

SUPPORTING SOLIDARITY

WHY THE WORLD MUST BOLSTER COLOMBIA'S
RESPONSE TO THE VENEZUELAN DISPLACEMENT CRISIS

2019 BOARD OF DIRECTORS MISSION REPORT

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Cover Photo: Venezuelans and Colombian returnees line up to enter Colombia on the border with Venezuela. Photo Credit: Guillermo Legaria/Getty Images.

CONTENTS

- 4 SUMMARY AND RECOMMENDATIONS**
- 7 BACKGROUND**
- 11 VENEZUELAN IN COLOMBIA—GREATEST NEEDS AND POLICY RESPONSES**
- 17 POLICY VERSUS PRACTICE—LIMITATIONS AND CHALLENGES IN IMPLEMENTATION**
- 20 CRISES COLLIDE—THE VENEZUELAN INFLUX INTO POST-CONFLICT COLOMBIA**
- 22 CONCLUSION**

SUMMARY

In recent years, worsening political turmoil, economic collapse, and blatant violations of human rights have forced people to flee Venezuela in increasing numbers. As of November 2019, more than 4.6 million Venezuelans had sought refuge outside their country—the second largest displacement crisis in the world and the largest in Latin America’s history.

Colombia is host to 1.5 million Venezuelan refugees and migrants—the largest number by far. From the start of the crisis, the Colombian government has extended a relatively generous welcome to Venezuelans. It has mobilized emergency humanitarian assistance, facilitated access to services and work, and created mechanisms for hundreds of thousands to regularize their status. More broadly, Colombia has served as a leader and an example at the regional level, maintaining open borders even as other countries increasingly close their doors.

In fact, the failure of regional host countries to truly align their policies has left Colombia to shoulder the consequences of its neighbors’ increasingly restrictive measures. Meanwhile, the United Nations, recognizing the enormity of the crisis, created a regional platform jointly run by the UN Refugee Agency (UNHCR) and the International Organization for Migration (IOM). It is designed to better coordinate the UN response across its relevant agencies, implementing partners, and major host countries, and mobilize the necessary resources. The response of the donor community, however, has fallen short.

In this context, Colombia’s capacity to respond is growing increasingly strained. Insufficient resources and institutional capacity limit the public sector’s ability to accommodate the Venezuelan population. The UN’s corresponding coordination mechanism at the national level, the Interagency Group on Mixed Migration Flows (GIFMM), has struggled to work efficiently alongside the existing humanitarian architecture in Colombia.

Many Venezuelans lack information about the rights and services available to them. Those who are aware often face practical obstacles to accessing them, such as complex bureaucratic processes or unexpected fees. Despite Colombia’s generous policies, the majority of Venezuelan refugees and migrants enter and reside in the country irregularly, with little assistance and at much greater risk. Further, vulnerable groups, including women and girls, lack access to specialized services. Others have been discriminated against as xenophobia increases.

These trends are likely to worsen as the number of Venezuelans seeking refuge in Colombia—and staying for a protracted period—rises. Developments at home and in the region strongly suggest that this continued rise is likely. Meanwhile, Colombia is grappling with its own domestic challenges. Despite a 2016 peace accord formally ending a decades-long civil war, armed groups continue to operate in the country, and nearly 8 million Colombians remain internally displaced. Public opinion increasingly finds the government’s implementation of the accord to be unsatisfactory. In November 2019, frustration with this effort and other domestic policies erupted into nationwide protests that, in turn, triggered a backlash against Venezuelans.

These recent developments underscore how the deteriorating internal displacement crisis is colliding with the increasing pressures created by the influx of Venezuelans, exacerbating the humanitarian consequences for all. As donors and humanitarians have shifted their programming to address the needs of displaced Venezuelans, the country’s internally displaced pop-

ulation is increasingly marginalized and neglected. Many refugees and migrants settle in the same communities where Colombian internally displaced people (IDPs) reside, leaving these two highly vulnerable populations to compete for resources. This trend could be aggravated by plans to scale down the presence of the UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA)—the UN body responsible for coordinating the response to Colombia’s IDP crisis.

To address this reality, the response must increasingly support mid- to long-term measures that benefit both displaced populations as well as their host communities. The situation demands solutions that facilitate Venezuelans’ social and economic integration into host communities, even as immediate humanitarian aid remains critical for those newly streaming across the border. Additional support from the international community is critical. Without it, Colombia cannot maintain its generous policies for Venezuelans or address the needs of its own citizens. Such support would create incentives for other states to model Colombia’s approach and promote greater stability nationally and regionally. Ultimately, a comprehensive response backed by adequate resources is essential for Colombia to provide the protections and assistance due to all displaced people inside its borders.

RECOMMENDATIONS

The international community should do the following:

- Donors should fully fund the UN Refugee and Migrant Response Plan for Venezuela (RMRP) for the remainder of 2019 and 2020.
- Donors should promote responsibility sharing by encouraging regional policy harmonization. They should provide technical and financial capacity to support initiatives such as the Quito Process and regional vaccination cards that improve the regional response.
- Donors should increase funding for efforts to promote the socioeconomic integration of Venezuelans in Colombia. These should include measures to strengthen institutional capacity in the health and education sectors and increase income-generating opportunities for Venezuelans.
- The international community must continue to provide humanitarian relief to those in need. It must ensure specialized protections for the most vulnerable, including the caminantes, or walkers, who travel through Colombia on foot, and women and girls.
- The international community should hold the government of Colombia accountable for addressing its internal conflict and resulting internal displacement crisis. It should support implementation of the peace process and restitution for victims of armed conflict.

Multilateral institutions should do the following:

- The UN should reverse its decision to reduce OCHA’s capacity in Colombia. OCHA plays an essential role in coordinating the humanitarian response for victims of the armed conflict at a time when resources and attention are shifting away from this vulnerable population.

- International financial institutions should continue to facilitate the Colombian government's access to financing. Projects financed through grants and concessional lending mechanisms should promote Venezuelans' socioeconomic inclusion and development goals for both displaced and host communities.

