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The Venezuela Regional Humanitarian Crisis and COVID-19

The deteriorating humanitarian situation in Venezuela has elevated congressional concerns about the country, which remains in a deep crisis under the authoritarian rule of President Nicolás Maduro. Even before the Coronavirus Disease 2019 (COVID-19) pandemic, Venezuelans were facing a lack of food, medicine and health, and access to social services. Political persecution, hyperinflation, loss of income, and oppressive poverty also contributed to a dire situation. According to household surveys, the percentage of Venezuelans living in poverty increased from 48.4% in 2014 to 96% in 2019 (80% in extreme poverty). By the end of 2020, more than 7 million people were estimated to require humanitarian assistance, with pregnant and nursing women, those with chronic illnesses, indigenous people, migrants, children under five, and people with disabilities particularly in need. Food insecurity is a significant issue, mainly due to the price of food rather than its lack of availability. Many households do not have reliable access to potable water, and interruptions in electrical service and gas supplies are common. With a collapsed health system, overall health indicators, particularly infant and maternal mortality rates, have worsened. Along with COVID-19, previously eradicated diseases have become a major concern. Fuel shortages, exacerbated by the end of U.S.-licensed oil for diesel swaps in the fall of 2020, have reportedly had an impact on humanitarian aid delivery.

Displacement

As of April 5, 2021, U.N. agencies estimated more than 5.6 million Venezuelans had fled the country. Roughly 4.7 million (about 85%) of the refugees and migrants were hosted in Latin American and Caribbean countries, with more than 1.7 million Venezuelans in Colombia (see **Figure 1**). Responses to the Venezuelan arrivals have varied by country and continue to evolve with events on the ground. The displacement crisis has affected the entire region, as neighboring countries strain to absorb arrivals often malnourished and in poor health. Although the U.N. High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) does not consider most Venezuelans to be refugees, it asserts that a significant number of displaced Venezuelans need humanitarian assistance, international protection, and opportunities to regularize their status. Venezuela's exodus has become an unprecedented displacement crisis for the Western Hemisphere, which has in place some of the highest protection standards in the world for displaced and vulnerable persons. The countries in the region have been 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. More than 2.5 million Venezuelans in neighboring countries lack identification documents, making them vulnerable to exploitation. In a move welcomed in the region and by the international community, the Colombian government

announced an initiative in February 2021 to provide 10-year temporary protection status to Venezuelan migrants in Colombia. With separate global compacts on refugees and migration adopted in 2018, experts urge timely and predictable funding from the international community to support host government efforts to assist Venezuelan refugees and migrants and the communities sheltering them.

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



Source: CRS.

Since March 21, 2021, fighting between Venezuelan military forces and Colombian non-state armed groups based in Venezuela's Apure State has driven displacement in and around Apure, Venezuela. Increased security concerns and existing COVID-19-related movement restrictions have affected humanitarian access. As of April 14, the Pan American Health Organization (PAHO) and the Venezuelan Red Cross were the only relief organizations assisting populations in the area. Roughly 5,800 people have fled across the border to Colombia's Arauca Department, where authorities are providing humanitarian assistance and protection to the recently displaced; however, this has raised concerns that cash assistance could provide an incentive for displaced Venezuelans to remain in Colombia.

Coronavirus Disease 2019

COVID-19 emerged in Venezuela in mid-March 2020 and added a complicated layer to the country's humanitarian crisis. In general, vulnerable populations often live in

crowded, unsanitary conditions that make them particularly susceptible to COVID-19 and present significant challenges to response and containment. PAHO and the U.N. Children's Fund (UNICEF) have led the international COVID-19 response in Venezuela, prioritizing capacity-building support for hospitals, as well as health, water, and sanitation interventions for vulnerable populations. PAHO has facilitated negotiations to obtain and distribute vaccines through the World Health Organization's COVAX mechanism. To access approximately 11 million vaccines through COVAX, on April 10, 2021, the Maduro government reportedly paid \$64 million and then on April 18, it announced an unspecified second payment.

