DISCUSSION PAPER

Seeking Refuge:
Venezuela's Migration Crisis and the Politicisation of Aid

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Introduction

Venezuela has seen steady migration out of the country over the past eight years. Since 2010, approximately 3 million Venezuelans have fled the country (UNHCR Press Releases, 2018). The rate has picked up significantly in the past 4 years, with more than 1.9 million having left since 2015. (Regional Inter-Agency Coordination Platform for Refugees and Migrants from Venezuela, 2018). Described as the 'largest migration and refugee crisis in the Western hemisphere in modern history' (Bahar, Piccone & Trinkunas, 2018), it is one largely ignored by the world.

The country has been experiencing an economic meltdown that has led to shortages of food and medical supplies. Moreover, the violent crime rate in Venezuela is among the highest in the world and the economic crisis has led to widespread hunger across the country as inflation continues to rise and many people cannot afford basic necessities. Despite the fact that Venezuela was once a wealthy country with the largest proven oil reserves in the world, hyperinflation has meant that many people cannot afford to eat, and even they could, grocery store shelves have often been empty.

The exodus from Venezuela is the largest displacement in Latin America's history, resulting from a confluence of violence, poverty and hunger, for which is there is no immediate remedy or resolution (Betts, 2013). It is estimated that 5,000 people were departing daily at of the end of July 2018, amounting to 1 in 12 people in Venezuela. Comparatively, more than 5.5 million people have fled Syria since 2011, approximately 1 in 5 people. However, despite the desperate situation the people face, the UN Refugee Convention does not officially recognize 'fleeing due to economic meltdown' as a cause for seeking refuge (Millbank, 2019). Syrians arriving in other countries have been granted protection in accordance with the UN Refugee Convention, due to the immediate threat of war and violence. The Venezuelan case reflects a debate regarding whether those fleeing should be classified as economic migrants or refugees by the international community. Despite the causes of sudden migration being vastly different, the challenges families and individuals face on their journey and in their new countries are incredibly similar.

The large influx of Venezuelans in neighbouring countries is proving to be difficult. Sexual and gender based violence, exploitation and abuse, and a lack of access to basic rights for Venezuelans living along the border are on the increase (UNHCR, 2017). Though many of these countries have simplified the temporary residence application process, the pressure of migration has had significant consequences for the surrounding countries, most notably Colombia and Peru, the main transit countries for those leaving Venezuela.

This paper seeks to explore the nature of the exodus from Venezuela, and identify how and why it is not being viewed or declared a refugee crisis. The paper will also examine the impact of the crisis on the Venezuelan people, as well as on the broader region and the role. Equally important, the paper will scrutinise the motivations of global powers in providing support and extending political recognition to one party or the other in the midst of a period of strong rhetoric surrounding migration and refugees internationally. Further to this, it will look at how the crisis can be managed and why recognition is crucial to seeing a more effective global response.

Media Coverage and International Attention

The crisis is Venezuela has been largely shaped by economic factors, including unsustainable levels of external debt, and governmental policies that have led to hyperinflation. Combined with a drop in oil prices, as well as the paying off of loans to China and Russia through oil, there has been no choice but to cut imports by more than 70 percent. This has led to a social crisis, the people of Venezuela are suffering due to a lack of food, medicines and basic necessities, and 85 percent of households are now below the poverty line (Sequera, 2018). What began as an economic crisis has become a difficult humanitarian situation leading to mass migration.

The humanitarian crisis is not being acknowledged globally for a number of reasons. As Venezuelans walk hundreds of miles across the continent to find a home, the current government is rejecting offers of US aid because of the ensuing politicization. (TRT World, 2019). In doing so, the government is contributing to confusion internationally, with some countries utilising this as another opportunity to criticise the Maduro government, whilst others remain silent fearing a breakdown of relations. Moving past the pride of once being the richest economy in South America, acknowledgement from Maduro would necessitate accountability and the acceptance of humanitarian aid from the international community.

