

Research report

Forum: Human Rights Council
Issue: The question of the Venezuelan humanitarian crisis
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Introduction

Venezuela has the world's largest oil reserves. Since that was discovered in the 1920s, oil has taken Venezuela on an exhilarating but dangerous boom-and-bust ride that offers lessons for other resource-rich countries. Decades of poor governance have driven what was once Latin America's most prosperous countries to economic and political ruin. The uprising of president Maduro's opposition, hyperinflation, violence, food and medicine shortages, and many other factors have brought the country into its current crisis. Millions of Venezuelans have left their homes in order to seek refuge in different countries and to find food, work, and a better life in general.

Definitions of key terms

Dutch disease

A government has the "Dutch disease" when developing an unhealthy dependence on natural resource exports to the detriment of other sectors.

Hyperinflation

Hyperinflation is a term to describe rapid, excessive, and out-of-control general price increase in an economy. Venezuela has the highest inflation rate in the world.

Interim president

An interim president is a head of state that is intended to be in office only until a permanent president is established.

General overview

Venezuela is currently facing a large humanitarian crisis, with millions not having any access to basic healthcare, safe water, or sufficient nutrition. This is a result of Nicolas Maduro's government. The government is responsible for short-term forced disappearances, extrajudicial executions, and tortured detainees, and is currently being investigated for crimes against humanity by the International Criminal Court.

The Venezuelan humanitarian crisis has failed to calm down. Currently, a total of 6 million refugees and 950,000 asylum seekers have been amassed worldwide. This makes the crisis the second largest displacement crisis in the world. With many lacking the proper documentation or permission to stay in nearby countries.

The majority of the refugees are families with children, elderly people, and pregnant women. These people have found themselves without shelter, or a manner to sustain their basic daily needs, such as food. Not to mention, their complete vulnerability to traffickers and smugglers when crossing borders.

Many countries have launched large programs, of the regularization of refugees, as a result of the excess demand for host communities, to make sure refugees have access to rights and services.

COVID-19

The global Covid-19 pandemic has intensified Venezuela's humanitarian crisis. Education was already very limited but during the pandemic many schools had to be closed which made access to education even harder than it already was. As in many countries hospitals struggled with staff shortages and supplies. Venezuelans who fled the country before the start of the pandemic often had to come back to their homeland and families due to them losing jobs abroad, now being unable to earn wages back home. More than 62.000 Venezuelans have left Chile, Peru, and Colombia to return to their shattered homeland.

When the pandemic started Venezuela's government looked abroad for humanitarian assistance while continuing to restrict and control aid deliveries. The government has sought help from its political allies -China, Russia, and Cuba- but has also asked the United Nations for assistance. 60 countries pledged 2.79 billion USD to help Venezuelan refugees in the region with the main donor to the Regional Refugee and Migrant Response Plan has been the U.S. government.

Major parties involved

Russia

The Russia-Venezuelan relationship is long-standing. Vladimir Putin and former Venezuelan leader Hugo Chávez tightened ties that current president Maduro has maintained. The relationship between the two countries has given Venezuela a greater relevance on the global geopolitical map.

China

Venezuela is dependent on China for its oil demand, even with investments and finance projects dropping off as Beijing reevaluates its exposure to Venezuela's ongoing economic meltdown.

Lima Group

The Lima Group was established on August 8, 2017, to coordinate participating countries' efforts and apply international pressure on Venezuela. The Lima Group has committed to closely monitoring events in Venezuela and applying pressure on Venezuela's government until full restoration of democracy in the country is achieved. The nations part of the Lima Group are: Bolivia, Brazil, Canada, Chile, Colombia, Costa Rica, Ecuador, El Salvador, Guatemala, Guyana, Haiti, Honduras, Mexico, Panama, Paraguay, and Peru.

United States

Relations between the United States and Venezuela have traditionally been characterized by an important trade and investment relationship as well as cooperation in combating the production and transit of illegal drugs.

Timeline of Key Events

5th March of 2013

Venezuela's long-time president Hugo Chávez dies of cancer. Nicolás, whom Chávez groomed to replace him, was elected into office a month later, gaining 50.6% of the vote. Chávez was very much liked and admired by the general public of Venezuela thanks to his social welfare programs. After taking the presidency in 1999, he nationalized the oil industry and used the profit to fund food subsidies, education, and health care programs. During his presidency, unemployment and poverty halved, and income per capita more than doubled. After Maduro took the office he continued largely unrestrained spending, which created a huge deficit that sent the country into an economical spiral.

23rd of January 2014

During high levels of violence, food shortages, and scarcity of basic goods, opposition leaders Leopoldo López and María Corina Machado began a campaign to remove Maduro from office. In February 2014 thousands of Venezuelans took to the streets in protest. Over a three-month

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period of violent demonstrations, 43 people were killed. On December 30 that year Venezuela's Central Bank confirmed that the country had entered a recession due to

plummeting oil prices. The inflation rate surpassed 63% in 2014. The government was forced to make cuts in public spending, making it difficult for poor Venezuelans to access food and medicine.