In neighboring countries, UNHCR, the International Organization for Migration (IOM), and their partners have sought to address the immediate public health needs of refugees and migrants, as well as the displaced prompted by the virus, while trying to reduce the spread and conduct information and awareness campaigns. A year into the pandemic, transmission and deaths due to the virus among those affected by the humanitarian crisis are unclear, as widespread reporting, testing, and data are lacking. The pandemic has impeded progress on existing humanitarian priorities, and its secondary impacts (such as increased food insecurity, protection risks, and poverty) have exacerbated an already challenging humanitarian situation. COVID-19 prevention measures that restrict movement (such as physical distancing, quarantine orders, and border closures) have disrupted the informal economy, cross-border economic activity, and remittances, and loss of livelihoods and economic decline have made it difficult for Venezuelans to meet their basic needs. The pandemic has complicated many Venezuelans' decisions about whether to stay, leave, or, in a much smaller number of cases, return to Venezuela. Venezuelan returnees have presented challenges in border areas, particularly with COVID-19 and absent the establishment of a formal returns process.

International Humanitarian Response in Venezuela

Beginning in 2019, the U.N. Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (UNOCHA) set up its coordination structure, including regional hubs in the country. As of August 2020, the humanitarian space had expanded to 129 operational actors implementing 234 projects. Humanitarian access inside Venezuela has been a challenge for many humanitarian organizations. As further indication, on April 14, 2021, the Maduro government mandated that NGOs operating in Venezuela register with its Office Against Organized Crime and Terrorism Financing. The Humanitarian Response Plan (HRP) in Venezuela is a collective effort by UNOCHA and implementing partners to coordinate and scale up a response across the country, with assistance in the areas of health, water, sanitation and hygiene, food security, nutrition, protection, shelter and nonfood items, and education. The 2021 HRP has sought \$762.5 million in aid and targets assistance for 4.5 million of the country's most vulnerable people. Following lengthy negotiations that began in 2019, on April 19, 2021, the U.N. World Food Program (WFP) and the Maduro government signed a memorandum of understanding that would allow WFP to establish a humanitarian presence inside Venezuela with full operational independence from the Maduro

regime. WFP plans to provide food assistance to 185,000 of the most vulnerable children by the end of 2021 and to 1.5 million children by the end of the 2022-2023 school year. The estimated budget for this program is \$190 million, which will be funded through the Venezuela HRP.

International Humanitarian Regional Response

UNHCR and IOM coordinate the international response to the needs of displaced Venezuelans and host communities in the region, which includes governments, U.N. entities, NGOs (national and international), the Red Cross Movement, faith-based organizations, and civil society. The Regional Interagency Coordination Platform provides a common humanitarian framework for assistance. The 2021 Regional Refugee and Migrant Response Plan, launched in December 2020, appealed for \$1.4 billion to reach 3.3 million of the most vulnerable across Latin America and the Caribbean. Protection and assistance needs are significant for arrivals and host communities, particularly in border areas. Services provided vary by country but include reception centers and options for shelter; emergency relief items, legal assistance with asylum applications and other matters; protection from violence and exploitation; and temporary work programs and education opportunities.

U.S. Humanitarian Assistance

Since FY2017 and as of December 2020, the U.S. government has provided more than \$1 billion in humanitarian and emergency food assistance in response to the Venezuela regional crisis. The Department of Defense has twice deployed a naval hospital ship on medical support deployments. In FY2020, U.S. humanitarian assistance included \$528.5 million to support Venezuelan refugees and migrants who fled to other countries (or for the communities hosting them) and \$94.3 million for humanitarian relief activities inside Venezuela. In addition, for the COVID-19 response, the United States provided nearly \$13.7 million for Venezuela and \$33.6 million for the region.

Issues for Congress

Congressional interest in the humanitarian situation has focused on displacement in the region, the political situation in Venezuela, and the overall humanitarian response. Some Members have also expressed concerns about the humanitarian impact of sanctions, particularly during the COVID-19 pandemic. In the 117th Congress, oversight is likely to continue on U.S. humanitarian assistance, as well as on contingency planning. U.S. officials and Members of Congress have praised the April 2021 WFP agreement with Venezuela. In keeping with international humanitarian standards, U.S. humanitarian assistance is provided on the basis of need and according to principles of universality, impartiality, and independence. However, an April 2021 USAID Office of Inspector General report assesses some challenges USAID faces in responding to the Venezuela regional crisis, identifies areas of fraud risk in the humanitarian response, and makes recommendations to improve USAID's approach.

Rhoda Margesson, Acting Section Research Manager
Clare Ribando Seelke, Specialist in Latin American Affairs

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