The government of Colombia should do the following:

- Continue to keep Colombia's borders open to Venezuelans and implement policies to accommodate the influx.
- Open a new, continuous registration process for Venezuelans that involves a clear and simplified path toward regularization and guarantees of protection.
- Facilitate Venezuelans' socioeconomic integration, including by reducing bureaucratic and financial obstacles to accessing their rights to health, education, and work, and incentivizing the private sector to create livelihood opportunities.
- Engage with civil society actors to improve the dissemination of information so that both Venezuelans and Colombians are fully aware of the rights and services available to them.
- Commit to fully implementing the peace agreement and compensating victims of the armed conflict, including by meeting the needs of Colombian IDPs.
- Invest in campaigns to counter xenophobia and ensure that initiatives supporting displaced Venezuelans also benefit their host communities.

BACKGROUND

Venezuela's political and economic crisis has generated a regional humanitarian emergency. Institutional collapse, hyperinflation, generalized violence, and political repression continue under the authoritarian regime of President Nicolás Maduro. Millions of Venezuelans, lacking access to food, medicine, and basic social services, have fled. Some fear for their lives; all fear for the futures of their children. They have mostly taken refuge in neighboring countries of Latin America, where their reception was initially warm; however, as Venezuela's domestic crisis persists, the limits of that welcome are being tested.

More than 4.6 million people have left Venezuela, making it the second largest displacement crisis in the world.¹ With 5,000 people leaving daily, the number of Venezuelans living outside of the country is expected to reach 5 million by December 2019 and at least 7 million by the end of 2020.² Colombia alone is host to nearly 1.5 million Venezuelan refugees and migrants.³ Approximately 80 percent of those arriving in the country enter in the administrative department of Norte de Santander (NdS), where the Simón Bolívar International Bridge serves as the primary official entry point in the city of Cúcuta. As one UN official there described it, "The situation at the border changes from 'chaotic' to 'very chaotic.' But there is always chaos."

This chaos is captured only partially by the official figures, which do not reflect the number of Venezuelans who lack the documents needed to use official crossing points and thus enter through irregular channels,

called *trochas*. In NdS, about 72 percent of the Venezuelan population has irregular status.⁴ Indeed, one U.S. government official guessed that in fact there might be as many as 2 million Venezuelans now residing in Colombia. By any count, Colombia hosts the largest number of Venezuelan refugees and migrants, by far—about one-third of them.

Growing Threats to an Initial Welcome

Despite these large numbers, Colombia's response has been impressive from the start. At a time when governments around the world are building walls—literally and figuratively—to prevent foreigners' entry, Colombia has kept its borders open. The public and the government have expressed solidarity with Venezuelans, citing an obligation to reciprocate for the years in which Venezuela took in Colombian refugees. That rhetoric is manifest in policies meant to facilitate Venezuelans' access to rights and services and their ability to regularize their status. The government acknowledges the need for medium- and long-term solutions to promote integration, recognizing the benefits it will bring to both displaced Venezuelans and host communities.

However, long a refugee-sending country, Colombia was not prepared for the pressures created by such a large and rapid population influx. The current challenges will only intensify as the number of Venezuelans inside Colombia and the extent of their needs grow. Those outcomes are inevitable for several reasons. First, there is no end in sight to Venezuela's political turmoil. Meanwhile, the

1. "Refugees and Migrants from Venezuela – Response for Venezuelans," R4V Coordination Platform for Refugees and Migrants from Venezuela, accessed December 13, 2019, United Nations, <https://r4v.info/en/situations/platform>.

2. Juan Pablo Varsky, "Para Finales de 2020 Habrá 7 Millones de Migrantes Venezolanos, Según ACNUR," CNN Español, September 30, 2019, <https://cnnespanol.cnn.com/video/venezuela-migracion-acnur-naciones-unidas-exodo-perspectivas-buenos-aires-cnnee/>.

3. "Refugees and Migrants from Venezuela – Response for Venezuelans – Colombia," R4V Coordination Platform for Refugees and Migrants from Venezuela, accessed December 13, 2019, <https://r4v.info/en/situations/platform/location/7511>.

4. Grupo Interagencial sobre Flujos Migratorios Mixtos (GIFMM) Norte de Santander, "Contexto Refugiados y Migrantes," UN Staff presentation to Refugees International, September 2019, Slide 2.

humanitarian situation there is deteriorating, driving out increasingly desperate people. They tend to be poorer and less educated, without social networks on which to draw for support, and in more critical health conditions. More families are arriving, as well as elderly and disabled individuals unable to get the care they need at home. This demographic shift has increased the demand on Colombia's systems. In addition, some neighboring host countries—most recently Ecuador and Peru—have introduced new visa requirements for Venezuelans that many are unable to meet. As a result, people who had planned to move through Colombia instead find themselves blocked there.

On top of these growing numbers and needs, the Colombian government must also attend to nearly 8 million of its own citizens who remain internally displaced by domestic conflict. In 2016, the government signed a peace agreement with the largest guerrilla group in the conflict—the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC). However, dissatisfaction with the government's implementation of that deal has been a growing source of frustration among both former FARC members and the broader Colombian population, even fueling massive protests in November 2019. Moreover, a number of other armed groups not part of the agreement continue to operate. They dominate areas where the government's presence is largely absent, primarily along the border. Venezuelans arriving in these areas are vulnerable to harassment, exploitation, and recruitment. Many settle in the same communities where Colombian internally displaced people (IDPs) reside, setting the two populations up to compete for resources.

In the year since Refugees International's first visit, the Venezuelan population in Colombia increased from about 1 million to more than

1.4 million. Meanwhile, in NdS Department alone, the UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA) registered many more victims of the armed conflict, including IDPs.⁵ Many have faced cases of double and even triple victimization.

Without additional support, the government cannot fully implement, maintain, and extend the generous policies it has introduced for Venezuelans—or also address the needs of its own population. Refugees International identified these risks during its first mission to Colombia in October 2018. Upon returning in March 2019, an RI team heard that although the government had sustained a positive approach, many of the shortcomings that had existed six months before remained. Moreover, the humanitarian situation along Colombia's border with Venezuela had continued to deteriorate. Nevertheless, both crises remain relatively underreported and underfunded.

