrants from Venezuela through Operation Welcome (*Operacao Acolhida*) that focuses on providing economic support and living assistance to refugees in the northern states of Roraima and Amazonas. Additionally, Brazil has a relocation program (*Interiorizacao*) that assists refugees in transit through Brazil to other states. From April 2018 to October 2020, the program relocated 43,994 Venezuelans (Onu Mugarcao 2020).

Brazil has a formal asylum process. The program had a back-log of 120,000 applications on December 5, 2019, but Brazil made a strong push to help Venezuelan migrants integrate by granting 21,432 asylum applications in a single day. (Munoz and Broner 2019). The current backlog is 102,504, as of August 30, 2020. (R4V Platform). Asylum affords refugees protection, stability, and right to work.

Still, most Venezuelans in Brazil continue to face urgent unmet needs. Brazil has a universally accessible public health system (*Sistema Unico de Saude – SUS*), but demand for healthcare services has exceeded local capabilities – especially in Roraima where resources were already thinly stretched. These conditions have caused the resurfacing of some contagious diseases, such as measles, and other adverse health outcomes (Doocy et al, 2019).

While Brazil is facing a difficult domestic situation and immense challenges combating COVID-19, the Brazilian government appears to be committed to continuing to assist refugees through the asylum and relocation programs to help alleviate some of the burdens on the northern Brazilian states. New migrants will particularly need assistance and protection as later departures typically arrive with fewer resources and in worse health than those who left Venezuela in the earlier years of the crisis. (CRS 2020a).

#### **vii. Argentina**

There are no easy trails for Venezuelans to Argentina, which is located in the southern cone of South America. Most Venezuelan migrants have to transit through Colombia, Peru, and either Bolivia or Chile to reach Argentina. This is the reason that only 145,000 Venezuelans have settled in Argentina, despite the country's relative open-door policy. Because countries closer to Venezuela are starting to limit access to their territory, the R4V platform projects that additional Venezuelans will seek refuge in Argentina.

Argentina had granted residency permits to 210,071 migrants and refugees as of September 21, 2020. (R4V Platform 2020), and access to universal healthcare and education. However, at times Venezuelans still face barriers to enrollment in formal education or obtaining preventive treatment such as vaccinations. (R4V 2020, 158). Xenophobic or discriminatory practices towards Venezuelans have been the exception rather than the norm, although tensions have been rising as the number of migrants and refugees has increased.

Venezuelans also face limited access to formal jobs and other activities necessary to earn a livelihood due to limited recognition of qualifications and lack of integration into host communities. Migrants and refugees have a harder time organizing and accessing information on legal and administrative regulations due to less developed and smaller Venezuelan communities than in other regions. The United Nations Human Rights Council estimates that it needs \$24 million in funding for Venezuelans in Argentina (UNHCR, 2020). UNHCR partners are providing Venezuelans with food, shelter, clothing, and family reunification services.

### ***C. Additional Major Destination Regions***

#### ***i. Central America***

Some Central American nations have maintained an open-door policy for Venezuelans for much of the Venezuelan crisis. Panama, for example, hosts 94,000 Venezuelan refugees and had issued 76,297 residence permits as of October 5, 2020 (R4V Platform 2020). There were 2,858 Venezuelan asylum claims pending in Panama as of June 26, 2020. (R4V Platform 2020). Panama has also created the Office of Humanitarian Affairs for Venezuelan Residence under Decree No. 612 of October 22, 2018, to help administer migration policy.

Costa Rica offers a provisional legal framework for refugee protection that enables refugees to access social services and the labor market. As a result, Costa Rica has experienced an increase in Venezuelan and Nicaraguan migrants and refugees since 2018. There were 16,360 requests for migratory regularization in Costa Rica between 2015 and June 2019, with 34 percent approved. Costa Rica's asylum system faces significant backlogs: the number of pending applications by Venezuelans increased from 9,949 in 2019 to 25,913 by March 31, 2020. (OCHA, 2020).

