



LA Quarterly magazine
December 2020

n° 137

CHRONIQUE



Interview
« Lockdown or repression? »

Focus
**Adriana, a
Venezuelian in
Colombia**

Reportage
**The Venezuelan crisis, the second
biggest migrant crisis after Syria**

Humanitarian information from



**PREMIERE
URGENCE
INTERNATIONALE**



A crisis overlooked by the international community

Since 2013, Venezuela has experienced an economic downturn and other issues such as inflation coupled with episodes of hyperinflation, and political, social and institutional tensions. Public services have collapsed and there are frequent shortages of basic services such as food, electricity, water and medicines.

In 2020, thousands of Venezuelan refugees and migrants have been entering Colombia on a daily basis through various entry points along the Colombian-Venezuelan border, especially in North Santander and Arauca. **Adriana, a Venezuelan refugee who made the difficult journey with no resources and without her family members says that "the old Venezuela does not exist anymore"**. It is thought that the people arriving now are facing harsher conditions than earlier migrants, and that they are generally poorer than those who were able to travel earlier. *"One of the specific problems that Venezuelan migrants have is that many of them are not legally registered as refugees or asylum seekers, even though they should be subject to provisions to ensure their protection,"* says **Tinou-paï Blanc, Emergency Officer for Première Urgence Internationale**.

Especially since the COVID-19 crisis, during which over 1 million people have already been infected in Colombia, there has been a severe rise in vulnerability, a lack of access to basic goods, services, and livelihoods, and increasing xenophobia. This aggravation of the crisis has resulted in the Regional Refugee and Migrant Response Plan (published by the United Nations in 2020 following Covid-19) which estimates that there are **3.22 million people in need in Colombia, including 1.77 million Venezuelans and 600,000 Colombians in the country**.

Unfortunately, despite this emergency situation, the crisis in the region remains largely overlooked by the international community. **This is particularly evident in terms of funding, with only 7% and 13.7% of the needs' costs being financed in Venezuela and Colombia respectively**. This gap in funding and resources has very real consequences, with humanitarian organisations struggling to provide urgent and basic response programmes.

To respond to this crisis, **Première Urgence Internationale** is working in consortium with **Solidarités International** in Colombia, with programmes aiming to improve access to quality medical care and mental and psychosocial support, but also to improve shelter, water, hygiene and sanitation services, and ensure the distribution of food. *"We are fortunate to be able to reach highly vulnerable populations and conduct vital response activities in Colombia, despite the general lack of international resources being provided to the country."*

Adrian Fleming,
Head of Mission Colombia, Première Urgence Internationale

THE VENEZUELAN CRISIS, THE SECOND BIGGEST MIGRANT CRISIS AFTER SYRIA

With 15% of the population having left the country, the Venezuelan crisis is, in terms of numbers, the second biggest migrant crisis after Syria, but the biggest if we discount countries at war.

As the country taking in most people, Colombia is particularly affected by the arrival of thousands of Venezuelans. This influx of people creates huge pressure for a society already weakened by its own long-term crisis. Humanitarian needs remain very substantial, both for the host population and for the displaced persons.