The Regional Response

South American states have acknowledged the need to develop a truly regional, coordinated response to the displacement resulting from Venezuela's internal crisis. In September 2018, the Quito Process was established to allow governments to exchange information and promote best practices regarding the response to the humanitarian situation.⁶ Each meeting has promoted harmonizing policies that facilitate Venezuelans' regularization and integration, issued promises to guarantee human rights, and appealed for greater international support to do so.

In practice, however, many states have failed to fulfill the promises made in Quito. For example, although some South American

5. Equipo Local de Coordinación (ELC) Norte de Santander, "Contexto Humanitario-Norte de Santander," United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA), Staff presentation to Refugees International, September 2019, Slide 5.

6. The Quito Process is formally the International Technical Meeting on Human Mobility of Venezuelan Nationals.

RESEARCH OVERVIEW

Refugees International first traveled to Colombia to study the effects of the Venezuelan displacement crisis in October 2018. This launched a regional series that has since covered host country responses in Trinidad and Tobago, Curaçao, and Ecuador.

In March 2019, concerned about complex regional dynamics and intensifying pressures on Colombia's government, a Refugees International team conducted a one-week follow-up mission to examine the impact of those developments.

In September 2019, a team of Refugees International staff returned to Colombia with 12 members of the Refugees International Board of Directors. The delegation traveled to Cúcuta and Bogotá, and its suburb Soacha. They met with Colombian government officials at the national and local levels, U.S. government representatives, international and national nongovernmental organizations (NGOs), civil society organizations, and displaced Venezuelans and Colombians.

Previously, Refugees International was deeply engaged in reporting on Colombia's internal displacement crisis. From 2005 to 2016, it issued leading analysis and recommendations to address the plight of Colombians displaced by civil war, and the challenges they continued to face in its aftermath.

countries have technically kept their borders open, their new entry restrictions have effectively closed the door to Venezuelans. One UN official in Cúcuta described the resulting "cork effect," warning of the pressure building up inside Colombia as a result of the impeded flow. If that pressure becomes overwhelming and prompts Colombia to impose its own restrictions, Venezuelans will be left without any options.

Many of them, unwilling or unable to remain in Colombia, choose to proceed through irregular channels, which leaves them without access to rights and protections. The restrictions thus alter migration flows, force individuals into risky situations, and even separate families. Ultimately, these outcomes highlight

that restrictive border policies only increase migrants' vulnerability and effectively give states less control of their borders.

The region has, however, demonstrated that cooperation is possible. In August 2019, ten countries agreed to coordinate an effort to provide regional vaccination cards to Venezuelan migrants.⁷ Previously, the absence of documentation or shared record keeping meant Venezuelans who traveled from country to country could be vaccinated two or more times. This initiative should both improve health care for Venezuelans and ensure better use of resources. A senior representative of the Organization of American States (OAS) said he hoped it could set a precedent for future collaboration.

7. The agreement was reached unanimously by Argentina, Canada, Colombia, Dominican Republic, Ecuador, Haiti, Panama, Paraguay, Peru, and the United States.

Despite this positive example, regional policy harmonization remains an elusive—albeit increasingly essential—goal. Colombia, because of its geographic position and strength in resisting others’ restrictive reflexes thus far, is bearing the impact of this crisis.

The International Response

In December 2018, the UN issued the Refugee and Migrant Response Plan for Venezuela (RMRP) to appeal for funding and coordinate a comprehensive response to the displacement crisis.⁸ The first of its kind in Latin America, it is coordinated jointly by the UN Refugee Agency (UNHCR) and the International Organization for Migration (IOM) through the Regional Platform for Refugees and Migrants from Venezuela.⁹ In Colombia, the Interagency Group on Mixed Migration Flows (GIFMM, for its Spanish name) serves as the national manifestation of this regional platform.

UN officials acknowledge that the Platform had a challenging start. However, it made progress as it became more fully operational. It has sought to strengthen its coordination function within countries and encourage best practices across them. This includes efforts to improve engagement with civil society actors, who add critical value as both service providers and information gatherers. The Platform also provides technical support to host country governments and regional initiatives,

including the Quito Process, and advocates for more support from foreign donors and development actors.

Underfunding remains the biggest obstacle to implementing an effective response. For 2019, RMRP funding requirements amounted to nearly \$738 million. As of November 1, 2019, only 52 percent of those funds had been received.¹⁰ Meanwhile, the needs for 2020 are nearly double, at \$1.35 billion.¹¹ The U.S. government has been the largest donor by far, contributing 76.3 percent of the funds received in 2019 compared to the European Union’s (EU) 5.0 percent. This amount is far from enough.

Development actors also have an important role to play. In Colombia, the government recognizes that the social and economic impact of Venezuelan displacement will be long-term. The increase in Venezuelans settling there creates new demands for labor market access, financial inclusion, and other economic solutions. However, stakeholders worry that not enough is being done to respond accordingly.

In January 2019, the World Bank announced that Colombia would be eligible for the Global Concessional Financing Facility (GCFF), created to support projects in middle-income countries hosting large refugee populations.¹² The first GCFF grant to Colombia, for \$31.5 million, was approved in May 2019 to improve

8. “Regional Refugee and Migrant Response Plan (RMRP) for Refugees and Migrants from Venezuela, January–December 2019,” R4V Coordination Platform for Refugees and Migrants from Venezuela, accessed December 13, 2019, <http://reporting.unhcr.org/sites/default/files/2019%20RMRP%20Venezuela%20%28December%202018%29.pdf>.

9. At its launch, the Regional Platform included 95 organizations covering 16 countries and four areas of focus: direct emergency assistance, protection, socioeconomic and cultural integration, and strengthening capacities in the receiving countries.

10. “Regional Refugee and Migrant Response Plan – Venezuela Situation, Funding Update 01 November 2019,” R4V Coordination Platform for Refugees and Migrants from Venezuela, accessed December 14, 2019, <https://data2.unhcr.org/en/documents/download/72090>.