Smaller island nations in the Caribbean such as the Dominican Republic, Aruba, Curacao, Guyana, and Trinidad and Tobago have also received an influx of Venezuelan migrants and refugees. These five nations cumulatively hosted approximately 100,000 migrants and refugees as of September 2019. (R4V 2020, p. 130). Island nations have adopted different approaches to

the inflow of Venezuelans. Some countries have introduced restrictions on entry due to limited resources. Such island nations are only able to provide limited food, shelter, and medical care to migrants and refugees.

## **ii. Europe**

More than 50,000 Venezuelans have fled to Spain since the start of the Venezuelan crisis, and availed themselves of Spain's relatively generous immigration rules. In total, 320,000 Venezuelans live in Spain (Legorano 2019). Spain provides Venezuelans with temporary protection and work permits, while they wait for their asylum claims to be processed and adjudicated (ibid.). Spain has recognized 35,243 refugees from Venezuela and had an additional 16,540 asylum applications pending as of November 5, 2020. (R4V Platform 2020).

The European Union (EU) has primarily addressed the Venezuelan exodus through humanitarian aid, pledging a total of €144.2 million for immediate humanitarian assistance. (EU 2020). The European Investment Bank has also provided €400 million in loans to Venezuela's neighboring countries to finance social and economic infrastructure. Additionally, individual countries in the region have provided €87.5 million in grant funding to support the Venezuelan refugees, providing humanitarian assistance and promoting the integration of Venezuelans in their new communities.

## **iii. North America**

Mexico had accepted 71,000 Venezuelans and provided 53,534 with residence permits or regular stay status as of July 10, 2020. Regular stay status allows migrants with pending asylum claims to reside in the country and work for up to one year. As of June 30, 2020, there were 8,510 Venezuelan asylum claims pending. (R4V Platform 2020).

A relatively small number of Venezuelans live in Canada, and Canada accepted only 820 Venezuelan asylum claims in the first six months of 2019. (Levitz 2019). However, it has provided additional monetary assistance of more than \$55 million in humanitarian aid since 2017 (Government of Canada n.d. 2020). These funds are being provided to NGOs, primarily in Colombia and Brazil, to provide emergency food assistance, health care, water, sanitation, education, and protection services.

## **IV. A Diminishing Welcome**

The regional response to Venezuelan migrants and refugees has been generous. Few would have imagined that 15 percent of Venezuelans would leave the country and neighboring countries would have accepted so many. However, the ability of these countries to provide support, particularly during the pandemic, is limited. The high concentration of Venezuelans also exacerbates crowding in many large cities, such as Bogota, and Lima. The rapid influx of refugees has caused the public resources of these nations to stretch to the breaking point (Taj & Reinhold 2018).

These dynamics have caused many countries to back away from their initial open border policies and to implement more stringent entry and petition for status requirements. As noted, Peru instituted a passport and visa requirement for entry, which effectively closed the border for many Venezuelans who cannot afford the costs to acquire them. By mid-2019, Peru's economy had started to implode under the strain of nearly a million Venezuelan migrants and refugees, with unemployment rates rising, local food and medical shortages, and a growing wave of resentment among natives.

Similarly, Chile's senate recently began debating a bill that would tighten migration rules on how prospective immigrants can enter Chile. The bill was advanced by the government of Chile, following a report that after COVID-restrictions are lifted, migrant numbers could reach up to 250,000 people a year (Laing 2020).

The pushback to Venezuelan migrants occurred in many countries whose economies soured in rough correlation with the influx of refugees. In addition to politicians favoring policies to protect voting natives, populist movements against migrants went as far as to promote hit music that disparages Venezuelan migrants. In Panama, a hit called "La Chama," which generally refers to Venezuelan women's promiscuity, became popular (Fieser and Bristow 2018).

Venezuelan refugees have also been subject to insults, threats, and violence across their new host nations. Gallup performed polls in 2016 and 2019 to gauge migrant acceptance in various host nations and found that Latin American nations saw the sharpest decline in attitudes of acceptance towards migrants (Esipova, Ray, and Pugliese 2020). Espirova, Tay, and Pugliese compared the results for each nation surveyed and found that migrant acceptance dropped the most in Peru, Ecuador, and Colombia (ibid). These are also the three nations with the most Venezuelan refugees.

