

BUSINESS INSIDER

After a year of isolation, ‘the most miserable country in the world’ is ‘interested in a new beginning’

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August 13, 2016

On Friday, a year after shutting its western border and isolating itself from Colombia, Venezuela announced that the frontier would be reopened.

The news came after Venezuelan President Nicolas Maduro met with his Colombian counterpart, Juan Manuel Santos, in the western Venezuelan city of Puerto Ordaz.

The leaders settled on a gradual reopening of their countries' border crossings, with five border checkpoints opening for pedestrians from 6 a.m. to 9 p.m. each day, starting Saturday.

Within a month, cars should be able to cross the border, and more crossing points will open over the coming year, the two leaders said. Prior to the closure, 100,000 people crossed the border daily; that number dropped to 3,000 a day after the border was shut.

Maduro shuttered the frontier in August last year in what he said was an effort to crackdown on the "plague" of smugglers and paramilitary groups who he accused of trying to undermine Venezuela's economy and its socialist government. Venezuela's border region has become a hotbed for smuggling of various items, like drugs and weapons, but also of consumer goods and Venezuela's price-controlled gasoline.

The closing appeared only to slow, not stop, smuggling. The main routes were placed under heavy guard, but "river and jungle crossings opened up and many said they simply paid border guards a little extra to make the crossing," Reuters reported.

As part of his campaign to rid the region of threats, Maduro's government also deported many of the Colombians living in the area illegally, some of whom were refugees from Colombia's protracted civil conflict.

Friday's announcement signaled a thaw in the tensions that festered over the last year. "We're interested in a new beginning in economic and commercial relations with all of Colombia's productive sectors," Maduro said while seated next to Santos, in front of a picture of Latin American independence hero, Simon Bolivar.

Santos noted that bilateral talks in preparation for opening the border had been going on for months and that both countries would guarantee security and help curb smuggling, according to Reuters.

For Maduro — who runs what the libertarian Cato Institute calls "the most miserable country in the world" because of economic problems like rampant inflation and widespread shortages of basic goods — the confrontation with Colombia over the border gave an international facade to problems at home.

"Now this was a move in international relations, but it really had much more to do with domestic causes," said David Smilde, a senior fellow at the Washington Office on Latin America, on the Trend Lines podcast in late July. "It was because there were legislative elections coming along. It was because of this terrible problem with scarcities, and it was because of this problem with crime"

"So Maduro used the situation at the border with Colombia to say, 'well, the crime is being caused by paramilitaries, and they're also using contraband to try and undermine the revolution, and therefore we need to close this border,'" Smilde added.

"The closure of the border has been a total disaster," said Anabella Abadi, an economist with ODH Grupo Consultor in Caracas, told The Wall Street Journal. "It hasn't changed anything for the country as a whole or even for the border states. In fact, things have gotten worse."

Venezuela's currency, the bolivar, has lost one-third of its value against the US dollar on the black market, and the country's economy will likely shrink 10% this year.

As Venezuela's economy has worsened, particularly the debilitating scarcity that has people standing in line for hours to buy ever dwindling supplies of basic products, the border closure has made life harder for Venezuelans in the region by keeping them from crossing the border to buy more expensive but more readily available essentials.

The border closure also wounded Venezuelan industrial and agricultural production, as farmers and others were less able to go to Colombia to buy seeds and raw materials that have become unavailable in Venezuela.

About 65% of arable land in Venezuela's agricultural Andes region has been left fallow this year because of lack of seeds and fertilizer, agribusiness lobby Fedegro told The Wall Street Journal. "Going to Colombia to buy inputs was our only way to plant something in the past," Fedegro head Tony Pestana told The Journal.

Several times in recent weeks, thousands of Venezuelans have flooded over the border to the Colombian town of Cucuta after Venezuelan authorities allowed temporary openings at crossings in western Venezuela's Tachira state.

On one weekend, more than 120,000 people streamed across the border, and some Venezuelans made all-night road trips to get to the border area in time for the scheduled openings.

"So this [border closure] has had a huge impact on both the Venezuelan side and the Colombia side because there's so much cross-border economics, and it's something that has a real big impact still," Smilde said.