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Venezuela's Neighbors Join Forces to Contain Crushing Flow of Refugees

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Venezuela's accelerating slide toward mass starvation has become a continental disaster and South American governments this week began trying to manage it together.

With thousands of migrants pouring over the border -- an outflow equal to the Mediterranean refugee crisis -- government officials are meeting in Colombia, Peru and Ecuador to coordinate a response that so far has been haphazard. On the agenda are measures to prevent epidemics, harmonize identification requirements and share the burden of relief.

"The migration crisis is putting Venezuela squarely on the table in a way we haven't seen so far," said Geoff Ramsey, an analyst at the Washington Office on Latin America, a research organization that works for human rights. "It's no longer an internal affair."

In all, 2.3 million Venezuelans live outside the country, with more than 1.6 million fleeing the ravaged petrostate since 2015, according to the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees. That's roughly equal to the flow of migrants to Europe in the same period. The crisis looks likely to worsen as oil output plunges thanks to mismanagement, and hyperinflation defies attempts to rein it in.

Open Question

There's another discussion on what to do about Venezuelan President Nicolas Maduro, a socialist autocrat who has withstood protests, coup and assassination attempts and U.S. sanctions. Peru and Argentina said this month that they will join Chile, Colombia and Paraguay to accuse Maduro of crimes against humanity at the International Criminal Court in the Hague. Leaders have called for elections and the restoration of Venezuela's nullified National Assembly, but U.S. President Donald Trump's suggestions of military intervention have few backers. Instead, neighboring countries are contending with the burden Maduro has handed them.

In Boa Vista, Brazil, the capital of impoverished Roraima state, the situation is desperate. Dom Mario Antonio da Silva, the state's Catholic bishop, said Wednesday that about 25,000 refugees have reached the city, and as many as 4,000 sleep on the streets. The church is offering food baskets, serving breakfast to 1,200 people and teaching migrants Portuguese.

"What we need are effective immigration policies," da Silva said. "At the moment, we have no immigration policies. What Brazil is doing at the moment is just first aid, emergency measures."

Common Cause

This week, officials from Colombia, Peru, Ecuador and Brazil met in Bogota to discuss joint strategies on health care, schooling and employment for migrants. On Wednesday, there were further meetings in Lima to formulate a request to organizations including the UN and the Red Cross to step up financial and logistical support, said Enrique Bustamante, head of policy at Peru's immigration agency.

"The number of Venezuelan migrants in the region is unprecedented," he said. "There's never been a migratory flow like this in such a short time."

Ministers from as many as 14 countries and 10 international organizations are to meet Sept. 3-4 in Quito, Ecuador, to discuss the crisis more broadly.

Catching Up

Not a moment too soon, said Ian Vasquez, director of the libertarian Cato Institute's Center for Global Liberty and Prosperity in Washington. "The region appears unprepared and surprised," he said. "It's turning into a wider humanitarian crisis."

The costs of an effective response are unknown. So far, the U.S. is spending more than \$65 million on development and humanitarian assistance. Nikki Haley, the U.S. envoy to the UN, visited Colombia's border with Venezuela this month and said the burden on neighboring countries compelled the U.S. to act.

"When a region condemns one of their own, the international community listens," she said.

The U.S. is sending a Navy hospital ship to Colombian waters in September, and China is dispatching a similar vessel to Venezuela itself.

Pay Now

The UN High Commissioner is halfway to funding a \$46.1 million mission in which it is working with governments to improve asylum and refugee management systems and meeting basic needs. Olga Sarrado, a spokeswoman on Venezuelan matters, stressed the need for donor countries to immediately provide the rest of the money. Humanitarian organizations and governments are being swamped by the almost 5,000 people who leave daily, she said.

"They are still responding, they are not overwhelmed, but they are reaching a saturation point," she said Wednesday night.

Colombia, which has a 1,400-mile border with Venezuela, has borne the brunt, with almost a million migrants now in the country, according to authorities. But Colombia has its own problems, including one of the region's highest unemployment rates, and it has tightened visa rules and deployed troops to patrol informal border crossings.

At a Bogota restaurant called Caraota (Venezuelan dialect for “bean”), owner Jorge Lara has a stack of resumes from Venezuelan migrants. He gets two or three per day.

“They don’t mind what type of work it is,” Lara said Wednesday at his restaurant, which sells Venezuelan staples such as arepas. “They are simply looking to get established, to get some income as soon as possible.”

Closing Crossings

Many Venezuelans continue south over land. But Peru and Ecuador this month barred immigrants without passports. Ecuador suspended the measure after a judge’s order, but the government introduced a requirement for still more documentation. Peru said it would accept children, pregnant women without passports as well as those requesting refugee status.

Brazil President Michel Temer said that the deteriorating situation is increasing tensions not only along the remote northern border, but throughout the region. An influx of as many as 800 Venezuelans per day is overwhelming efforts to vaccinate the new arrivals against measles and other illnesses, and this week soldiers were sent to help with patrols and humanitarian aid. The country is considering restricting border passage by handing out numbered tickets or vouchers, Temer said.

"Our policy and that of international accords is to offer refuge, but the ideal for us is that they receive our humanitarian aid there and could stay there," Temer said.

Freedom Flights

The government has tried to alleviate pressure on remote border towns by relocating some Venezuelans. On Tuesday, television broadcasts showed jets taking off from Boa Vista carrying Venezuelan refugees south. Each was to get a work permit.

They aren’t the only migrants in the air -- Maduro earlier this week tried for a public relations coup: On Monday, one day before Peru declared a state of emergency, 89 Venezuelans were flown from Lima. The repatriated group had supposedly contacted the Venezuelan Embassy after xenophobic and inhumane treatment. They arrived in Caracas to applause and tearful embraces. The spectacle was all captured by state television.

“To all who want to return from economic slavery, persecution and hate, stop scrubbing toilets in other countries and come back home,” Maduro said. He spoke from his presidential palace.