Increased crime is also frequently cited as a reason why host countries have become less amenable to receiving an increasing number of Venezuelan migrants and refugees. The true impact of Venezuelans on crime rates in host countries is a bit of a mixed bag. Bahar, Dooley, and Selee conclude that:

[F]or the most part, Venezuelan migrants commit substantially fewer crimes—and certainly fewer violent crimes—than the native-born, relative to their share in the overall population (Bahar, Dooley, and Selee 2020).

At the same time, while migrants contribute to a rise in aggregate crime statistics, economists generally agree that accepting refugees enhances a county's long-term growth by adding additional laborers, taxpayers, and inventors to the economy (Maxmen 2018). However, in the current COVID-19 environment most populations focus on the immediate issues within host countries and not longer-term potential benefits.

### ***A. COVID-19 Response***

The coronavirus pandemic has further exacerbated the difficulties that Venezuelans have faced in adapting to life in their host countries. In addition to limiting the amount of public resources available in host countries, the coronavirus disproportionately impacts employment in the travel and hospitality industries, where many Venezuelans had found work (Trivin 2020). These industries have largely shuttered their doors, and Venezuelan workers have been among the first to lose their jobs (WFP 2020).

Social distancing policies have also hampered the ability of NGOs to assist Venezuelan migrants and refugees due to the COVID-related policies that have been put in place. For example, restrictions on social movement and gatherings have had the unintended consequence of undermining the ability of aid organizations to provide services. This is especially notable in areas like Cucuta, Colombia, where Venezuelan migrants and refugees already overwhelmed the organizations providing assistance. In areas like Cucuta, social distancing rules “could worsen an already dire humanitarian situation” by requiring NGOs to effectively cut their services in half – or stop providing services altogether – to comply with the restrictions (Welsh 2020). This would further impede the ability of the international community to assist Venezuelans in need.

Many Venezuelan migrants and refugees have expressed hopelessness in the face of a truly perilous situation, with some even deciding to undertake a harsh journey back home. Luzdey Olivo Rodriguez, a Venezuelan social worker in Ecuador, observed that many were going back home in “despair” as the closing of the informal economy left many refugees with “no way to survive” (Welsh 2020). Such refugees have expressed the sentiment that “we don’t want to go back – but what choice do we have?” (ibid.).

As of August 30, 2020, more than 100,000 Venezuelans had returned to Venezuela since March 2020 due to their lives being shattered by the COVID lockdowns. (Otis 2020b). Most have returned from nearby countries such as Colombia as Venezuela has been reluctant to permit stranded Venezuelans to return on repatriation flights (Acosta 2020a). Tens of thousands of these Venezuelans moved through Colombia by bus, with the rest walking hundreds of miles to reach Venezuela (Otis 2020b). Venezuelan migrants and refugees from as far as Chile have been forced by circumstances to return to Venezuela as the informal jobs have dried up during the Coronavirus-related lockdowns (Cambero 2020a).

Venezuelans who return are likely to experience horrid conditions, with virtually all Venezuelan hospitals reporting medicine shortages and having eight hospital beds per 10,000 people, as well as hyperinflation and a crumbling infrastructure that causes electrical outages (Otis 2020a). In total, approximately 4 percent of Venezuelan migrants have returned to Venezuela through Colombia during the COVID crisis; however, many are now re-emigrating out of Venezuela as they have found the situation in Venezuela to be worse than elsewhere (Acosta 2020b). Migracion Colombia estimates that Venezuelans who returned home would seek to come back to Colombia with at least one more person, and eighty percent of those who left early when the pandemic started would return (ibid.). Colombian officials predict that approximately 200,000

Venezuelans will reenter Colombia within the first three months of the border reopening. (Turkewitz 2020).

## V. Closing Thoughts

The collapse of Venezuela and ensuing exodus has caused millions of people to lose their homes, livelihoods, and social circles as they flee Venezuela. As one Venezuelan explained, “we have to run or we’ll die.” (Polanco 2020). Host countries badly need additional support. In addition, countries that have restricted or closed border entry should reverse these policies to enable Venezuelans to enter and at least temporarily stay within their borders. They should also expedite consideration of asylum and regularization applications, and promote the integration of Venezuelans so that they can sustain themselves and start to rebuild their lives.

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