11. “Regional Refugee and Migrant Response Plan (RMRP) for Refugees and Migrants from Venezuela, January–December 2020,” R4V Coordination Platform, accessed December 13, 2019, <https://reliefweb.int/sites/reliefweb.int/files/resources/72254.pdf>.

12. The World Bank, “Colombia Eligible for Global Concessional Financing Facility Support for Inflows of Venezuelan Nationals and Hosting Communities,” press release no: 2019/118/LAC, January 24, 2019, <https://www.worldbank.org/en/news/press-release/2019/01/24/colombia-eligible-for-global-concessional-financing-facility-support-for-inflows-of-venezuelan-nationals-and-hosting-communities>.

access to jobs and services for Venezuelans and host communities.¹³ The Inter-American Development Bank (IDB) created a similar special grant facility in May 2019.¹⁴ In October 2019, it announced a partnership with the U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID) that will provide \$13.5 million to “crowd-source, fund, and scale innovative solutions” that support Venezuelans inside and outside of the country, as well as host communities.¹⁵

VENEZUELAN IN COLOMBIA—GREATEST NEEDS AND POLICY RESPONSES

The needs of Venezuelan refugees and migrants in Colombia vary from urgent humanitarian assistance to longer-term integration support. As Colombia increasingly becomes a destination rather than a transit country, the response must give more attention to the latter without neglecting the former.

Emergency Response

Citing the dearth and prohibitive cost of essential goods in Venezuela, many individuals told Refugees International that they came to Colombia to find food and medicine. Upon crossing the Simón Bolívar Internation-

al Bridge into Cúcuta, individuals come to an Assistance and Orientation Point (punto de asistencia y orientación, PAO). Refugees International visited this space, where UNHCR, IOM, the United Nations Children’s Fund (UNICEF), the Colombian Red Cross, and several nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) have set up aid tents with the support of Migración Colombia, the national migration authority. Individuals can get vaccines and other medical treatments, blankets, and nutrition and hygiene kits at these tents. They can also learn about their rights in Colombia, available services, options for onward travel, and other referrals and information.

Just beyond the border, in the adjacent neighborhood of La Parada, there are additional services. A health clinic offers pre- and postnatal care, treatment for chronic diseases, and dental care, as well as psychological support. A local church group has set up a food kitchen that serves 8,000 meals per day. Colombian and Venezuelan volunteers do the cooking, serving, and cleaning. One Venezuelan man with whom an RI staffer spoke said that although he had a permit to work legally in Colombia, he preferred to work at the kitchen in exchange for his meals. There, he felt welcome and was doing something good to help others. Outside, he said, it could be difficult to find a job even with the required papers because employers discriminate against Venezuelans. To support their family, he and his wife also prepare and sell food on the street.

In addition to these emergency services, Venezuelans in Colombia are also in need of shelter. In warmer climates as in

13. The World Bank, “US\$31.5 Million to Help Improve Services for Migrants from Venezuela and Host Communities in Colombia,” press release no: 2019/156/LAC, April 12, 2019, <https://www.worldbank.org/en/news/press-release/2019/04/12/us315-million-to-help-improve-services-for-migrants-from-venezuela-and-host-communities-in-colombia>.

14. Inter-American Development Bank (IDB), “IDB Approves Grant Funds for Countries Receiving Migrants in Latin America and Caribbean,” news release, May 7, 2019, <https://www.iadb.org/en/news/idb-approves-grant-funds-countries-receiving-migrants-latin-america-and-caribbean>.

15. United States Agency for International Development (USAID), “USAID and the Inter-American Development Bank Launch \$13.5 Million Innovation Challenge for Venezuelans Across Latin America and the Caribbean,” press release, October 21, 2019, <https://www.usaid.gov/news-information/press-releases/oct-21-2019-usaid-and-inter-american-development-bank-launch-135-million>.

Cúcuta, Venezuelans sleep outside, making homelessness a visible problem. The city offers few opportunities—unemployment is high, the informal economy dominates, public services are inadequate, and local government revenue is low. Therefore unwilling to stay in Cúcuta but unable to afford transportation elsewhere, Venezuelans travel by foot to bigger cities or other countries. The journey from Cúcuta to Ecuador, for example, takes approximately two weeks.

Shelter is a particular concern for these *caminantes*, or walkers, who trek along dangerous highways and over frigid mountain roads. IOM operates just nine temporary shelters along the route to provide refuge. Those without access are vulnerable to harsh weather, assault, and violent conflict. Women and youth are especially at risk of trafficking and recruitment by armed groups.

The UN estimates that 93 percent of *caminantes* have irregular status.¹⁶ In December 2018, the government sought to provide some legal protection to them by introducing a temporary transit permit (PIP-TT)¹⁷ that gives foreigners 15 days to travel through and exit Colombia. However, humanitarian workers and Venezuelans with whom the RI team spoke said relatively few *caminantes* knew about this permit.

Protection Challenges for Women and Girls

Venezuelan women and girls are disproportionately affected by displacement. They are vulnerable to trafficking both in transit and once they arrive. Risks are especially high for those who cannot regularize their status; unable to secure

formal employment, they may resort to sex work or survival sex to support themselves and their families.¹⁸ Sexual and gender-based violence (SGBV) is prevalent, and NGOs report that the majority of victims are underage. In addition, the stress of displacement can exacerbate domestic violence problems, often with severe consequences for children.

A women's rights advocacy organization told Refugees International that victims of SGBV who are in Colombia irregularly often do not report their cases out of fear of legal consequences for their migratory status. Meanwhile, pre-existing systemic gaps in Colombia's referral pathways mean that those who do file reports still often fail to find recourse. When seeking help, some have been denied care because of discrimination against and stigmatization of Venezuelan women. Male Colombian humanitarian workers in Cúcuta noted that Latin America's machista culture and local governments' failure to recognize gender-based problems create obstacles to addressing these issues.

Limited access to contraception and high rates of SGBV have led to a large number of pregnancies among Venezuelans, even as difficulty in accessing prenatal care results in high rates of maternal and infant mortality. The lack of pre- and postnatal care, and for sexual and reproductive health in general, is a problem that begins in Venezuela and persists once in Colombia. One NGO shared the story of a 15-year-old girl who entered Colombia using a *trocha* controlled by armed groups to access prenatal care. Another spoke of women walking for hours inside Colombia just to access obstetric and gynecological care.

