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The Venezuela Regional Migration Crisis

The deteriorating humanitarian situation in Venezuela has elevated congressional concerns about the country, which remains in a deep political and economic crisis under the authoritarian rule of President Nicolás Maduro. Even as Venezuela has experienced hyperinflation (the highest in the world), a rapid contraction of its economy, and severe shortages of food and medicine, President Maduro has refused to accept international humanitarian assistance. As conditions in the country deteriorate, increasing numbers of Venezuelans continue to leave for urgent reasons, including lack of food, medicine, and access to social services; political persecution; insecurity; and loss of income. As the pace of arrivals from Venezuela has quickened, neighboring countries, particularly Colombia, are straining to absorb a population that is often malnourished and in poor health. The spread of previously eradicated diseases, such as measles, is also a major regional concern. (For more information on the situation in Venezuela, see CRS Report R44841, *Venezuela: Background and U.S. Relations*.)

Figure 1. Venezuelan Migrants and Asylum Seekers: Flows to the Region and Beyond



Source: CRS.

Based on estimates from the U.N. High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), as of November 2018, more than 3 million Venezuelans were living outside the country. Of those, more than 2.3 million were estimated to have left after 2015. Although UNHCR states that most displaced Venezuelans are not considered refugees, a significant number are seen as needing humanitarian assistance and international protection. Host countries have been willing to

register some Venezuelan migrants so they can reside there legally, with access to social services, and perhaps work, for up to two years.

While more than half of Venezuelan migrants have stayed in Colombia, significant numbers have fled to Peru, Ecuador, Chile, Brazil, Argentina, Panama, Mexico, and the southern Caribbean (particularly Trinidad and Tobago). Between September 2014 and 2018, roughly 400,000 Venezuelans in the region and beyond (to the United States, Canada, Spain, and elsewhere) applied for political asylum (specific legal protection for which most migrants do not qualify.) See **Figure 1**. Responses to the Venezuelan arrivals vary by country and continue to evolve with events on the ground.

Humanitarian experts are most concerned about the roughly 60% of Venezuelans in neighboring countries who lack identification documents. The Venezuelan government has made it increasingly difficult for Venezuelans to obtain a valid passport. Without a passport, such persons often cannot secure alternative legal forms of stay in neighboring countries. Those who lack status are vulnerable to arrest and deportation by governments and to abuse by criminal groups, including human trafficking. Young children, indigenous communities, pregnant women, and the elderly are particularly at risk.

Regional and Global Migration and Asylum Policies

Venezuela's exodus is a significant displacement crisis for the Western Hemisphere, a region with some of the highest protection standards in the world for displaced and vulnerable persons. Neighboring countries are under pressure to examine their respective migration and asylum policies and to address, as a region, the legal status of Venezuelans who have fled their country. Although countries have generally welcomed Venezuelan arrivals, some have begun to tighten visa requirements and/or deported them. Several international organizations, including the Inter-American Commission on Human Rights and various U.N. entities, have raised concerns about instances of xenophobia against Venezuelans.

Most Latin American countries and the Caribbean are part of an ongoing forum that is based on the 1984 Cartagena Declaration on Refugees, which has an expanded definition of refugee that goes beyond the 1951 U.N. Convention Relating to the Status of Refugees and its 1967 Protocol, including indirect impacts driving displacement such as poverty, economic decline, inflation, violence, disease, food insecurity, and malnourishment. The Cartagena Declaration incorporated cooperative approaches to help meet the needs of the displaced. Following the commitments of the New York Declaration for Refugees and Migrants in 2016, and with ongoing efforts to finalize separate global compacts on

refugees and migration, experts urge timely and predictable funding from the international community to support efforts by host governments to assist Venezuelan migrants and the communities sheltering them.

International Humanitarian Response Framework

Since mid-2018, a shift has taken place in the international response structure for this crisis, the details of which are still being worked out. The U.N. Secretary-General appointed UNHCR and the International Organization for Migration (IOM) to coordinate the international response through the Regional Inter-Agency Coordination Platform for Refugees and Migrants from Venezuela, which includes U.N. entities, nongovernmental organizations, the Red Cross Movement, faith-based organizations, and civil society. Former Guatemalan diplomat and Vice President Eduardo Stein has been appointed the U.N. Joint Special Representative for Venezuelan Refugees and Migrants to promote dialogue and consensus in the region and beyond on the humanitarian response.

