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The Venezuela Regional Humanitarian Crisis and COVID-19

The deteriorating humanitarian situation in Venezuela has elevated congressional concerns about the country, which remains in a deep crisis under the authoritarian rule of President Nicolás Maduro. Even before the Coronavirus Disease 2019 (COVID-19) pandemic, Venezuelans were facing a lack of food, medicine and health, and access to social services. Political persecution, hyperinflation, loss of income, and oppressive poverty also contributed to a dire situation. According to household surveys, the percentage of Venezuelans living in poverty increased from 48.4% in 2014 to 96% in 2019 (80% in extreme poverty).

Millions require humanitarian assistance, with pregnant and nursing women, those with chronic illnesses, indigenous people, migrants, children under five, and people with disabilities particularly in need. In February 2020, the U.N. World Food Program (WFP) released an assessment showing that in 2019, 9.3 million Venezuelans were food insecure, with 2.3 million people at severe levels. Many Venezuelans reported that the price of food presented more of an obstacle than the availability of food. Many households did not have reliable access to potable water and reported interruptions in electrical service and gas supplies. With a collapsed health system, overall health indicators, particularly infant and maternal mortality rates, worsened. Previously eradicated diseases such as diphtheria and measles also became a major concern.

Displacement

As of August 2020, U.N. agencies estimated that more than 5.1 million Venezuelans had fled the country. Roughly 4.3 million (about 85%) of the refugees and migrants were hosted in Latin American and Caribbean countries (see **Table 1**), with more than 40% in Colombia. While 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. Although the U.N. High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) does not consider most Venezuelans to be refugees, it asserts that a significant number need humanitarian assistance, international protection, and opportunities to regularize their status. Border closures, quarantine orders, and other limitations on movement in place due to COVID-19 may affect displacement numbers.

Venezuela's exodus has become an unprecedented displacement crisis for the Western Hemisphere, which has in place some of the highest protection standards in the world for displaced and vulnerable persons. The countries in the region have been 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. More than 2.5 million Venezuelans in neighboring countries lack identification documents, making them vulnerable to exploitation. With separate global compacts on refugees and migration adopted in 2018, experts urge timely and predictable funding from the international community to support efforts by host governments to assist Venezuelan refugees and migrants and the communities sheltering them.

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



Source: CRS.

Coronavirus Disease 2019

COVID-19 emerged in Venezuela in mid-March 2020 and added a complicated layer to the country's humanitarian crisis. In general, vulnerable, displaced populations live in conditions that make them particularly susceptible to COVID-19 and present significant challenges to response and containment. The Pan American Health Organization and the U.N. Children's Fund have led the international COVID-19 response in Venezuela, prioritizing capacity-building support for hospitals as well as health, water, and sanitation interventions for vulnerable populations. In neighboring countries, UNHCR, the International Organization for Migration (IOM), and their partners have sought to address the immediate public health needs of refugees and migrants, as well as the displaced prompted by the virus, while trying to reduce the spread and conduct information and awareness campaigns.

COVID-19 prevention measures that restrict movement, such as physical distancing, quarantine orders, and border closures, have disrupted the informal economy, cross-border economic activity, and remittances. They have also made it difficult for Venezuelans to meet their basic needs. Reportedly, as of August 2020, as many as 95,000 Venezuelans may have attempted to return to Venezuela, particularly from Colombia, as loss of livelihoods and economic decline followed the pandemic.

Venezuelan returnees have presented challenges in border areas, particularly absent the establishment of a formal returns process. Many Venezuelans have used informal border crossings, which present protection risks due to the presence of armed groups. Venezuelan returnees, arriving primarily along borders Venezuela shares with Brazil and Colombia, are required to quarantine in temporary shelters for 14 days. Although some critical assistance has been provided at points of entry, relief agencies have expressed concern about Venezuela's capacity and willingness to ensure sufficient quarantine and health safety in the reintegration of returnees. Human Rights Watch and others have reported abuses of returning migrants by Venezuelan security forces.