16. "GIFMM Presentation."

17. In Spanish, the Permiso de Ingreso y Permanencia-Permiso de Tránsito Temporal (PIP-TT).

18. Devon Cone and Melanie Teff, "Searching for Safety: Confronting Sexual Exploitation and Trafficking of Venezuelan Women and Girls," Refugees International, August 5, 2019, <https://www.refugeesinternational.org/reports/2019/8/2/searching-for-safety-venezuela-trafficking>.



Caminantes, also known as walkers, cross dangerous highways and mountain roads to seek shelter and safety on their journey from Cúcuta to Ecuador. Photo Credit: Refugees International.

Registration and Regularization

From the start, the Colombian government recognized that displaced individuals are most vulnerable when they cannot regularize their status in the country to which they flee. It also understood that regularization would increase its ability to monitor flows across and within its borders.

Thus, as a first step, the government of Colombia sought to legitimize the frequent movement immediately around its border. In May 2017, it created border mobility cards (TMF)¹⁹ for people living inside Venezuela along Colombia's northeastern border. TMF allow them to enter Colombia regularly and

stay within a delimited border area for up to seven consecutive days. These “pendular” migrants cross frequently—even daily—to access basic goods and services unavailable in Venezuela, go to school, or visit relatives, and then return home. Each day, there are about 30,000–40,000 such crossings, which have long been used as a coping mechanism by populations on both sides of the border.²⁰ As of September 2019, the government had issued 4.2 million TMF.²¹

The Colombian government also introduced extraordinary regularization measures for Venezuelans who sought to settle in Colombia. As of July 2019, about 677,000 Venezuelans—or just under half of those seeking to settle—had regular status in Colombia. Of those, about 88 percent held a special

19. In Spanish, Tarjetas de movilidad fronteriza (TMF).

20. Fernando Mudarra and Orlando Ortiz, “Cúcuta, el epicentro de la emergencia migratoria de Venezuela,” *El País*, March 23, 2019, https://elpais.com/elpais/2019/03/19/planeta_futuro/1552999963_663150.html.

21. “GIFMM Colombia: Venezuelan Refugees and Migrants – September 2019,” R4V Coordination Platform for Refugees and Migrants from Venezuela, November 7, 2019, accessed December 13, 2019, <https://data2.unhcr.org/en/documents/details/72042>.

residency permit (PEP).²² First introduced in 2017, the PEP accords Venezuelans regular status for up to two years and grants access to basic health services, education and work, and eligibility to enroll in the social security system.²³

Batches of the permits have been issued over the course of almost two years. Initially, only Venezuelans who entered at official border crossings with valid passports were eligible. In April 2018, the government opened a mass registration process for undocumented Venezuelans (RAMV) to cover those who had entered irregularly.²⁴ It subsequently made registrants eligible for a PEP. The most recent round, however, again was available only to individuals who entered regularly before December 17, 2018; it closed in late April 2019. In May 2019, the government announced that PEP I holders whose permits were soon to expire would have until September 2019 to renew them for another two years. However, the government has not indicated whether it will conduct another registration process or issue new PEPs in the future.

The Colombian government has taken other steps to facilitate Venezuelans' regularization and integration, including recognizing expired passports and reducing or eliminating processing fees. Most recently,

the government announced it would grant Colombian citizenship to babies born to Venezuelan parents in Colombia since August 2015.²⁵ Because Colombia does not accord birthright citizenship and it is impossible to register Venezuelan births abroad, the measure is critical in preventing a crisis of statelessness. Officials expect it to benefit more than 24,000 babies.

Health

Health care is not only an immediate need—Venezuelans need services beyond the border area. Many suffer from chronic illnesses, including cancer, diabetes, hypertension, and tuberculosis. Since the influx began, hospitals and medical groups report treating increased cases of skin diseases, sexually transmitted diseases (STDs), HIV, malaria, and infant malnutrition.²⁶ Even measles and diphtheria, once eliminated in Colombia, have re-emerged.²⁷

In addition to basic health care services, individuals whose lives have been upended by displacement or who experienced trauma before or during their move need psychosocial support. Unfortunately, mental health care is often neglected—limited resources may not provide it or individuals do not seek it out. All people in Colombia have the right to

22. In Spanish, Permiso Especial de Permanencia (PEP).

23. The PEP was introduced in 2017 in response to the influx of displaced Venezuelans. It is valid for 90 days at a time, automatically renewable for up to two years. It is issued by Migración Colombia at no cost. The PEP is not a visa or valid identity document and does not replace a passport. PEPs have been issued in four rounds over the course of almost two years: August 3–October 31, 2017 (68,875 PEPs issued); February 6–June 7, 2018 (112,617 issued); April–June, 2018 (281,608 issued of the 442,462 RAMV registrants made eligible); and December 27, 2018–April 27, 2019. As of June 30, 2019, PEP holders accounted for 88 percent of the 676,093 Venezuelans with regular status in Colombia—the other 12 percent held visas or other permits.

24. The Administrative Registry for Venezuelan Migrants (Registro Administrativo de Migrantes Venezolanos, RAMV) was a registration exercise for undocumented Venezuelans that took place from April to June 2018. Under the program, 442,000 undocumented Venezuelans were registered and subsequently made eligible for a PEP. The process was conducted by Colombia's National Risk Management Unit (Unidad Nacional de Gestión del Riesgo) with help from IOM and UNHCR.

25. "Estado Colombiano Concede la Nacionalidad a Niños Nacidos en Colombia, Hijos de Migrantes Venezolanos, para Proteger sus Derechos," Presidency of the Republic, Government of Colombia, August 5, 2019, accessed December 13, 2019, <https://id.presidencia.gov.co/Paginas/prensa/2019/190805-Estado-colombiano-nacionalidad-ninos-nacidos-Colombia-hijos-migrantes-venezolanos-protoger-sus-derechos.aspx>.

