

# Venezuela-Colombia tensions rise following foreign ministers' meeting

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The most active border crossing between Venezuela and Colombia has remained closed following a meeting Wednesday between the two countries' foreign ministers. Little of substance was agreed in the six-hour talks between Venezuelan Foreign Minister Delcy Rodríguez and her Colombian counterpart Maria Angela Holguin, and there is no solution in sight for a crisis that has ratcheted up tensions between the two Latin American nations and inflicted extreme suffering on thousands of poor Colombian migrants and refugees.

The Venezuelan government of President Nicolas Maduro ordered the border closed on August 19 after unidentified gunmen—described by Venezuelan authorities as paramilitaries and widely assumed to be smugglers—opened fire on a Venezuelan border patrol, wounding three soldiers. Maduro followed up the action three days later by imposing a 60-day “state of exception” suspending fundamental democratic rights in six Venezuelan municipalities in the state of Tachira, on the Colombian border.

The police-state decree has been used by the Venezuelan army and national guard to carry out a wave of house-to-house raids in which Colombians deemed to be living illegally in Venezuela have been forcibly evicted and driven back across the border with, in many cases, nothing but the clothes on their backs. Many have been forced to wade across the Tachira River, which separates the two countries, holding small children and carrying bundles and pieces of furniture.

The security forces have marked the homes of Colombians being expelled from Venezuela with the letter D for demolition and then bulldozed them into rubble.

In a many cases, families have been separated and there are also reports of children of expelled migrants

having been left abandoned in Venezuela.

The only minor amelioration of these brutal practices negotiated between the Venezuelan and Colombian prime ministers was an agreement to allow Colombian civil defense to assist deported Colombian immigrants in recovering their belongings.

Whether even this minimal agreement will be honored was cast in doubt, however, as both Venezuela and Colombia recalled their ambassadors, reflecting the continuing rise in tensions.

In Colombia, right-wing politicians, and particularly former president Alvaro Uribe, who was closely tied to the country's paramilitary death squads, have attempted to whip up a war fever over the Venezuelan expulsions. Colombian politicians have hypocritically feigned concern for the deportees, many of whom had fled the bloody violence for which they themselves were responsible.

So far, well over 1,000 Colombians have been forcibly deported by Venezuelan security forces. The right-wing Colombian government of President Juan Manuel Santos reports that some 5,000 to 6,000 have “voluntarily” repatriated to escape the threat of raids. Venezuelan military officials have urged the immigrants to flee across the border under the threat of forced expulsion.

Amnesty International issued a statement declaring its “deep concern” over human rights violations in the border operation. “According to the reports received by Amnesty International, the people deported had been detained in operations of the Armed Forces and expelled to Colombia without opportunity to challenge their expulsion, or having the possibility of collecting their belongings,” the statement said. “In some cases, there have been charges of mistreatment during detention, forced evictions and demolition of houses

where Colombian nationals lived or were believed to have lived without any type of respect for their rights.”

The Maduro government has denounced all such reports as “slanders,” and a prominent member of the ruling United Socialist Party of Venezuela (PSUV), Jorge Rodríguez, mayor of the municipality of Libertador—part of the capital of Caracas—called for a “mass march against imperialism” in the capital on Friday to support the government’s border crackdown.

The pretexts for the border closure, the mass expulsions and the state of exception are the need to combat paramilitaries and smuggling. Both, however, are longstanding issues that are not confined to the Tachira River border crossing.

Moreover, the pretense that driving out thousands of impoverished Colombian immigrants is going to make any appreciable dent in the amount of goods being smuggled into Colombia—including fuel and foodstuffs whose prices have been kept low by the Maduro government—is patently false.

Smuggling is a major industry, directed by a mafia whose leading figures are to be found in the so-called *boliburguesia* —the ruling class layer that has enriched itself through its ties to the government— and the security forces themselves.

The launching of campaigns against Colombians inside Venezuela is a longstanding tactic, going back to the Accion Democratica and Copei governments that preceded the coming to power of the late Hugo Chavez and the advent of the so-called Bolivarian Revolution in 1999. They have traditionally been used to divert rising popular anger over deteriorating economic and social conditions.

This is clearly the situation confronting the Venezuelan government today. Inflation is rising faster in Venezuela than any other country in the world, and is already believed to be reaching triple digits. The government last released official economic statistics in December, when it reported inflation had risen to 69 percent. Government officials are privately saying that the rate could end the year at over 150 percent. Rising prices and shortages of basic commodities have led to isolated cases of rioting and looting in recent weeks.

The government has indicated that it is considering extending the state of exception to other regions, and the crackdown on the border could be the prelude to the increasing use of repression against social unrest inside

Venezuela itself. Already, the Maduro government has implemented a nationwide “Operation for the Liberation and Protection of the People” (OLP), a law and order campaign that is supposed to quell crime and paramilitary threats. It has resulted in a significant rise in police killings and has been denounced by critics as a criminalization of the poor.

Meanwhile, the government faces legislative elections in December, with reason to fear that growing anger over economic conditions as well as the endemic corruption within the government and ruling party could lead to large-scale abstention and hand a victory to the right-wing Democratic Roundtable of Unity (MUD) coalition.

With the anti-immigrant and anti-Colombia campaign, the government appears to be hoping to benefit politically by diverting popular anger into a reactionary and nationalist direction.

Significantly, the US government has indicated tacit support for Venezuela’s mass deportations. Asked earlier this week whether the Obama administration was concerned over the “humanitarian and political crisis” created by the actions of the Maduro government, State Department spokesman John Kirby responded that, “Governments have a sovereign right to control their borders.” Washington, it would appear, recognizes in the anti-immigrant campaign a further shift to the right by the Maduro government, which it has no interest in obstructing.

With its brutal actions against impoverished Colombian migrant workers, the Maduro government is providing the clearest proof that, behind the left populist rhetoric of the “Bolivarian Revolution”—and its promotion by various pseudo-left parties internationally—Venezuela is ruled by a bourgeois government that is an enemy of the Venezuelan and Latin American working class.



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