International Humanitarian Response in Venezuela

Although in 2018 the Maduro government rejected large amounts of humanitarian assistance, beginning in 2019, it permitted U.N. humanitarian entities and partners to increase their humanitarian and protection activities. The U.N. Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (UNOCHA) set up its coordination structure, including regional hubs in the country, in February 2019. As of August 2020, the humanitarian space had expanded to 129 operational actors implementing 234 projects. The 2020 Humanitarian Response Plan (HRP) is a collective effort by UNOCHA and implementing partners to coordinate and scale up a response for the most vulnerable people across the country (with assistance in the areas of health, water, sanitation and hygiene, food security, nutrition, protection, shelter and nonfood items, and education.) The 2020 HRP appeals for \$762.5 million, of which \$674.6 million is for adjusted humanitarian requirements and \$87.9 million is for the COVID-19 response, and targets assistance for 4.5 million of the country's most vulnerable people.

International Humanitarian Regional Response

UNHCR and IOM coordinate the international response to the needs of displaced Venezuelans and host communities in the region, which includes governments, U.N. entities, nongovernmental organizations (national and international), the Red Cross Movement, faith-based organizations, and civil society. The Regional Interagency Coordination Platform provides a common humanitarian framework for assistance. The 2020 Regional Refugee and Migrant Response Plan (RMRP) launched in December 2019 appealed for \$1.35 billion to reach 4 million of the most vulnerable across Latin America and the Caribbean. As of July 2020, the updated RMRP funding appeal increased to \$1.4 billion, of which \$968.8 million was for adjusted humanitarian requirements and \$438.8 million was for the COVID-19 response.

Protection and assistance needs have been significant for arrivals and host communities. Services provided have varied by country but have included support for reception centers and options for shelter; emergency relief items; legal assistance with asylum applications and other matters; protection from violence and exploitation; and the creation of temporary work programs and education opportunities. In addition, the Quito Process, a regional coordinating mechanism, has helped harmonize policies among host countries and donors and scale up the humanitarian response to refugees and migrants.

U.S. Humanitarian Assistance

Since FY2017, the U.S. government has provided more than \$610.6 million in humanitarian and emergency food assistance in response to the Venezuela regional crisis (as of May 2020). This included \$534.4 million to support Venezuelan refugees and migrants who fled to other countries (or for the communities hosting them) and, since FY2018, \$76.2 million for humanitarian relief activities inside Venezuela. The U.S. military has twice deployed a naval hospital ship on medical support deployments. In addition, as of August 21, 2020, in COVID-19-related humanitarian assistance, the United States provided \$13.7 million for the response in Venezuela and \$103.3 million (of a total \$141 million that included other COVID-19 health and economic funding) to the region. As with international humanitarian standards, U.S. humanitarian assistance is provided on the basis of need and according to principles of universality, impartiality, and independence.

Issues for Congress

Congressional interest has focused on the humanitarian response in the region, the political situation in Venezuela, and displacement. In the 116th Congress, oversight is likely to continue on U.S. humanitarian assistance, as well as on contingency planning. Countries in the region (as well as the United States and humanitarian actors) remain keenly aware that the spread of COVID-19 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.

Congress has supported the Administration's efforts on the restoration of democracy in Venezuela without U.S. military intervention in the country and provision of humanitarian support to Venezuelans, although some Members have expressed concerns about the humanitarian impact of sanctions, particularly during the COVID-19 pandemic. In December 2019, Congress enacted P.L. 116-94, which incorporates the Senate-reported version of the VERDAD Act (S. 1025), a comprehensive bill to address the crisis in Venezuela. The VERDAD Act incorporated a House-passed measure authorizing FY2020 humanitarian assistance to Venezuela (H.R. 854). The House-passed version of the FY2021 Department of State, Foreign Operations, and Related Programs appropriations bill, Division A of H.R. 7608 (H.Rept. 116-444), approved on July 24, 2020, urged the USAID Administrator to respond to humanitarian needs in Venezuela and the region.

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