26. Information received during Refugees International visit to Hospital Universitario Erasmo Meoz in Cúcuta, Colombia, September 2019.

27. Snyder, Michael, "The Venezuela Crisis and Infectious Disease Spread," Outbreak Observatory, February 28, 2019, <https://www.outbreakobservatory.org/outbreakthursday-1/2/28/2019/the-venezuela-crisis-and-infectious-disease-spread>.

emergency health care, regardless of their migration status. In 2017, the government declared that public hospitals must provide emergency treatment to Venezuelan patients free of charge. It committed to reimbursing them for these services but has yet to compensate many providers, leaving them in significant debt. At Hospital Universitario Erasmo Meoz in Cúcuta, Refugees International heard how this financial strain was hampering its ability to serve all in need.

Non-emergency medical care requires either proof of insurance in Colombia or out-of-pocket payment. Those costs are prohibitive for many Venezuelans who arrive with few financial means; moreover, they encounter difficulty in securing work or accessing credit.

Education

By law, children in Colombia have the right to free basic public education up to grade nine, regardless of their migratory status. In practice, school administrators do not always know about or recognize that right. Access is generally easier for Venezuelans who have a PEP.

In April 2019, there were at least 327,000 children from Venezuela living in Colombia.²⁸ However, only approximately 130,000 Venezuelan children were enrolled in school there, including about 3,000 who cross from Venezuela daily to attend classes.²⁹ However, Colombia's education system was under-resourced and overburdened even before the influx of Venezuelans. The arrival of so many of them has exacerbated shortages of space, teachers, educational materials, and other resources, leaving schools unable to accommodate new students.

In Nds Department alone, 51 percent of the 41,600 school-age Venezuelan children were out of school as of August 2019.³⁰ Some parents do not enroll their children because they are uncertain if they will stay in the area or because the children have already fallen behind and struggle to perform academically. For others, the fees that some schools charge for uniforms and materials are prohibitive. Others cannot get seats because of extreme overcrowding or find that the nearest school is too far away. For children living in Barrio Las Delicias, a settlement on the outskirts of Cúcuta where Colombian IDPs and displaced Venezuelans reside together, the nearest school is about 15 to 20 minutes away by foot. However, none of the four children in a Venezuelan family the RI team visited was enrolled—the nearest school was above capacity and the only alternative, in Cúcuta, was too far to walk to.

Livelihoods

Venezuelans with whom Refugees International spoke said that above all, they wanted jobs. All of them were eager to support themselves and many had left relatives in Venezuela who counted on their remittances. As one Venezuelan woman in Cúcuta put it, “A job opens doors to the rest [of what we need].” However, only Venezuelans with a visa, PEP, or complementary permit (PECP³¹) can work legally. The creation of the PECP in July 2019 newly gave this right to rejected asylum seekers. Those whose asylum applications are still being processed still face barriers to employment, however. Although the government recently removed a condition that explicitly prohibited asylum seekers from working, it does require them to obtain

28. UNICEF, “More than 300,000 Venezuelan Children in Colombia Need Humanitarian Assistance – UNICEF,” press release, April 29, 2019, <https://www.unicef.org/press-releases/more-300000-venezuelan-children-colombia-need-humanitarian-assistance-unicef>.

29. UNICEF, “More than 300,000 Venezuelan children in Colombia need humanitarian assistance.”

30. “GIFMM Presentation,” Slide 14.

31. In Spanish, Permiso Especial Complementario de Permanencia (PECP).



On the outskirts of Cúcuta, Colombians displaced by conflict established informal settlements more than a decade ago. Now, Venezuelans crossing the border are finding refuge there, including in “solidarity homes” hosted by Colombian IDPs. Photo Credit: Refugee International.

a work visa to do so. Unlike the PEP or PECP, a visa comes at a cost—one that most Venezuelans cannot afford. The situation creates a major disincentive to seeking international protection.

Moreover, stakeholders told Refugees International that support for livelihoods was the biggest gap in the response to the crisis. The vast majority of Venezuelans work in the informal economy, either because they lack documents or cannot find jobs despite having them. This situation leaves them vulnerable to exploitation—Venezuelans with whom the RI team spoke said they had been paid less than their Colombian counterparts or, in some cases, not at all.

Others were not able to find work in the professions they had at home. Refugees International interviewed Venezuelans in Cúcuta and Bogotá who had held jobs as professors, social workers, and engineers back home. In Colombia, however, they could not get their credentials certified. As one woman in Cúcuta put it, “There is a vicious cycle—you cannot get work if you don’t have papers, but you can’t pay for the papers if you can’t get work.”

Transitional assistance in the form of cash transfers can help Venezuelans afford such costs and stabilize their situation. Nevertheless, aid workers told Refugees International that the government was resistant to cash transfer programs because it feared beneficiaries would resort to relying on this aid. That assumption contradicts the sentiment that Venezuelans expressed to the team. Meanwhile, resources for more sustainable livelihoods programs are severely

lacking. A consortium of NGOs is working, with U.S. government support, to push for cash transfer programs and advocate for livelihoods to receive a place at the top of the government’s agenda.

In a welcome move, the Ministry of Labor announced in May 2019 a plan to begin issuing special temporary work permits to undocumented Venezuelans.³² Individuals with a written job offer from an employer would be eligible to apply for a PEP-FF³³ to secure employment in the formal sector, and with it, guarantees of a minimum wage and access to health and pension programs.³⁴ Unfortunately, as of December 2019, the government had yet to sign the proposal into law and begin issuing such permits.

POLICY VERSUS PRACTICE—LIMITATIONS AND CHALLENGES IN IMPLEMENTATION

Despite the government’s positive rhetoric and policies, the reality for most Venezuelans falls short of what it promises. Above all, Colombia lacks the resources to support the millions of Venezuelans residing in and transiting through the country. Although it has been the primary recipient of international support for the response—Colombia had received about 47 percent of the funds committed as of November 2019—that aid has not filled the

32. Daniela Pastori, “En Junio Comienza el Permiso Especial Temporal de Trabajo,” *El Heraldo*, May 29, 2019, <https://www.elheraldo.co/economia/en-junio-comienza-el-permiso-especial-temporal-de-trabajo-636768>.