The international community fails to treat those leaving Venezuela as refugees due to the predominant understanding of the universally agreed upon UNHCR definition of a refugee:
Someone who has been forced to flee his or her country because of persecution, war or violence. A refugee has a well-founded fear of persecution for reasons of race, religion, nationality, political opinion or membership in a particular social group. (The 1951 Refugee Convention, 2010).

Despite the fact that the region developed one of the world's most advanced approaches to refugees as part of the 1984 Cartagena Declaration, and have included this definition in their respective national refugee legislation, there is a reluctance to recognise those fleeing Venezuela as refugees from a legal point of view. According to the text of the Cartagena Declaration (1984), refugees are more broadly defined as:
People who flee their country "because their lives, security or freedom have been threatened by generalized violence, foreign aggression, internal conflicts, massive violation of human rights or other circumstances which have seriously disturbed public order.

Neighbouring countries have welcomed Venezuelans warmly, helping them to integrate into the local economy. However, the regions' leaders fear the impact of further influx on infrastructures that are just managing to cope with the current migration trends (Freier, 2018). Despite the significant rise in crime, allegedly making Venezuela the second most violent country in the world (US Bureau of Diplomatic Security, 2018), along with the disruption of public order due to the numbers affected by food insecurity and malnourishment the Cartagena Declaration on Refugees has not been enacted by any of the regional signatories to the situation in Venezuela.

While there are have been many acts of individual kindness with Colombians opening their homes to Venezuelan migrants, and despite government efforts to enact policies to help better integrate Venezuelans, there has been increased hostility from the general public. Though the many who are sharing their small homes in Las Delicas (Martinez, 2018), an informal settlement formed following the armed conflict in Columbia, can relate to the uncertainty many Venezuelans face, they have not been received well by many neighbouring populations. Only 20 percent have applied for asylum, as many do not want to be recognized as asylum seekers due to the stigma attached to this identity (Martinez, 2018). Though governments in the region have been supportive and reformed policies to better integrate Venezuelans into their society, there is a lot of hostility from the public in many countries. Colombia, which has taken

on the largest number of Venezuelan migrants, has introduced many new measures to deal with the crisis.

There is a fear of a rise in xenophobic sentiment in Colombia, Brazil and Peru and some have even held protests to stop the entrance of migrants in border areas. This has been met with stern solidarity from many of the countries in the region. The President of Colombia asked '...all Colombians to steer clear of xenophobia and hostilities toward Venezuelans" ("Santos urges Colombians to reject xenophobia toward Venezuelan migrants", 2018). He also raised the issue with regards to elections as migration can be used to 'exacerbate fear for electoral ends'. Such active and vocal steps from leaders is preventing what has occurred over the past few years in Europe about the rhetoric surrounding Syrian refugees specifically. Despite the risks that come with signatory countries in the region recognising the crisis as a refugee crisis, in accordance with the Cartagena Declaration, it is essential in order to manage efficiently the near-constant flow of people leaving Venezuela.



US Role in Venezuela

Other factors that have influenced the response to the Venezuelan refugee crisis has been the long-time strategic approach the US has taken towards Venezuela. Rhetoric has become more anti-migrant during the Trump era. Despite this, the US has made numerous declarations of support and offers of aid for the Venezuelan people. At the same time, the US has continued to apply sanctions on the Venezuelan economy, exacerbating the situation to the point that the aid they are offering is needed. Here, there is a clear politicisation of aid, which ultimately serves to worsen the situation facing the Venezuelans.

The US has a long history of interventions in Latin America going back to the 1846 invasion of Mexico, leading to a treaty, which ultimately granted the US almost half of Mexico's territory (Associated Press, 2019). In terms of Venezuela, American interest in Venezuela's oil wealth is a significant driver behind US policy towards to the South American state. John Bolton, US National Security Advisor, has publicly expressed interest in the potential windfall for American oil companies investing in Venezuela (Hennigan, 2019). Following the re-election of Maduro in May 2018, The United States, the European Union and the G7 did not recognize the legitimacy of the elections, and therefore his mandate. They deemed the contest illegitimate, viewing 'the National Assembly as Venezuela's only democratic institution' (Congressional Research Service, 2019). For the US, this was not unprecedented given their long-standing policy of isolating the Maduro government.

