

Anti-Venezuelan pogrom in northern Brazil highlights official promotion of the country's far-right

Miguel Andrade
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Events that have unfolded since an anti-Venezuelan pogrom carried out on August 18 in Brazil's northernmost state, Roraima, as well as the reactions to it by the Brazilian authorities, have highlighted the increasing turn by the country's political establishment to the far-right.

Initial reports emerging on the day of the pogrom in the city of Paracaima stated that a demonstration against an assault on a local shopkeeper attributed to Venezuelan immigrants had descended into rioting over the state's overstretched resources and the failure of federal authorities to relocate the large number of Venezuelans entering the impoverished state. Coming over the only road to Brazil's northern border, their aim is to find jobs and better living conditions in Brazil's industrial south or in Argentina and Chile.

It was later revealed that accounts of the assault were falsified to incite the pogrom, with the involvement of the far-right Patriotic party, which had also been falsely reporting the displacement of Brazilians from public hospitals to make room for Venezuelans.

At least 1,200 Venezuelans were chased to the border, after dozens of Brazilians torched a camp where Army soldiers were screening migrants. As soldiers watched, the far-right bands threw rocks at the Venezuelans, assaulting even small children.

When the Venezuelans started leaving, Brazilian soldiers cordoned them off from the aggressors, who denounced them as traitors. They then began gathering the Venezuelans' abandoned belongings and taking them to the city's central square to set them on fire. In a further indication of the coordinated character of the action, the roving bands started looking for Venezuelans in other military facilities to drag them

off, taking them to the border.

But the pogrom was only the beginning of a continuing campaign of terror. Faced with the repeated refusal by the country's Supreme Court and federal authorities to allow the state's right-wing Governor Suely Campos to seal the border, motorcycle gangs have cruised through the city at night expelling homeless Venezuelans and enforcing a curfew over those with papers and able to find some shelter.

A gang leader, interviewed by *Deutsche Welle* on August 23, revealed that their actions are coordinated with the local Military Police. According to reports, Venezuelans who spend their days trying to get Brazilian papers and find jobs now go back across the border at night to sleep on the ground in a parking lot inside Venezuelan territory.

Roraima is Brazil's least populated state, with only 530,000 inhabitants and a GDP of only 9 billion reais (US\$ 2.3 billion). Sharing a border with Venezuela, it has received an estimated 130,000 Venezuelans fleeing their country's deepening economic crisis. An estimated 50,000 have remained in the state. The city of Paracaima itself has only 4,500 inhabitants, and only 21 percent of the population has access to the sewage system.

The chief difficulty for the migrants, who usually walk at least 200 km from the border city of Paracaima to the state capital of Boa Vista, is the state's geographical isolation from the rest of Brazil. Its only land connection to the rest of the country is a precarious 800 km road link to Manaus, a special economic zone harboring a manufacturing hub deep inside the Amazon jungle, from which it is possible to leave by plane or by sailing down the Amazon River a further 1,600 km to

Belém to reach the country's road network.

Plagued by poverty and even poor health—Venezuelans have lost an average of 11kg in the last years due to food scarcity—these migrants have been met with contempt and indifference from authorities, living in improvised camps spread around the state and facing a 65 percent unemployment rate. A relocation program announced on February 12 has benefited only 800 Venezuelans, with São Paulo, the country's richest state with a population of 45 million, offering shelter to only 300.

Mirroring the reaction of the most right-wing European regimes, the Australian government and the Trump administration, the Brazilian ruling class is using the precarious situation facing the Venezuelan population—and more broadly the recent influx of Haitian, African, Bolivian and a small number of recent Syrian refugees—to create a constituency for a far-right mass movement to counter working class radicalization. In Brazil's case in particular, this agitation is also employed to justify closer alignment with US imperialism in the drive to war against Venezuela.

Brazil, the world's fifth largest and sixth most populated country—and Latin America's largest economy, territory and population by a wide margin—has received less than 2 percent of the 2.3 million Venezuelans who have left their country. However, after the initial rebuff to the proposed sealing of the border, the government leader in the Senate, Romero Jucá, a Senator for Roraima state facing the prospect of losing his seat in the October general elections, announced on August 20 as he left a meeting with President Michel Temer that he would propose a law for immigration quotas, citing the reactionary European Union refugee policy as an example. Jucá also made clear he would campaign for the sealing of the border, in an apparent disagreement with Temer.

At the same time, Temer on August 22 dispatched his Public Safety Minister, Raul Jungmann, to Colombia—recently confirmed as a “global partner” of the NATO alliance and for decades the most reliable US ally in the region—to coordinate a response to the crisis. This decision was taken barely two weeks after US Defense Secretary Gen. James Mattis declared in a Latin American tour that Brazil should lead discussions on how to put pressure on the Maduro government.

Having reached no concrete agreement with Colombia, Jungmann declared in a press conference after coming back to Brazil that he would offer no further help to Roraima beyond dispatching 120 National Guard troops to repress Venezuelans, as the federal government had concluded that the state had unused funds and should be able to deal with the migrants. He added that Roraima Governor Suely Campos was “free” to request federal intervention in the state if crime was a problem, and that the armed forces were ready to act upon request.

The militarization of the Roraima state—with wide layers of the country's military ever more supportive of the fascistic reserve Army captain and presidential candidate Jair Bolsonaro, the military inaction in the face of the far-right bands and the open acknowledgement of the collaboration between such elements and the state's Military Police—is a clear indication of the willingness of the ruling class to bring to the forefront of Brazilian politics the most backward forces.

Heavily interconnected with Venezuelan economy, and even integrated into its power grid due to the isolation of the rest of Brazil, and ridden with violent land disputes around the indigenous reservations covering half of its territory, Roraima's crisis has become a rallying point for Brazilian reaction in preparation for major class battles.

Significantly, the Workers Party (Partido dos Trabalhadores, PT) has remained largely silent on the anti-refugee pogroms in Roraima. On the one hand, many of its pseudo-left supporters back the Maduro regime in Venezuela and refuse to acknowledge the flight of economic refugees from the country as anything but imperialist propaganda. On the other, the party is loathe to alienate the far-right, anti-immigrant elements with which it allied itself during its 13 years in power.



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