The Venezuelan crisis

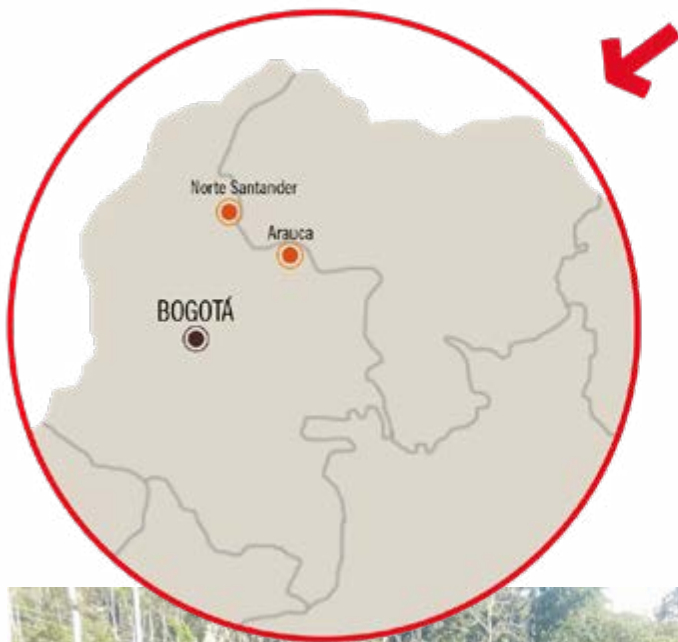
In 2013, Venezuela suffered an economic crisis, mainly caused by its economy's dependence on oil revenue. The scale of this crisis can also be attributed to political, social and institutional tensions within the country. Since then, daily life for Venezuelans has consistently worsened, through record hyperinflation rates, a fall in growth and a higher unemployment rate. At the same time, basic public services have collapsed and food, electrical and medical shortages are frequent.

According to the Humanitarian Response Plan published by the United Nations in July 2020, **over 96% of Venezuelans are living in poverty**. This impoverishment is fuelling an increasing insecurity, making Venezuela one of the most dangerous countries in the world in terms of criminality. This situation has led **over 5 million Venezuelans to flee to surrounding countries**. The long journey that they take, generally on foot, to cross the border via the Andes can take several weeks, at high altitudes and particularly low temperatures. Because of its proximity to Venezuela, Colombia is the first country that takes in the Caminantes - or exiles - who walk this route. Since February, there have been 1.8 million Venezuelan refugees in the country.

COVID-19 in Colombia

The year 2020 has been marked by the rapid exponential spread of the Covid-19 pandemic across the world. Far from being free of this global health crisis, the first cases were detected in Colombia in March. The government has taken several measures to slow down the spread of the virus: closing borders (including the one with Venezuela), introducing a curfew, social distancing and a ban on mass gatherings. Despite these efforts, Colombia remains the second most affected country in Latin America, after Brazil and Argentina, with over a million cases and 35,000 deaths at the end of November 2020 (source: Johns Hopkins).

The Covid-19 pandemic has **heightened the pre-existing crises in Colombia**, with significant impact in several provinces, in particular the departments of **Norte de Santander and Arauca** which are on the route taken by the displaced persons.



While these departments take in huge numbers of displaced persons, the aid mechanisms dedicated to them have been drastically reduced by the restrictions relating to the pandemic. Because of this, Venezuelans who have fled from their homeland assemble in parks and informal settlements in Colombian towns, the "asentamientos", with little or no support.

These already fragile people are becoming even more vulnerable with aid becoming scarce. Beyond the social and economic consequences of the massive influx of Venezuelans, these people tend to be **more stigmatised** in a rampant health crisis situation and with infection rates rising.

This brings a risk of **xenophobia being exacerbated**, as Alba Pereira, Director of the 'Entre dos Tierras' foundation, a partner to Première Urgence Internationale in Colombia, explains: *"If we don't offer a real, effective and clear response, there's a risk of social explosion, from both the host communities and the migrants themselves."*

Facing all these difficulties and without any real or obvious response, many Venezuelans decide to go back to their homeland. *"As clear proof of the deterioration in conditions and of the inadequate Colombian response, many Venezuelans are actually looking to go back to the border. Every day, they gather in the parks in Bucaramanga to find a means of*



transport or to start the difficult 7-day walk home," explains Adrian Fleming, Première Urgence Internationale's mission leader in Colombia.

Masses of vulnerable people returning back to their homeland create unique and significant challenges, in particular in the midst of a pandemic, when travelling is strictly limited.



The need for an emergency response

In order to cover all of the problems, Première Urgence Internationale is mobilising its teams to respond to the needs of Venezuelan refugees during their exodus and after they have moved to Colombia. Along the migration route between Cúcuta and Bucaramanga, the main objective is to mitigate the lack of shelter resources and to offer adequate protection to the migrants. This is being done through building or reconstructing water supply infrastructures, installing functional, safe and decent toilet facilities, or restoring sanitation infrastructures.

