

South American states militarize borders against refugees

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24 February 2021

“The world of decaying capitalism is overcrowded. ... In an era of aviation, telegraph, telephone, radio, and television, travel from country to country is paralyzed by passports and visas. ... Amid the vast expanses of land and the marvels of technology, which has also conquered the skies for man as well as the earth, the bourgeoisie has managed to convert our planet into a foul prison.”

“Manifesto of the Fourth International on Imperialist War and the Proletarian World Revolution” adopted by its Emergency Conference of May 19-26, 1940

The Fourth International’s emergency conference held in the midst of the Second World War delivered a comprehensive indictment of the war’s chief cause—the private ownership of the means of production, together with the capitalist nation-state system which rests upon this foundation.

This indictment applies with even greater force today in Latin America, as one nation after another seeks to align itself ever more closely with US imperialism as Washington prepares its next military aggression against Venezuela in its attempt to quash Chinese and Russian influence in the hemisphere.

As interimperialist antagonisms grow, the historically venal and reactionary bourgeoisie in Latin America is shutting its borders to millions of Venezuelans escaping economic, social and health disasters caused by decades of unending destabilization, coup attempts and plunder.

The pro-imperialist, right-wing regimes in Brazil, Chile, Colombia, Ecuador and Peru are using an explosion in regional migration as a justification to militarize their borders, whipping up xenophobic anti-migrant sentiment in the process.

Thousands of troops, backed by tanks and armored vehicles, have been deployed to reinforce security personnel at irregular border crossings. Earlier promises made to displaced Venezuelans have proven a cruel hoax. The truth is that the ultraright governments were only concerned with using the profound crisis facing destitute migrants for political advantage.

Today, military forces monitor the crossings between Brazil and Venezuela, on one side, and Colombia on the other. Colombia has dispatched 600 national police and military personnel to monitor the border. The right-wing government of President Iván Duque launched “Operation Wall” last year to control its border with Venezuela.

More forces have been deployed to the Colombia-Ecuador border, the Ecuador-Peru border, as well as the Peru-Brazil and the Chile-Bolivia borders.

As a result, more than 500 displaced people, mainly from Haiti, have remained stranded on the Amazonian border between Peru and Brazil for the last two weeks. The refugees, trying to leave Brazil

through the “International Friendship Bridge” linking the two countries, are denied entry by Peruvian Armed Forces mobilized to bolster the police. Last Tuesday, security forces charged at the defenseless men, women and children with tear gas and repression. On Thursday, Brazil responded by sending military forces to take charge of border control for 60 days.

This follows an incident at the end of January, when Peruvian troops opened fire on displaced Venezuelans entering from Ecuador through Tumbes. Some 500 mostly Venezuelan nationals were arrested at different points in the Tumbes region. In mid-January, the Peruvian government deployed 1,200 troops, tanks and armored vehicles, as well as national police, to control the more than 30 irregular crossing points between Ecuador and Peru. The Ecuadorian government reciprocated. On January 27, the Ecuadorian Armed Forces mobilized 200 soldiers and 20 Hummer tactical vehicles on the border with Peru in the El Oro department.

“A person who enters the country with an irregular pass is being put on the same level as someone who commits a crime. Crossing the border with an irregular pass is not contemplated as a type of crime in Peru’s migration law,” said Marta Castro, a human rights research coordinator in Peru.

But this is precisely the aim. This has been facilitated by the local big business media with inflated and salacious reports of supposed migrant crime waves that have fomented attacks and pogroms against Venezuelans and other refugees with increased frequency. They are cultivating the basest moods of national chauvinism and xenophobia, dehumanizing the poorest and most vulnerable sections of the working class and oppressed masses.

Chilean Interior Minister Rodrigo Delgado explained the concept best when he revealed that the decree extending the use of the military also gives the authorities the “tools in terms of immediate expulsion” of refugees. He continued, “Today crossing the border is not characterized as a crime, but with the new law it is characterized as a crime.” This is not merely a national but rather a regional response.

The death of 23-year-old Bolivian Jaime Veizaga Sánchez at the hands of the paramilitary Carabineros police on February 9 must be viewed in this context. The cops dumped the barely conscious man from a checkpoint vehicle outside the Medical Legal Service (legal mortuary) in the mining town of Calama. He had arrived in the country just seven days earlier.

Last week, about 100 migrants were expelled from Iquique in the north of Chile. While a Court of Appeals annulled the expulsion order, arguing the refugees were denied due process, most are already in Venezuela.