Donald Trump's bold and controversial statement on the 24th January 2019, recognizing the opposition leader of the National Assembly, Juan Guaido, as President of Venezuela was simply an escalation of US interventionism in the region. Challenges to Maduro's by Guaido began as early as 2014 – prior to the current economic crisis - when oil prices were high and the economic environment was relatively stable (Ponceleon, 2019). More recently, Guaido's envoy to the US has discussed Venezuelan oil with foreign, particularly American oil companies, following a similar pattern to the 2002-attempted coup that deposed Maduro's predecessor, Hugo Chavez, for less than 48 hours. American commercial interests have dictated interventionist policy towards the region on multiple occasions, from the 1989 invasion of Panama, under the guise of overthrowing dictatorship, to support for military coups overthrowing democratically elected governments throughout the second half of the 20th century.

Venezuela has historically served as a major oil supplier to the US. However, relations deteriorated considerably during the course of the Chavez and Maduro years. This has been exacerbated recently as the Trump administration has enacted sanctions against Venezuelan officials alleged to be involved in human rights violations, corruption and drug trafficking. Broader sanctions were introduced in 2017, restricting the Venezuelan government's access to US financial markets (Main, 2018).

Meanwhile, the US is increasing its declarations of aid to the country. On September 24th 2018, Congress passed a bill stating that they would 'provide humanitarian relief to the Venezuelan people and Venezuelan migrants, to advance a constitutional and democratic solution to Venezuela's political crisis, to address Venezuela's economic reconstruction, to combat public corruption, narcotics trafficking, and money laundering, and for other purposes'. It is clear, in this instance, that US aid is being used as a political tool meant to advance US interests in the country ostensibly under the guise of 'democratisation'. The alliance of Trump and Guaido emphasises this, with Guaido making numerous statements focused on introducing aid into the country, formally challenging Maduro's stance of keeping borders closed to US assistance. On the 11th of February, the first cargo was delivered and subsequently publicised by Guaido and John Bolton, without specifying how it had been transported and received. US Aid has now become a tool in the battle between President Maduro and the opposition leader, reinforced in the name of restoring democracy in Venezuela.

The rhetoric of democracy has been deployed by the US through their active and vocal support for Guaido. Trump has regarded him as "a young and energetic gentleman" and the current crisis in the country as '...really democracy in action... I think the process is

playing out - very, very big tremendous protests.' (Al Jazeera, 2019) Despite the legitimacy of Guaido amongst some of the Venezuelan public, the intervention of Trump is one that is viewed negatively due to US history in the region. Only a third of Venezuelans support external military intervention (Trombetta, 2019), with many fearing the destruction of their country following previous historical American interventions. Adding to this, US media has capitalised on the opportunity, blaming 'socialism' for all of Venezuela's ills and the economic collapse being demonstrative of the failures of socialism in the region. This is despite the reality that multiple countries in South America have elected socialist-leaning governments, many of which have been successful at stabilizing their national economies, such as Bolivia and Peru (Toro, 2018). In the same way, very little coverage has been centred on the measures taken by neighbouring countries to address the migration crisis.

