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The Venezuela Regional Migration Crisis

The deteriorating humanitarian situation in Venezuela has elevated congressional concerns about the country, which remains in a deep political and economic crisis under the authoritarian rule of President Nicolás Maduro; on January 23, 2019, President Trump recognized the head of Venezuela’s National Assembly, Juan Guaidó, as the country’s interim president and ceased to recognize the Maduro regime. Before the most recent political upheaval began in January 2019, Venezuelans were already facing severe shortages of food and medicine (in part due to corruption), and lack of access to social services. Political persecution and the impact of hyperinflation (the highest in the world) with loss of income and oppressive poverty also contributed to a dire situation. Maduro has refused to accept most offers of international humanitarian assistance. As conditions in the country have become progressively worse, increasing numbers of Venezuelans continue to leave, and neighboring countries, particularly Colombia, are straining to absorb a population that is often malnourished and in poor health. The spread of previously eradicated diseases, such as measles, is also a major regional concern. (Also see CRS Insight IN11024, *Venezuela: U.S. Recognizes Interim Government*, and CRS Report R44841, *Venezuela: Background and U.S. Relations*.)

Figure 1. Venezuelan Migrants and Asylum Seekers: Flows to the Region and Beyond



Source: CRS.

By the end of 2018, the U.N. High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) and other experts estimated that more than 3 million Venezuelans (one in ten) had left the country

with the vast majority remaining in the Latin America and Caribbean region. Although UNHCR has asserted that most displaced Venezuelans are not considered refugees, a significant number are needing humanitarian assistance, international protection, and opportunities to regularize their status. UNHCR and the International Organization for Migration (IOM) estimate that by the end of 2019, the number of Venezuelan refugees and migrants could reach over 5.3 million.

Responses to the Venezuelan arrivals vary by country and continue to evolve with events on the ground. While more than half of Venezuelan migrants have stayed in Colombia, significant numbers have fled to Peru, Ecuador, Chile, Brazil, Argentina, Panama, Mexico, and the southern Caribbean. See **Figure 1**. Colombia is dealing with its own political transition and other pressures. Although it has begun to emerge from decades of civil conflict, Colombia faces ongoing violence by armed groups. The Colombia-Venezuela border covers 1,378 miles and has seven official border crossing points. Cúcuta is the main reception point for Venezuelan migrants entering Colombia. There are hundreds of unofficial points of entry on the border, which make it impossible to track all arrivals. The Colombian government estimates that there are 1 million Venezuelans throughout the country, but the actual figure is unknown.

Taken as a percentage of their overall population, Venezuelan arrivals have significantly affected small countries and territories. Trinidad and Tobago, a twin-island country with 1.4 million people, estimated in late 2018 that it was hosting 60,000 Venezuelans, which increased its overall population by more than 4%. Between September 2014 and 2018, roughly 400,000 Venezuelans in the region and beyond (to the United States, Canada, Spain, and elsewhere) applied for *political asylum* (specific legal protection for which most migrants do not qualify.) Host countries have been willing to register some Venezuelan migrants and by October 2018 had granted 960,000 Venezuelan arrivals *alternative legal forms of stay* (temporary legal residence with access to social services, and sometimes work, for up to two years.)

The Venezuelan government has made it increasingly difficult for Venezuelans to obtain a valid passport and therefore legal status outside the country. Humanitarian experts are most concerned about the roughly 60% of Venezuelans in neighboring countries who lack identification documents, which makes them vulnerable to arrest and deportation by governments and to abuse by criminal groups, including human traffickers. Young children, indigenous communities, pregnant women, and the elderly are particularly at risk.

International Humanitarian Response Framework

The U.N. Secretary-General appointed UNHCR and the International Organization for Migration (IOM) to coordinate the international response through the Regional Inter-Agency Coordination Platform for Refugees and Migrants from Venezuela, which includes U.N. entities, nongovernmental organizations, the Red Cross Movement, faith-based organizations, and civil society. Former Guatemalan diplomat and Vice President Eduardo Stein has been appointed the U.N. Joint Special Representative for Venezuelan Refugees and Migrants.

