

Venezuelan refugees face desperate conditions in Colombia

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The US government is engaged in an ongoing effort to suffocate Venezuela's economy and isolate its government, and the effects on millions of average citizens from that country have been devastating. Washington is waging what amounts to siege warfare comprised of ever-expanding extraterritorial sanctions on Venezuela's petroleum, gold, other mining and financial sectors.

A failed coup attempt by Juan Guaidó of the US-backed and -funded right-wing *Voluntad Popular* (Popular Will) party has only caused the Trump administration to double down on its strategy to bring down Nicolás Maduro's government. A recent raid on the Venezuelan embassy in Washington and resulting arrest of anti-intervention activists invited by the Maduro government to occupy the building was yet another provocation indicating the administration's contempt for international law.

This predatory imperialist strategy, and the sanctions in particular, have been devastating for Venezuela's population, worsening already astronomical inflation and forcing the government to reduce imports and ration what basic supplies there are at its disposal. Studies carried out *before* the most recent round of sanctions reported poverty levels unheard of in the formerly relatively wealthy South American nation.

One study conducted in 2018 by the Center for Economic and Policy Research attributed an estimated 40,000 deaths between 2017-2018 to American sanctions, with Venezuelans losing an average 24 pounds of body weight that year. A poll reported by the south-Florida Spanish-language newspaper *El Nuevo Herald* in September 2018 found that 30 percent of Venezuelans were regularly eating one meal a day, while another 28.5 percent reported eating "nothing or close to nothing" at least once a week. Overall, 78.6 percent of respondents reported persistent difficulties obtaining food.

There is no doubt that these horrifying conditions have drastically worsened over the past year, considering ongoing efforts to strangle the country's economy.

Meanwhile, a tiny layer of wealthy Venezuelans, whose

members are made up of both "old money" and a newly minted layer of the ultra-wealthy deriving its wealth from connections to the current government (the so-called *Boliburguesia*), continue to fill upscale cafes in the wealthy districts of Caracas. Many other wealthy members of the Venezuelan upper class have decided to leave the country altogether and emigrate to Spain and the US, where they have invested in real estate or started small businesses.

These are the unequal conditions that have forced an estimated 2.5 million Venezuelan citizens to flee since 2014, with 2 million destitute Venezuelans having left for neighboring countries in the last two years alone, many of them former professionals and members of the middle class. Unable to secure the basic means of survival for themselves and their families, Venezuelans have emigrated on foot or by bus, traveling hundreds and sometimes thousands of miles with few possessions, and often with children in tow, to seek a better future.

The greatest influx of refugees has been to Colombia, where an estimated 1.1 million Venezuelans survive on the margins of society, many of them reduced to sheltering in the streets and begging for food. Some manage to pool together their limited resources and rent rooms, sleeping in extremely crowded conditions.

Colombia, like many other countries south of the United States border, is itself a place of massive inequality, where the three richest men's combined assets are equivalent to 10 percent of the country's entire GDP. Poverty is especially acute in rural areas, where jobs and basic infrastructure are badly lacking. The current president, Iván Duque of the Centro Democrático (Democratic Center) party, a political protégé of ultra-right-wing former president Alvaro Uribe, was inaugurated in August 2018 and swiftly proposed a "National Development Plan"—a broad package of austerity measures that includes major cuts in funding to the nation's pension and health care systems.

The country also has its own refugee crisis resulting from decades of civil war, with an estimated 3.5 million internally displaced persons and at least 750,000 who have fled to

neighboring countries. As the Duque government represents Washington's closest ally in the region, the US and Western media pay scant attention to these Colombian refugees.

With the public health care system chronically underfunded, average Colombians have to wait months for urgent tests and appointments, and for Venezuelan refugees in Colombia, the situation is even worse. They cannot see doctors for routine visits or procedures and are only attended to once a health problem has become an emergency situation. Schooling is also out of reach for many of their children, the majority of whom lack the necessary documentation for enrollment. Often, school is not an option simply because young children are expected to help collect money for the family.

This WSWS reporter interviewed a 24-year-old Venezuelan refugee named Oriana who sells bottled water and soda on the side of the road in Medellin with her husband and six-month-old baby. Asked about her reasons for leaving, she responded:

"We came to Colombia on foot in September because we had no other choice. I was studying civil engineering, and Juan was working at a taxi business. We were able to make a living more or less, but everything started becoming unstable. Suddenly I couldn't continue my studies because all the teachers started quitting over pay. Then we found out I was going to have a baby, and at the time you couldn't find any diapers or medications in the stores, and there were long lines in the hospital. Once you finally made it to the front, you had to pay for everything just to be able to see a nurse—even gloves! Really, we had to get out of there because we felt like our baby could die if we stayed."

For Oriana and many other Venezuelans, survival depends on the generosity of the locals and their ability to sell small items to passing drivers. Oriana had this to add:

"We feel much better being here; people in Colombia have helped us out a lot to be able to raise the baby—giving us diapers and milk, though when we first arrived, we were sleeping on the streets. And I'm talking about just regular people, not the government, people who drive by here, they've really helped us out, and we're very grateful."

Eking out a living on the streets means spending long hours exposed to the elements and fumes of traffic from dusk until dawn, in an effort to scrape together enough pesos for food and shelter for the night.

Diego, 16, arrived with family and friends recently, and spoke about what a typical day is like:

"The situation became dire back in Venezuela, so here we are now, waking up at 5 a.m. to earn our daily bread. We spend all day standing around at a stoplight handing out pieces of candy and hoping people will give us some change. We don't have the necessary documents to work or get

medical care. At least we are able to pay for a place to sleep and food among us with what we earn here, though we try to scrape something together to send to our family back in Venezuela, too. And you know who suffers the most in this situation? It's the kids."

Among the refugees, there is broad hostility to both the existing government of Nicolás Maduro, which, its "Bolivarian socialist" pretensions notwithstanding, defends capitalist property and presides over deepening social inequality, and to Guaidó, who is seen as a representative of the traditional oligarchy and US imperialism.

Asked about the political situation and threats of direct military invasion by the United States, Oriana's husband Juan had this to say:

"We need to get the current government out of power. I was alive during the *Caracazo* [mass anti-austerity riots in the nation's capital, Caracas] in 1989 when people were massacred in the streets by the government. Of course, Guaidó is also a right-wing politician, he could do the same thing as the current government, so we need a new government, not Maduro and not Guaidó.

"As for an invasion—Venezuela doesn't need an invasion, people would certainly be worse off. Just look, everywhere the Americans have gone, it's been a catastrophe."

Enrique, a former resident of Caracas in his twenties, had a similar political outlook:

"Guaidó is just another corrupt politician, he's not actually doing anything except going around giving interviews, posing for photo ops. He's totally corrupt, but we do have to get Maduro out, too."



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