Whilst the US utilises this rhetoric, simultaneously implementing harsher financial sanctions, which have been more significant than many other destabilization efforts, it makes it difficult for the Maduro government to work through the crisis without outside help. The situation in Venezuela reflects an economic breakdown over a number of years under a particular government, worsened by US policy and sanctions placed on Venezuela. The dysfunctional exchange rate system, slow spiral into hyperinflation and ineffective price controls are now being blamed by the US on 'socialism' and the lack of a democratic government. (Velasco, 2018). The US media has rarely reported on the economic damage caused by financial sanctions- a financial embargo cutting off Venezuela from financial markets that has contributed to the shortages of essential goods, food and medicines. Though extreme, Trump's sanctions have not been significantly different to Obama's sanction regime, rather this is simply a continuum of a policy that has identified Venezuela as an 'extraordinary threat to the national security and foreign policy of the United States (The White House, 2015). This reinforces US policy interests in oil, now being masked in the guise of 'restoring democracy' in Venezuela.

In turn, this has isolated Maduro, who is using the opportunity to blame the current crisis in Venezuela on external factors, accusing the opposition of working with the US to topple the government (VOA, 2019). It has led Maduro to view any possible external support from the international community as a threat, further exacerbating the difficult situation the Venezuelan people are facing. International Red Cross and UN officials have spoken out about the politicisation of aid, and raised concerns about it being used for political ends (Dobson, 2019). The US- Guaido alliance is shifting focus on to a potential intervention from the US and the international community and neglecting the suffering of Venezuelans.

Anti-Migrant Rhetoric

The current crisis in Venezuela reflects a much broader issue globally, namely the tendency to focus on anti-migrant sentiments as the most significant element in approach to migrants. This has been illustrated with regards to anti- migrant sentiment in Europe as over 1 million displaced Syrians have come to Europe as asylum seekers or refugees since the conflict began. Whilst this mirrors a move to populism in Europe, and reveals a lack of trust and cohesion in European societies, it underestimates the work being done by countries in the immediate region. The numbers clearly evidence this; more than 5 million Syrians live in neighbouring countries in the Middle East and North Africa, over 3.6 million in Turkey, and 1 million in Lebanon, followed closely by Jordan and Iraq (Connor, 2018).

A parallel can be drawn with the USA in this case. Constant attention on Trump's controversial announcements and clear vocalisation of anti-migration sentiments effectively ignores the toll of this crisis on the rest of Latin America. Although more than 28,000 Venezuelans have filed asylum petitions in the US in the last year alone, most of this exodus over the past 5 years has been to other South American countries. Over 1.7 million Venezuelans have left since 2015 to neighbouring countries such as Colombia, Peru, Ecuador, Chile, Argentina and Brazil (European Parliament, 2018).

This mass migration is placing a lot of pressure on public services and informal job markets in the main host countries, while also contributing to an increase



in social tensions. Many of the local communities Venezuelans are entering are also living on the threshold of poverty (Dowling, 2018). Ecuador has seen a deterioration of the labour market, which started before the arrival of the Venezuelans, and has had to declare a state of emergency in three of its provinces (World News, 2018).

Brazil has also grown in importance as a destination and transit country. As of April 2018, 50,000 Venezuelans had applied for asylum and residence. However as most people enter through the Roraima State land border with Venezuela, a state of emergency had to be declared after 30,000 Venezuelans arrived in the state capital, which has a population of 350,000. Brazil's federal government has sent the army to provide humanitarian assistance and stem violence between locals and migrants (Mahlke & Yamamoto, 2017). Violence has been a recurring issue in the region and Brazil has also implemented a reinforcement of

border security. Though Brazil has worked to build temporary shelters, vaccination and immunisation, measures have been taken to avoid conflict with the local population. This includes relocation to other Brazilian cities to ease migratory pressure as well as establishing 'a control regime' for entering the country.

Other significant impacts on the region has been a higher rate of crime as well as illegal work for many Venezuelans who have left. Many have come from professional sectors such as the airline industry and have been sold the dream of a job in neighbouring countries to instead be trapped into human trafficking and prostitution. This is leading to a higher rate of crime as well as health issues in countries, which already face many social, and health issues. Colombia's busiest border town, Cucuta, is reporting a significantly higher number of cases of HIV.