While sanitary conditions are very worrying in this area, they are similar in the Colombian towns where the displaced populations are ever-increasing.

Therefore the programmes we are carrying out aim to **improve Venezuelan migrants' access to quality medical care. Mobile medical teams** are working mainly in the Arauca department (the Colombian department with the largest number of Venezuelans compared to its local population), and in Norte de Santander to respond to health care needs. They can provide primary health care and psychosocial support, as well as awareness-raising sessions and a response to the Covid-19 pandemic. In this specific Colombian context, the humanitarian response aims to build up resilience, both in the host population and in the displaced populations, in particular by reestablishing access to basic services.

Although the scale of the current Covid-19 crisis makes it impossible to predict the changing situation exactly, this emergency work is designed to respond to the most essential needs during this critical time in the pandemic. The work aims to alleviate the crisis' most negative effects on people who are already very vulnerable in Colombia.

Première Urgence Internationale's mission has not been suspended during the pandemic: work has simply been adapted to the situation, offering distanced medical appointments, for example.



Since February, there have been 1.8 million Venezuelan refugees in the country »

ADRIANA, A VENEZUELAN IN COLOMBIA

Adriana comes from Barquisimeto, a city in Lara State in Venezuela, and she is 19 years old. She decided to move to Colombia and she arrived on 4 July 2020. Her mother was hoping to come with her, but because of the Covid-19 pandemic, she was not allowed to cross the border.

"I lived with my parents and worked in Venezuela, but I did not have a good relationship with my father, and he gave me an ultimatum to leave. So I decided to come to Colombia. When I arrived, life was easier and the situation was a bit more stable before the pandemic. I took the bus from home as far as Guasdualito. From there, I took another bus to La Victoria which is near the border. On the way, the police were conducting checks to ensure that no illegal substances or contraband objects were being passed across the border. In reality, they were also asking for money. If you own anything of value, they try to find a reason for searching you and taking whatever you have. In actual fact, you realise that the people who are there to protect you do the opposite. They take what little you have. The people who go through this journey are the ones who want to work and find a better future for their families."



Access to inconsistent care

Most Venezuelans have very few resources, and there is no way for them to generate any income when they arrive in Colombia. The need for sexual and reproductive health services has been rising as the general profile of migrants has changed. Over a three-month period (May to July 2019) the refuge Samaritan's Purse Berlin, based in the area on the migration route targeted by the Première Urgence Internationale teams, has recorded a total **of 275 pregnant women, 53 people with disabilities, and 199 unaccompanied children and adolescents.**

However, the services they need are non-existent along the migration route. Some centres in Bucaramanga can offer this type of care, but access to it remains a challenge due to the refugees' status and the cost of care. This results in most pregnant and lactating women having no access to antenatal care (ANC), postnatal care (PNC) services or midwifery services. **With its work, Première Urgence Internationale wants to underline how urgent the need is to develop proper access to healthcare and sexual and reproductive health services, while improving the protective environment for people with specific needs or particularly vulnerable men, women, boys and girls.**

Première Urgence Internationale is responding to the immediate psychosocial needs identified among the "Caminantes" (the name given to Venezuelan displaced persons who have migrated on foot) to offer psychological first aid and reduce their level of distress by providing emotional support.

Adriana arrived at one of Première Urgence Internationale's mobile clinics in Araquita for help after being transferred by the organisation's hotline.

"It all went very well when I arrived at the hospital, and I was very well treated. I never felt there were any racism issues, and they were very attentive. I was also given medication. This is a very good system because it is the only way many people can have access to this service. I am very grateful. The psychologist I saw was attentive and friendly."

The fear of increasing discrimination

Adriana has been in Colombia for over a year, working in a restaurant where she is a victim of discrimination because of her nationality. The large number of migrants brings increased xenophobia as jobs and opportunities dry up for working-class Colombians who are already struggling.