International and U.S. Humanitarian Assistance

Governments, humanitarian organizations (national and international) are responding to the needs of displaced Venezuelans and host communities in the region. Services provided vary by country and include support for reception centers and options for shelter; emergency relief items, such as emergency food assistance, safe drinking water, and hygiene supplies; legal assistance with asylum applications and other matters; protection from violence and exploitation; and the creation of temporary work programs and education opportunities. The World Health Organization (WHO) is reportedly helping the government purchase and deliver millions of vaccines against measles, mumps, and rubella. Moreover, while Maduro has publicly rejected offers of international humanitarian assistance, in November 2018, the U.N. Central Emergency Response Fund (CERF) allocated \$9.2 million for Venezuela to be provided through U.N. entities.

In mid-December 2018, UNHCR and IOM launched the regional Refugee and Migrant Response Plan (RMRP), which is the first of its kind in the Americas: an operational and coordination strategy “responding to the needs of Venezuelans on the move and securing their social and economic inclusion in the communities receiving them.” The RMRP includes 95 organizations covering 16 countries. It is also an appeal for \$738 million in funding to support over 2 million Venezuelans and half a million people in host communities.

The U.S. government is providing humanitarian and emergency food assistance and helping to coordinate and support regional response efforts. U.S. government humanitarian funding for the Venezuela regional response totals approximately \$96.5 million for both FY2017 and FY2018 combined. (Humanitarian funding is drawn primarily from the global humanitarian accounts in annual Department of State/Foreign Operations appropriations legislation.) For nearly three months between October and December 2018, the U.S. Navy hospital ship *USNS Comfort* was on a medical support deployment to work with government partners in Ecuador, Peru, Colombia, and Honduras, in part to assist with arrivals from Venezuela. The United States is also providing \$37 million in bilateral assistance to support medium and longer-term efforts by Colombia to respond to the Venezuelan arrivals.

On January 24, 2019, Secretary of State Michael Pompeo announced that the United States would provide \$20 million in additional humanitarian assistance to the people of Venezuela at the request of Interim President Guaidó. The

U.S. Agency for International Development announced that it was pre-positioning emergency supplies (relief items, food, hygiene/medical kits) in Cúcuta, and preparing to move U.S. relief supplies to the region from warehouses in Miami and Houston. It remains to be seen how events unfold in Venezuela and the impact on the humanitarian situation. In keeping with international humanitarian standards, U.S. humanitarian assistance is generally provided on the basis of need and according to principles of universality, impartiality, and independence. Humanitarian organizations have expressed concern not just about the many logistical and security problems in delivering assistance to Venezuela, but also the prospect of humanitarian assistance being used as a tool in a political contest. The Maduro regime has so far blocked relief supplies from entering Venezuela via Cúcuta.

Regional and Global Migration and Asylum Policies

Venezuela’s exodus is a significant displacement crisis for the Western Hemisphere, which has in place some of the highest protection standards in the world for displaced and vulnerable persons. Neighboring countries are under pressure to examine their respective migration and asylum policies and to address, as a region, the legal status of Venezuelans who have fled their country. Although countries have generally welcomed Venezuelan arrivals, some have begun to tighten visa requirements and/or deported them. Several international organizations, including the Inter-American Commission on Human Rights and various U.N. entities, have raised concerns about instances of xenophobia against Venezuelans.

Most Latin American countries and the Caribbean are part of an ongoing forum that is based on the 1984 Cartagena Declaration on Refugees, which has an expanded definition of refugee that goes beyond the 1951 U.N. Convention Relating to the Status of Refugees and its 1967 Protocol and incorporates cooperative approaches to help meet the needs of the displaced. With separate global compacts on refugees and migration now adopted, experts urge timely and predictable funding from the international community to support efforts by host governments to assist Venezuelan refugees and migrants and the communities sheltering them.

Issues for Congress

Congressional interest has focused on the humanitarian response in the region, the political situation in Venezuela, and the increasing migration flows. In the 116th Congress oversight is likely to continue on U.S. humanitarian assistance, as well as on contingency planning for a crisis that could continue to expand. Countries in the region (as well as the United States and humanitarian actors) remain keenly aware that an acute situation, such as the spread of disease (e.g., measles) or a sudden increase in arrival numbers in excess of a country’s capacity, could affect border management and safety, and limit the acceptance of additional Venezuelans. How regional governments react will be key to the ongoing management of the crisis.

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