The challenges Venezuelans face when they enter other countries in the region has an effect on their morale. Leaving a broken economy with severe shortages of food, medicines and medical supplies and a country classified by the WHO as facing an emergency, Venezuelans come from one situation of feeling incredibly helpless to falling into poverty as they leave the borders of Venezuela. This is another indicator of their desperation to flee, and indicates a need for recognition of refugee status.

Though the initial policies of neighbouring countries have been welcoming, many have had to change these policies as the number of migrants has grown. The Peruvian government changed their laws between 2017 and 2018, initially granting temporary residence permits to migrants who entered the country before 2 February 2017, extended to October 2018, providing access to work, education, health and justice. Due to such a large influx of numbers, with over 100,000 permits being processed, regulations changed in August 2018 requiring Venezuelan citizens entering the country to present a passport (European Parliament, 2018).

The regional response to the crisis has been strong and is not given enough attention in the media. Led by Ecuador, ministers from over a dozen countries in Latin America, including Argentina, Brazil, Colombia, Costa Rica, Chile, Mexico, Panama, Paraguay, Peru, the Dominican Republic, and Uruguay participated in the Quito meeting on issues of asylum, documentation, data collection, fighting against sexual based violence and xenophobia (Regional Inter-Agency Coordination Platform for Refugees and Migrants from Venezuela, 2018).

Though the international community adopted a resolution in September 2018 to promote and protect the human rights in Venezuela, the assistance provided has been insufficient. The EU has provided $35.1 million in emergency aid and medium term development assistance for the Venezuelan people. The group of 11 nations signed a declaration urging 'substantially increased resources' (Valencia, 2018) and further support from the international community. Despite such work to deal with the crisis, Brazil, Ecuador and Peru have declared a state of emergency in entry points, to be able to implement measures that meet humanitarian needs and public health and security issues.

If the issue were officially declared a refugee or humanitarian crisis, there would be more of a chance to address it. The U.N would be able to step up its role and there may be a higher chance of facilitating a dialogue within the country to deal with immediate humanitarian issues. If the international community and Quito group of countries recognise this as a hemisphere-wide refugee crisis, receiving countries can be better supported to provide basic protections and additional funding from the international community. So far, less than $150 billion has been provided by the US and Europe (Bahar, Piccone & Trinkunas, 2018). Comparatively international donors have been able to give much more during officially recognised refugee crises.

Maduro's Reliance on Russia and China

National interests cannot be ignored when looking at why the current crisis is not being regarded as a humanitarian one. Oil revenues are an important part of Venezuela's economy. They account for 98% of the country's export earnings as Venezuela holds the largest reserves in the world (Congressional Research Service, 2019). As dynamics have shifted in the surrounding region, relations with Maduro have shifted. The region is split with regards to isolating Venezuela, however Cuba, Bolivia and Nicaragua have been working actively with the Maduro government through formal alliances regarding exports of oil within the region (Congressional Research Service, 2019).

China and Russia, have been providing large sources of financing and investment, particularly in a period when the USA has been imposing sanctions. This has become fundamental to their economies also, and a mutual reliance has formed between Venezuela, Russia and China. Chinese investments have led to incredible political and economic influence. China has lent over $60 billion to Venezuela in return for oil. Russia's national oil company is owed $3 billion by Caracas, and owns two offshore gas fields in Venezuela with stakes in assets boasting more than 20m tonnes of crude (Gabuev, 2019). They work politically to provide support for one another at multilateral meetings and on the international stage (Stuenkel, 2019). Acknowledging that there is a humanitarian crisis has the potential to further destabilise a country that has worked hard to build relations with these two powers.

US companies are one of the biggest buyers of Venezuelan oil, and US sanctions motivated by the need to secure influence politicised through formal endorsement of the opposition, have created more of a need for Venezuela to rely on other foreign powers in order to remain stable. Cuba is also a strong ally with a longstanding relationship with Venezuela. The US has served as a mutual challenge for both countries, further consolidating a partnership between the two. Maduro is reliant on the countries who have stood against foreign intervention in Venezuela. Russia, South Africa, Turkey, China, and Iran, as well as Bolivia, Cuba, Mexico, Nicaragua, and Uruguay remain incredibly important to Venezuela at this time.