“The expulsion order was issued while they were in the sanitary

residence, they were notified at 2 in the morning and then the expulsion was carried out 24 hours later, but they never left this place where they had no possibility of organizing a defense,” explained a lawyer representing the refugees.

The Venezuelan exodus

Some 4.6 million of the 5.4 million Venezuelans who have fled the ravages of both an unending imperialist onslaught and the abject failure of the bourgeois nationalist “Bolivarian Revolution” have sought refuge in the neighboring countries, only to suffer more hardship.

In 2018, the ultra-right-wing billionaire president of Chile, Sebastián Piñera, and the fascist Brazilian President Jair Bolsonaro drafted bills limiting the intake of refugees by making it a requirement to present certified documentation. Every other regime has followed suit. The special rapporteur of the United Nations for migrants’ rights, Felipe González, criticized the increasingly restrictive measures.

“Comparative experience, even in Latin America, shows that the use of the Armed Forces in migration matters produces serious violations of the human rights of people in mobility and in no way solves the problem, but rather increases it,” González tweeted.

“Faced with this radical change in migration policy measures, international organizations warned that there would be a significant increase in irregular entries and human trafficking, with the consequent risk for people in mobility,” he added.

A turning point in the mass migration of Venezuelans was reached in 2019 when Washington and Brussels began sharply escalating their attacks on the government of President Nicolás Maduro with sanctions and embargoes, backed by the so-called Lima Group (consisting of Canada and 13 Latin American countries that do the bidding of the US against Venezuela).

Conditions for refugees residing in Latin American countries have only deteriorated during the pandemic as millions have been laid off, evicted and made homeless. A study released last week revealed that two out of five Venezuelans residing in Latin American countries have been evicted during the pandemic. The survey by the Inter-American Commission on Human Rights (IACHR) and UN agencies showed that 11 percent of all renter evictions led to homelessness, while three out of four Venezuelans had no place to call home once evicted.

With much grandstanding, the Colombian government announced a Temporary Protection Status for Venezuelan migrants, which will identify, register and formally document 1.7 million refugees and migrants in Colombia, ostensibly to guarantee protections to foreigners. The measure will do nothing to protect them from exploitation, but it will replenish government coffers with increased foreign aid.

In another report the United Nations refugee agency UNHCR warned last week that barely two percent of the 1.7 million Venezuelan migrants in Colombia can cover their basic needs. Eighty-four percent are unable to obtain food, lodging or clothing. Three-quarters of these are believed to be “irregular,” or undocumented refugees.

While the governments of the Lima Group claim that the militarization of borders is designed to mitigate the spread of the

coronavirus, the reality is that the beefed-up security preceded 2020 and has more to do with demonstrating allegiance to US plans. This takes the form of the Armed Forces being allocated millions of dollars and employing tens of thousands of its troops in border control operations that ostensibly serve as an extension of the US “war on drugs” across the continent. Over the last two years, Latin American armed forces have deployed an increasingly sophisticated arsenal to intercept “transnational organized crime” in the border areas.

The coronavirus pandemic has ravaged South American nations not because of migration, but precisely because every right-wing government has imposed criminally reckless “herd immunity” policies that prioritize profit above the health and lives of the masses. Non-essential export-oriented industries critical to profit interests remained operational throughout 2020.

Now, each government is extending the use of its armed forces to control so-called “illegal smuggling of migrants and human trafficking.” Among the measures enacted is a plan allowing Colombian, Peruvian, Bolivian, Ecuadorian and Chilean police forces to coordinate transnational operations. The dangers of such measures are burnt into the history of 20th century Latin America, where the intelligence services of the military dictatorships of the 1970s and 1980s united in hunting down and murdering their political opponents under the CIA-backed Operation Condor.

The fate of the Venezuelan masses puts into sharp relief the anachronism and bankruptcy of the existing capitalist national state system in Latin America. In its 1940 conference, the Fourth International pointed the way out of this blind alley by advancing the slogan of the Soviet United States of South and Central America and calling on the proletariat to lead the struggle to free the masses from the yoke of world imperialism as part of the fight for world socialist revolution.

“It is not the belated South American bourgeoisie, a thoroughly venal agency of foreign imperialism, who will be called upon to solve this task, but the young South American proletariat, the chosen leader of the oppressed masses,” it stated.

This is truer today than ever before, after 80 years of the continent’s domination by a succession of bourgeois nationalist, fascist-military and pro-imperialist bourgeois comprador regimes. The Latin American working class must draw the necessary conclusions, unifying with workers throughout the continent, the US and around the world in a common struggle to put an end to capitalism. This is the perspective of permanent revolution, which is today fought for only by the International Committee of the Fourth International.



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