33. Originally proposed as the Permiso Especial de Trabajo (PETT), a new proposal in November 2019—expected to be signed by the end of the year—put forth the Permiso Especial de Permanencia para el Fomento de la Formalización, or PEP-FF.

34. Reuters, “Colombia Plans Temporary Work Permit for Undocumented Venezuelans,” *Voice of America (VOA)*, July 8, 2019, <https://www.voanews.com/americas/colombia-plans-temporary-work-permit-undocumented-venezuelans>.



The Simón Bolívar International Bridge is the primary crossing point between Venezuela and Colombia's northeastern border just outside Cúcuta. Signs point to the Assistance and Orientation Point where international organizations provide emergency services, and to government passport control. Photo Credit: Refugees International.

gap.³⁵ Funding requirements for Colombia are the largest in the region, at about \$315 million in 2019, and only 57 percent is covered.³⁶ For 2020, the UN has estimated that the response in Colombia will require \$739.2 million.³⁷ In addition, several other factors create obstacles to Venezuelans fully accessing the rights and services they are due.

Local Governments Continue to Struggle

Local governments warn of a disconnect between the national government's directives and their capacity to implement them. Nationally determined budgets often do not adequately account for the scale of local needs. A local government official in Nds Department told Refugees International that

the increased investments it had received since the start of the crisis were not only insufficient, but not directed to address the most pressing needs. They were intended to deliver immediate humanitarian relief rather than create productive opportunities, support integration, and provide educational services and psychosocial support. Promoting longer-term development is critical in a region that already has the country's highest rate of unemployment, sees severe overcrowding in public institutions, and is grappling with both Venezuelan and Colombian displacement.

The official emphasized the need for better coordination to distribute limited resources efficiently, and for better data collection to inform that effort. Otherwise, he warned, "isolated efforts will have isolated results." He also urged the Ministry of Foreign Affairs

35. "Regional Refugee and Migrant Response Plan – Venezuela Situation, Funding Update 01 November 2019."

36. "Regional Refugee and Migrant Response Plan – Venezuela Situation."

37. "Regional Refugee and Migrant Response Plan (RMRP) for Refugees and Migrants from Venezuela."

to strengthen consultations with local actors, who know the situation best. An aid worker in Bogotá emphasized that message, noting “The problem [of responding to displaced Venezuelans] exists everywhere in Colombia, but plays out differently in different contexts.”

Lack of Information

Gaps in providing and disseminating information also limit the effectiveness of otherwise sound policy. The mass registration exercise in 2018 is a telling example. Although 442,000 undocumented Venezuelans registered, hundreds of thousands more did not. They may not have been aware of the process, not understood the value of registering, or feared legal consequences upon presenting themselves to do so. The government subsequently decided that those who registered would be eligible to acquire a PEP, giving them access to additional services. However, many registrants did not realize they had to take additional steps to actually obtain the permit. Even after the deadline was extended, only 281,612 registrants solicited their PEP.

Aid workers added that inadequate information among Colombians also creates challenges. Some Colombian employers, health care professionals, and educators turn Venezuelans away because they are unfamiliar with documents like the PEP and unaware of Venezuelans’ rights.

Information about asylum is also lacking. Humanitarian workers at the Simón Bolívar Bridge in Cúcuta said that few Venezuelans request asylum because they are unaware or unfamiliar with the concept. Others mistakenly think that doing so would mean they could not return to Venezuela. Better information could help Venezuelans benefit from international protection.

Ultimately, guaranteeing the right to information requires not only providing clear, full

information, but engaging the most effective channels to disseminate it. Although government entities are responsible for doing so, many Venezuelans may be unfamiliar with those institutions or fear approaching authorities for help. A strong reliance on civil society organizations—particularly NGOs with a presence throughout the country and church groups with strong community ties—is critical to ensure that information reaches all of those for whom it is intended.

Social Tensions and Discrimination

Although Colombian communities have largely welcomed Venezuelans, discrimination is a problem. Parents report being turned away from schools when trying to enroll their children, while children who do go to school are often bullied. Most Venezuelans with whom Refugees International spoke had stories of difficulties in receiving proper care from medical providers, being denied work by potential employers, or having trouble securing leases from landlords. When asked why they had been rejected, the answer was simple: “my accent.”

As Venezuelans continue to arrive, tensions with host communities are starting to rise. In the informal settlements on the outskirts of Cúcuta, Colombian IDPs host Venezuelans in hogares solidarios, or “solidarity homes.” Refugees International spoke to one Colombian woman who explained that, having had first-hand experience of the difficulties of displacement as an IDP, she simply wanted to help others in need: “We had to start from scratch, so we know how hard it is. In my community, we were raised to help the less fortunate regardless of where they are from.” However, both she and the Venezuelans she was hosting acknowledged a shift taking hold in town— one Venezuelan woman living there said tensions with the local community had become more palpable and the security situation was worsening.

Wary of this situation, Colombia's national and local governments have launched campaigns and issued strong messages to counter xenophobia. One local group in Cúcuta is using art and music to bring Colombians and Venezuelans together and empower both displaced populations. Nevertheless, a risk remains that Colombia will reverse its positive reception of Venezuelans if increasing pressures exacerbate xenophobia.

In late November 2019, that threat became more palpable as massive strikes and protests—on a scale not seen in decades—rocked Colombia. Protestors voiced a number of grievances in addition to the government's failure to implement the peace agreement, including proposed pension reforms and increased attacks on activists and political candidates. Immediately, the protests triggered a backlash against Venezuelans, who were blamed for incidents of looting and vandalism.³⁸ The UN mission in Colombia was concerned enough to issue a statement condemning the sharp rise in xenophobia.³⁹ However, the government's expulsion of 59 Venezuelans accused of taking part in the disturbances only stoked public fear and scapegoating.⁴⁰ The situation—still developing at the time of publication—bodes poorly for the fate of Venezuelans seeking refuge in Colombia.