With trade deals remaining incredibly important to the countries supporting the current government in the midst of an economic crisis, it is clear that declaring a humanitarian crisis will weaken the position of a country that has significant oil wealth. (Stuenkel, 2019).Regardless of government and regime shift, the real problem that Venezuela faces, is a long term reliance on oil, it must be strategically worked through in order to ensure the country can run itself without intervention from any other major players. This will require a drastic change in economic policy, once the immediate needs of Venezuela's citizens have been met. Furthermore, working effectively with the countries hosting the largest number of Venezuelans would demonstrate accountability and responsibility from Maduro, in being able to put the Venezuelan people first and help him build more allies in his neighbouring countries, who are also concerned with US influence in the region.

Reducing human suffering could be the start of dealing with this crisis. If the region can acknowledge the crisis as a refugee crisis based on the Cartagena Declaration, surrounding nations such as Brazil and Colombia who have received so many impoverished people may be better able to manage the crises. It could also provide the region with the opportunity to work together with the government and civil society to support Venezuela to reach an end to the immediate humanitarian crisis that its people have been living through over the past five years.



Conclusion

The Venezuelan exodus remains a headline on the global stage. However, as opposed to the focus on the human suffering occurring and the destitute poverty many are forced to live in, the conversation remains dominated by major players with interests in the region. From Russia's longstanding interests in the region, to an intensified economic decline exacerbated by US sanctions, providing them with the opportunity to further an interventionist strategy towards the country and region, the Venezuelan people and aid are being politicised as opposed to prioritised.

There is no doubt that due to these issues building over the last 10 years, this will continue. However, what needs to be paid attention to are the people who are suffering and what the region should do to cope. The region needs to work more actively together to deal with a humanitarian crisis that they have primarily taken on and therefore applying pressure on Maduro to adopt the declaration would be the best step forward. In doing so, they may be able to prevent a physical intervention that the United States has threatened on numerous counts and deal with this issue with a regional focus.

Officially recognising the crisis as a refugee crisis is a risk for Venezuela, and will undoubtedly affect the national morale of a country that has long been a source of power and stability in the region. It may also be a considerable point of contention with Maduro's allies, as he works through the economic crisis. However, in order to prevent escalation of the crisis, the Cartagena declaration needs to be declared by one of the governments that have incorporated this into their national law. Utilising a regional declaration that that could support the cooperation of the region to deal with the crisis. Further to this, the Brazil Declaration was adopted by 28 countries and three territories in Latin American and the Caribbean on the 2-3 December 2014. Celebrating 30 years of the Cartagena Declaration, this focuses on the 'protection of Refugees and Stateless Persons in the Americas.' Utilising regional solidarity and building on a definition agreed upon 30 years prior, that could support those fleeing Venezuela currently. The UNHCR and IACHR consider the circumstances leading to the mass outflow of people within this definition. It is advocated for by the humanitarian community as a possible solution to provide the support that is required during the Venezuelan displacement crisis.

It would be the first time this declaration is applied to a crisis in the region, but by implementing legislation that has been formally set up since 1984, the region will be able to hold its own and establish the attention it deserves to best serve the Venezuelan people. It will provide the opportunity to gain donor support necessary to ensure they can cope effectively and prevent further crime, violence and stability within their own countries. It is difficult to see a change in sight for a migration crisis that began as early as 2012. Regardless of a change in leadership, the Venezuelan people will not see a rapid change in the state of the country due to a long history and build up to the crisis caused by political, social and primarily economic causes.

Recognition is crucial to seeing a more effective global response to this crisis and regional cooperation will only consolidate work that South America has already been doing together to provide the best solution possible for the Venezuelan people.

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