

## **Venezuela's Socialist Collapse Has Unleashed a Migrant Crisis in Colombia**

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September 17, 2017

Near the Colombian border city of Cúcuta's bus terminal, five middle-aged women recently arrived from Venezuela gather close together on a Wednesday night to sleep upon blankets on the concrete floor. Around them, several Venezuelan men, also recently arrived, try to rest on portable chairs, while the most fortunate count with the shelter of a camping tent. To an uninformed observer, the hundreds of Venezuelans inhabiting Cúcuta's public spaces—colonial plazas lined with palm trees, leafy city parks, even the middle of pedestrian roundabouts— would appear to be evacuees from an area struck by a natural disaster.

The Venezuelan refugees in Cúcuta, however, have been driven from their country not by a violent hurricane or a devastating earthquake, but rather by a man-made calamity known in Latin America as “21st Century Socialism.”

The Venezuelan economy, once the most prosperous in the region, is utterly ruined as a result of Hugo Chávez's “Bolivarian Revolution”. Venezuela's “pomp of yesterday is one with Nineveh and Tyre” while Colombia, a traditional exporter of emigrants (including to Venezuela in decades past), is experiencing the first wave of massive immigration in its history as an independent nation.

In Cúcuta, I met numerous Venezuelan professionals and students forced into street vending while they save enough money to travel to Peru or Chile, where they say they have already been offered better jobs. Others are content with day labour— washing onions in a street market, for instance— despite being paid a fraction of what an employer would have to offer Colombian workers.

When I asked them about the precarious conditions they endure, several Venezuelans told me that, unlike in their own country, at least in Colombia they can find food with what little money they earn. Due to the Chavista regime's policy of destroying most free market mechanisms, empty shelves have become the norm in stores across the Bolivarian Republic.

On a Thursday evening, a Colombian family arrives by car at Plaza Santander, Cúcuta's main square, in order to donate food to the Venezuelan refugees assembled there. Immediately, there arises a small stampede of people rushing towards the car, and towards the possibility of receiving a warm meal. They organize themselves and wait in a surprisingly civilized fashion

even though there's clearly not enough food in the small car to feed the dozens of Venezuelans who have formed a long queue.

The local authorities tell me that, in days past, street brawls have arisen over scarce amounts of donated food. Ironically, civil society's acts of charity are unleashing acts of violence. During my visit, the city mayor decided to ban food donations in public spaces.

The massive entry of Venezuelans into Colombia these days has to do with geography; the land border between the two countries is 2,219 kilometers long, with an almost complete absence of natural barriers and only a handful of legal checkpoints. Two of these are in Cúcuta, where approximately 3,500 Venezuelans are entering Colombia daily in order to stay in the country according to local authorities. If this level of immigration is maintained, over 1.2 million Venezuelans will settle in Colombia via Cúcuta alone during the next year, creating an unprecedented 3% population increase in the country.

An official tells me, however, that these figures do not include the large number of Venezuelans who are crossing illegally into Colombia at 52 informal crossings identified only in the Norte de Santander department, of which Cúcuta is the capital. In other words, the Colombian government, which has only presented official immigration figures to the public, is drastically underestimating the effects of illegal immigration upon the labour market and basic services such as health and education.

Why is Colombia, a country which the World Bank classifies as "upper middle income," suddenly experiencing immigration problems familiar to Britain and other nations with the world's most advanced economies? Apart from geography, it's a matter of economic freedom, or lack thereof.

According to the Economic Freedom of the World Index published by the Cato Institute and the Fraser Institute, the Venezuelan economy was the world's least free in 2014. Colombia, contrary to its international reputation as a bastion of "neoliberalism," was ranked 116 out of 159 countries in terms of economic freedom due mostly to its excessive taxes and regulations.

Nevertheless, for millions of Venezuelans suffering the effects— among them hunger— of having no economic freedom whatsoever, Colombia's partially free economy offers at least a chance of survival and, possibly, of a decent quality of life.

Whether consciously or not, the Venezuelan refugees who told me that their goal was to reach Peru or Chile are migrating toward much greater levels of economic liberty. In 2014, Peru was the world's 52<sup>nd</sup> most free economy while Chile was ranked 13<sup>th</sup> in the Cato / Fraser World Index. Significantly, not a single Venezuelan I spoke to in Cúcuta expressed a desire to migrate to Cuba, whose economy is so devoid of freedom that the Castro regime doesn't publish reliable statistics (which is why Cuba doesn't even appear in the freedom index). Venezuelans who have left their country, in fact, are fleeing the Cuban model which the Chavistas imposed on them with nefarious consequences.

There are exceptions, of course; the upper echelons of both the Maduro and Castro regimes are impervious to the suffering they have deliberately unleashed on their populations. For instance, while Venezuelan government bigwigs still travel the world in high fashion, the regime's refusal to emit passports for ordinary citizens prevents thousands of them from leaving the country. Others are left stranded in the Colombian border area, where they are allowed to remain legally as long as they hold a Venezuelan national ID card (*cédula*), whereas travelling by land into Colombia's interior or to other Latin American countries requires a passport.

American supporters of Bernie Sanders and British Corbynistas, especially the young fooled by socialists' claim to act "for the many, not the few," should visit Cúcuta to witness the effects of 21<sup>st</sup> Century Socialism first hand.