

Wave of xenophobic violence against Venezuelans living in Ecuador

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The killing of a pregnant Ecuadorean woman on January 11, stabbed to death by her ex-boyfriend, a Venezuelan, in the northern Ecuadorean city of Ibarra, unleashed a wave of xenophobic mob attacks against Venezuelan immigrants, forcing many to flee for their lives.

Crowds roamed the city's streets, attacking Venezuelans' homes, dragging them out and chasing them. Some were pursued by people in vehicles, brutally beaten and stoned. Four individuals were imprisoned for acts of violence.

The night after the murder, a mob went to a shelter for Venezuelan migrants and was only prevented from entering by a police cordon. Then the protesters took to the streets, just as they had done the previous day when the crime was committed.

The Quito daily *El Comercio* reported: "Desperate families ran through the streets carrying bags, children in their arms, with faces of panic. The Venezuelans reached the bus terminal of Ibarra, where late at night they were looking for tickets with no certain destination."

The mobs also entered the city's central parks to evict foreigners who slept in public places. Children and their parents were forced to leave the places where they had rested as their assailants burned their belongings.

Fearing for their lives, others sought to reach the Rumichaca border bridge to Colombia. Among them were migrants who began their exodus from crisis-ridden Venezuela two weeks earlier, crossing Colombia most of the way on foot and then seeking to go through Ecuador to reach Peru where family members and hoped for opportunities await them.

Hearing of the attacks, many Venezuelans decided not to go to work on Monday, January 21. Despite having worked in Ibarra for more than half a year as a locksmith, Gustavo told *El Comercio* that "there is no support from local authorities to protect the life of newly arrived

foreigners."

"Like him, there are several families of foreigners," *El Comercio* continued, "who remained locked in their homes for fear of being attacked, as happened with other people. Maxsalí, another migrant, sent his wife and four children to the house of some friends. He recalls that his family and other compatriots had to take refuge on the roof of a house for fear of the groups of people who asked for the foreigners."

The anti-immigrant violence is in line with the policies of the right-wing Ecuadorean government of President Lenin Moreno, which has engaged in an escalating persecution of immigrant workers. In Guayaquil, for example, officials of the Ministry of Labor raided three workplaces under the pretext of verifying the legal status of the workers. A vulcanizer and a car wash were raided. In one establishment, they detained 14 Venezuelans who were working without papers.

Moreno's government, aping the policies of his increasingly close ally, the imperialist government of US President Donald Trump, is promoting xenophobia in Ecuador in order to blame foreigners for the sharp decay in the Ecuadorean economy.

In the first weeks of January 2019 alone, the Ministry of Labor carried out 75 raids, 30 in the main port city of Guayaquil. In 2018, it staged 16,000 raids, detaining 3,600 for lack of papers.

On Tuesday, January 15, just two days after the rioting in Ibarra, Moreno joined Trump, becoming one of the first Latin American heads of state to recognize the president of the National Assembly, the right-wing stooge of the US State Department, Juan Guaidó, as president of Venezuela, initiating a process that could end up in civil war or US military intervention.

Now Moreno has upped the stakes, blocking flights that had been scheduled for January 26 to allow Venezuelans to go back to their country.

The Venezuelan embassy in Ecuador issued a declaration accusing President Moreno of human rights violations in denying the right of return of 270 people to Venezuela. It emphasized that most of them “have said they have been victims of xenophobia, discrimination, labor exploitation and trafficking on Ecuadorean soil.”

A program offering flights for Venezuelans seeking to return home has so far led to “12,000 repatriations of Venezuelan citizens from Brazil, Peru, Ecuador, Argentina, the Dominican Republic, Colombia, Chile and Panama,” according to *Telesur*. The brutal killing of the 22-year-old Ecuadorean girl, Diana Carolina, that sparked the anti-Venezuelan pogroms could have been avoided. Newspapers reported that local police officers observed the incident for 90 minutes without intervening after the young woman was taken hostage.

In an attempt to save face, Moreno decided to sack both the governor and the chief of police in Ibarra, while sending a unit of special forces to the city.

The violence shocked most Ecuadoreans. In Quito there was a large protest on January 12 with demonstrators condemning xenophobia as well as a series of murders of young women in the country.

The intense social inequality that pervades Latin America has also given rise to the world’s highest crime rates, with a recent survey finding that the 10 most violent cities in the world (outside of the war zones of the Middle East) were all in the region.

The attempt by the Moreno government to scapegoat Venezuelan immigrants for these conditions is part of a worldwide turn to the right and xenophobia by capitalist governments. It is, at the same time, a manifestation of the ebbing of the so-called “Pink Tide,” within which the former government of President Rafael Correa was counted. In the face of deepening economic crisis and rising social tensions, governments throughout the continent are turning towards methods of class war and repression.



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