Impact on Colombia

Colombia has received the majority of Venezuelan migrants amid its own political transition and other pressures. Although it has begun to emerge from decades of civil conflict, Colombia faces ongoing violence by armed groups. The Colombia-Venezuela border covers 1,378 miles and has seven official border crossing points. Cúcuta is the main reception point for Venezuelan migrants entering Colombia. There are hundreds of unofficial points of entry on the border, which make it impossible to track all arrivals. The Colombian government estimates that there are 1 million Venezuelans throughout the country, but the actual figure is unknown. (Officials also say this is no longer only a border crisis as 60% of Venezuelans now live in other parts of Colombia.) The Colombian response focuses on four groups:

- **Border crossers** (est. 80,000 daily, 1.6 million have Border Crossing Cards) can receive food aid, attend school, and engage in economic activity.
- **Returning Colombians** from Venezuela (300,000 thus far) are being entered into the national registry, obtaining citizenship, and receiving full access to public services.
- **Venezuelans in Colombia** (more than 620,000 eligible for Temporary Residence Permit) giving them access to work, health, and education services for two years.
- **Venezuelans in transit** (500,000 from January-September 2018) are crossing Colombia, some on foot, and with urgent assistance needs.

The Colombian government estimates that the costs of providing emergency health care, education, vaccinations, and other services could exceed 0.5% of the country's GDP. Colombia has asked for more international aid, better donor coordination, and equal sharing of the response burden among countries. Ongoing conflict, violence, and criminality in parts of Colombia have added to the complexity of the humanitarian response, particularly in areas where these situations overlap. Aid agencies are particularly concerned about conditions in both Colombia's eastern and southern border regions (near Ecuador), where armed groups are active, as well as in Colombia's Catatumbo region near northwest Venezuela, where migrants are reportedly being used for smuggling and coca cultivation.

International and U.S. Humanitarian Assistance

U.N. agencies and other international humanitarian organizations have launched aid appeals (which to date remain only partially funded) for additional international humanitarian assistance to support vulnerable Venezuelans throughout the region and to assist governments and relief organizations responding to arrivals. The April 2018 U.N. Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (UNOCHA) appeal was for \$102.4 million. Separate appeals have also been put forward by other U.N. and non-U.N. humanitarian partners. The Regional Response Plan for Refugees and Migrants from Venezuela (RMRP), a new humanitarian appeal, is being prepared for a December 2018 launch.

The U.S. government is providing humanitarian and emergency food assistance and helping to coordinate and support regional response efforts. As of September 30, 2018, U.S. government humanitarian funding for the Venezuela regional response totaled approximately \$96.5 million for both FY2017 and FY2018 combined, of which \$54.8 million was for Colombia. (Humanitarian funding is drawn primarily from the global humanitarian accounts in annual Department of State/Foreign Operations appropriations acts.) In addition, the U.S. Navy hospital ship USNS *Comfort* is on an 11-week medical support deployment through the end of 2018 to work with government partners in Ecuador, Peru, Colombia, and Honduras, in part to assist with arrivals from Venezuela.

In Colombia, the U.S. response aims to help the Venezuelan arrivals as well as the local Colombian communities that are hosting them. In addition to humanitarian assistance, the United States is also providing \$37 million in bilateral assistance to support medium and longer-term efforts by Colombia to respond to the Venezuelan arrivals.

Issues for Congress

Congressional interest has focused on the U.S. humanitarian response in the region and the political situation in Venezuela as they relate to the increasing migration flows. To date in the 115th Congress, the House passed H.R. 2658 in December 2017, which would authorize humanitarian assistance for Venezuela. Similar but not identical bills, S. 1018 and S. 3486, were introduced in the Senate, respectively, in May 2017 and September 2018. Oversight is likely to continue on U.S. humanitarian assistance that is being provided, as well as on contingency planning for a crisis that could continue to expand.

Countries in the region (as well as the United States and humanitarian actors) remain keenly aware that an acute situation, such as the spread of disease (e.g., measles) or a sudden increase in arrival numbers in excess of a country's capacity, could affect border management and safety, and limit the acceptance of additional Venezuelans. How regional governments may react will be key to the ongoing management of the crisis.

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