"My experience has been a little difficult but good in comparison to the situation in Venezuela now. It is much better than being back there. If at any point my story seems tough, what I have experienced has been easy compared to the horrible things other people have to face on their journey. I consider myself lucky in comparison to many others.

It is very sad to have a bad reputation everywhere, simply because of my nationality. Some Venezuelans are not authorised to work, for no other reason than their nationality. This rejection is a consequence of inadmissible behaviour by some of my compatriots. It is unfortunate that every Venezuelan has to pay for an unpleasant minority."



« LOCKDOWN OR REPRESSION? »

Fernando GARLIN POLITIS, doctoral student at the Centre for Population and Development (CEPED) at the French National Research Institute for Sustainable Development (IRD) and at Paris Descartes University. The title of his ongoing ethnology thesis is: Humanitarian States? Ethnography of humanitarian policies and practices in Venezuela and in Colombia.

In your research, you have studied the management of this migration crisis and in particular in the Colombian government's pushback practices. Have you observed any changes during the COVID-19 pandemic?

From when the lockdown began in Colombia on 22 March to 31 August, 1% of the migrant Venezuelan population have returned to their homeland every month. In February, Migración Colombia, the border agency managing migration, announced that 1.825 million Venezuelans were in Colombian territory, and in June, this number was 1,748,716. According to the National Statistics Bureau (DANE), 90% of these people are working illegally.

Other international organisations estimate that the number may be nearer 3 million Venezuelans and think that the official figures are too low. Despite these differences, Migración Colombia and most of the NGOs surveyed agree on two points: first, that closing the borders during lockdown has reduced the flow of migrants, and second, that opening the borders again will lead to a new arrival of Venezuelans.

On the humanitarian aid side, what consequences linked to the pandemic have you observed?

With the long Colombian lockdown measures, most of the offices offering aid to migrants have been closed, and hostels taking in Venezuelans, most of which are managed by female Venezuelan migrants, have been left without any financial support. Against this backdrop, the Covid-19 pandemic has put a strain on the Colombian migration policies regarding the Venezuelan migrants' precarious situation.

On 1 April, the eviction of a group of Venezuelans who were living in some housing rented out by some slum landlords sparked a debate around how the migration and health crisis was being managed in Bogota . After this, Bogota municipal council announced that the problem was the responsibility of Migración Colombia, and two weeks later the national government issued a new presidential decree with the aim of suspending the instruction or enforcement of any eviction measures imposed by an administrative or judicial authority until 30 June. Then on 30 April the Colombian president announced a series of economic measures to protect the Venezuelan migrant population at the border. But these were, and I quote, "measures that encourage competition, that help to create jobs and that also encourage businesses to develop. As we have said, these are measures that help us face the crisis, but also help us prepare these areas for a return to democracy in Venezuela." Yet these statements have not been backed up by more effective aid systems for the migrant population, but merely the announcement of the introduction of a biometric identification scheme...

From this point, we could speculate that the lockdown measures and border closures in Colombia have increased the economic insecurity and lack of protection experienced by the Venezuelan migrant population in Colombia. The limits on discourse of "integration through work" have also been noted. These dynamics show the subtle forms of repression throughout the pandemic, favouring "competition" and technological innovation in migration management. It will be interesting to see the extent to which these policies will facilitate or complicate the Venezuelan population's migratory experiences.

VISIT US ON www.premiere-urgence.org

FOLLOW US



QUESTIONS ?

Feel free to get in touch:

Tél : +33 (0)1 55 66 99 66

Email : contact@premiere-urgence.org

La Chronique is published by Première Urgence Internationale, an international solidarity NGO
Headquarters: 2 rue Auguste Thomas, 92600 Asnières-sur-Seine. Tel : +33 (0) 1 55 66 99 66.
www.premiere-urgence.org

Publication director: Thierry Mauricet | Coordination and Conception : Chiara Ciampa & Raouia Benhnia
The whole Première Urgence Internationale Team worked on this newsletter.

PRINTER: Cap Impression / DELIVERY : Adarys