CRISES COLLIDE— VENEZUELAN INFLUX INTO POST-CONFLICT COLOMBIA

Further complicating the situation of Venezuelans in Colombia is that they are entering in the midst of Colombia's continuing internal conflict and IDP crisis—dynamics separate from, but not unrelated to, the late 2019 protests. Despite the 2016 peace agreement, continuing violence harms civilians and triggers displacement in the same regions where Venezuelans arrive. In turn, that influx of Venezuelans—whose situation leaves them susceptible to exploitation and recruitment—exacerbates Colombia's internal conflict by fueling armed groups' illicit activities. The two crises are “colliding,” blurring the lines between at-risk populations and intensifying the humanitarian consequences for all.

Humanitarian actors warn that the needs of Colombian IDPs have been neglected. In 2016, when donors concluded that they could reduce their humanitarian funding in light of the peace agreement, the number of victims of armed conflict actually increased. Resources for the IDP response dropped rapidly—from \$5.3 million in 2016 to \$2.2 million in 2018⁴¹—whereas the number of victims of armed conflict increased rapidly—from a low of 30,000 in the latter half of 2016 to more than 165,000 in 2018. The Venezuelan crisis has exacerbated the trend.

38. Steven Grattan, “Protests in Colombia Spark Backlash against Venezuelan Migrants,” Reuters, December 1, 2019, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-colombia-strike-venezuela/protests-in-colombia-spark-backlash-against-venezuelan-migrants-idUSKBN1Y516U>.

39. “Naciones Unidas Condena el Incremento de la Xenofobia contra la Población Venezolana en Colombia,” United Nations Colombia, November 30, 2019, accessed December 13, 2019, <https://nacionesunidas.org.co/noticias/naciones-unidas-condena-el-incremento-de-la-xenofobia-contra-la-poblacion-venezolana-en-colombia/>.

40. “Colombia to Deport Dozens of Venezuelans who Joined Protests,” SBS News, updated November 26, 2019, <https://www.sbs.com.au/news/colombia-to-deport-dozens-of-venezuelans-who-joined-protests>.

41. “ELC Presentation,” Slide 10.



A man sitting in an informal settlement on the outskirts of Cúcuta, Colombia. Photo Credit: Refugees International.

The government and donors have continually redirected funding from the internal crisis even as Venezuelans themselves became victims of the conflict.

Critics who argue that the government has failed to fully implement the peace agreement also question its commitment and capability to do so. The fact that the issue topped protesters' agendas in November 2019 demonstrated that the sentiment was widespread. It further focused international attention on the situation, which was first drawn in August 2019. At that time, a former FARC guerilla leader had issued a renewed call to arms in retaliation for the government's failure to fulfill the terms of the peace accord. The Duque administration dismissed the threats as coming from a small minority of ex-FARC members and pledged to continue implementing the peace deal. Local actors and representatives of the UN and U.S. government did not expect the events to dramatically change the course of the government's response. However, they did

underscore the fragility of the peace process and its failure to engender national stability.

International Engagement

Further complicating the situation is the UN's 2016 decision to wind down the presence of OCHA in Colombia. The office long had served as a trusted interlocutor responsible for coordinating relief efforts—particularly for Colombian IDPs—as the lead for the country's cluster system. Humanitarian actors with whom Refugees International spoke worried that its absence would exacerbate the neglect of the IDP population.

They also lamented that the GIFMM's mandate is limited to coordinating the response to Venezuelans and not addressing the needs of Colombian victims of conflict. This means that its efforts parallel the existing humanitarian architecture rather than complement it, leading to duplication and inefficiency. NGO workers lamented the time wasted in having to travel to separate meetings with the

same organizations to discuss similar efforts. Still, aid workers have resigned themselves to engaging with what has been established. “It’s the game in town, so I’ll play,” one NGO staffer sighed. UNHCR and IOM have acknowledged and sought to address the coordination challenges.

Refugees International welcomed news in April 2019 that, in line with its recommendations, OCHA’s leadership had decided to extend the office’s presence in Colombia. This step will help sustain attention on the internal humanitarian and displacement crises. However, the number of OCHA field offices was cut from 12 to two between 2015 and 2019, and the agency’s budget drastically reduced. The office therefore lacks the resources necessary to reach all affected areas of the country and carry out its critical work. Moreover, as one OCHA staffer pointed out, the government’s resistance to recognizing the internal crisis creates a more difficult operating environment for them.

Ultimately, without a streamlined and coordinated response that accounts for the interactions between the two crises—and provides the resources to implement it—a comprehensive and sustainable solution to Colombia’s dual displacement problems will remain out of reach. As one UN representative said, “The government is doing relatively well in addressing the migration crisis. But that’s not the whole picture.”

CONCLUSION

Reflecting on the complex interplay of crises in Colombia, one UN representative in Bogotá warned, “Colombia is a ticking time bomb.” Separately, a U.S. government representative likened the situation to a pot of boiling water, ready to bubble over. At the same time, all stakeholders recognize the unique

combination of capacity and political will needed to implement a humane and effective response to Venezuelan displacement.

Unfortunately, the Venezuelan displacement crisis remains underreported, underfunded, and in some ways misunderstood. The international community must reward countries like Colombia that are trying to do the right thing. At the same time, it must hold the Colombian government accountable for addressing its own humanitarian and displacement problems. Assistance for one population cannot come at the expense of another. Otherwise, the risk to the already endangered peace agreement will threaten Venezuelan and Colombian individuals’ search for lives of dignity and security—and the stability of the region as a whole.

The government and the international community must work together and with civil society to develop a holistic response that accounts for the interactions between both displacement crises. They should streamline new and existing mechanisms that capitalize on the robust infrastructure Colombia already has in place. Moreover, they must introduce longer-term integration and development support, even while continuing to meet urgent humanitarian needs. Ultimately, Colombia needs support to sustain and expand its response, and provide the protection and assistance due to all of the displaced within its borders.

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ABOUT REFUGEES INTERNATIONAL

Refugees International advocates for lifesaving assistance and protection for displaced people and promotes solutions to displacement crises around the world. We do not accept any government or UN funding, ensuring the independence and credibility of our work.

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