6th December 2015

In the legislative elections, the opposition party gained a two-thirds supermajority in the National Assembly. Maduro feared for the security of his position, so he stacked the Supreme Court with justices loyal to him. On December 30, the Supreme Court blocked four newly elected lawmakers from joining the assembly just days before they were due to be sworn in, which Maduro's critics saw as an attempt to chip away at the opposition's majority. Later, reports would show that food shortages were so severe that Venezuelans lost an average of 19 pounds between 2015 and 2016

7th April 2017

The Supreme Court banned an opposition leader from partaking in the elections. The next day, Venezuelans responded with mass demonstrations all over the country. The protests lasted for months, resulting in violent clashes with riot police that left 66 dead.

On July 30, in an election considered by critics to have been a sham, voters elected the members of the Constituent Assembly, which was created with the intent to change the constitution parallel to the National Assembly. Neighboring countries in Latin America, as well as the U.S., Canada, and Spain, said they would not recognize the authority of the new branch. The Constituent Assembly was officially sworn in on August 4.

20th May 2018

Presidential elections were held, and Maduro was re-elected despite claims of fraud from the opposition coalition. The U.S. decried the election as unfair and anti-democratic before any voting had even taken place. On November 8, the United Nations Refugee Agency announced that over 3 million people had fled Venezuela due to massive shortages of food and medicine.

10th January 2019

Not long after Maduro's inauguration on January 10, Venezuelans took to the streets calling for him to step down. Guaidó, leading the opposition, claimed the presidency, citing emergency powers granted by the constitution. The U.S. quickly showed support for Guaidó. On January 23, Maduro responded by severing diplomatic ties with the U.S., ordering all American diplomats out of the country within 72 hours. U.S. Secretary of State Mike Pompeo said that they would instead abide by Guaidó's directive to maintain diplomatic relations with Venezuela. Humanitarian aid from the U.S. arrived in Venezuela at its border with Colombia on February 8, which Maduro blocked. On February 21, Maduro closed the border Venezuela shares with Brazil in an effort to block aid from coming into the country. A day later, at least two civilians were killed and dozens were injured when Venezuelan security forces fired on protesters near the Brazilian border. Meanwhile, Venezuela's former intelligence chief Hugo Carvajal publicly rejected Maduro and called out his inner circle for rampant corruption, urging the military to turn against him. This followed President Donald Trump's ultimatum to the Venezuelan military on February 26: side with the opposition coalition or face consequences.

Previous attempts to solve the issue

The United States and the interim government led by Interim President Guaidó collaborate closely to achieve the goal of a peaceful restoration of democracy via free and fair presidential and parliamentary elections. The United States works with Juan Guaidó and his team on a number of areas of mutual concern, including migration issues, public health, security, anti-narco trafficking initiatives, and the re-establishment of the rule of law. Since the beginning of the crisis, the United States has provided 272 million USD in economic, development, and health assistance to support the response to the crisis inside Venezuela and the region. U.S. assistance is provided through international organizations and their partners and not directly to the Interim government or its representatives.

In 2019-2020, **The United Nations** Security Council discussed the situation in Venezuela, but divisions among U.N. members blocked resolutions in response to the crisis. Despite that polarization, United Nations agencies are increasing humanitarian relief in Venezuela after securing approval in April 2019 from Maduro and Guaidó. The United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees and the International Organization for Migration are coordinating to serve some of the roughly 6 million Venezuelans who had left the country as of May 2021 and their host communities. An independent fact-finding mission of the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights has documented state human rights abuses against civilians that it describes as amounting to “crimes against humanity.”

In 2017 the European Union adopted an arms embargo against Venezuela; in 2018, it began to impose targeted sanctions on Maduro officials. The European Union has opposed broad economic sanctions, military intervention, and “any form of violence” in the country. Instead, the EU has backed efforts by the International Contact Group (ICG) and Norwegian diplomats to broker a diplomatic solution to the crisis. In mid-2020, the European Union backed former presidential candidate Henrique Capriles’s efforts to seek better conditions and a postponement of the December legislative elections rather than the preemptive boycott that Guaidó and the United States government had cleared. By January 2021, the European Union Parliament and most member states began referring to Guaidó as a “privileged interlocutor” rather than “interim president.”

Possible solutions

The political situation in Venezuela could remain at an impasse, and the socioeconomic situation could continue to deteriorate. Maduro could create cleavages within forces opposed to him both within and outside Venezuela and attempt to muddle through the crisis, thinking time is on his side. If Guaidó were detained or assassinated, civil unrest would intensify. If infighting among Guaidó’s supporters began, internal domestic pressure could weaken, discrediting anti-Maduro forces. Unity within the Lima Group—a group of Latin American countries and Canada that support Guaidó—could begin to fray, as some governments grow increasingly concerned with the growing humanitarian crisis and human outflows. Efforts by the International Contact Group (the European Union, Mexico, and Uruguay) to promote dialogue could gain ground, as indicated by the Norwegian government’s recent effort at mediation between the Maduro regime and democratic coalition forces to find a peaceful way out of the

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crisis. Diplomatic and security support for the Maduro regime from Cuba, Russia, and others could expand.

The United States and other Western powers want the restoration of democracy and rule of law. Nicolas Maduro is equally committed to holding on to power. International sanctions and diplomatic isolation are denying legitimacy and resources to Maduro's government but have not dislodged him from power. The crisis is intensifying tensions between the United States and Maduro's foreign allies—China, Cuba, Russia, and Turkey—which are doubling down on their support for the regime. The political and humanitarian crisis requires policy options that address the goals of restoring democracy and providing humanitarian assistance

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