

Forum: Security Council
Issue: The Situation in Venezuela
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Introduction

The crisis in Venezuela is said to have started during the presidency of Hugo Chávez, who was the leader of Venezuela from 1999 until his death in 2013. The crisis is marked by major socioeconomic and political issues including hyperinflation, police brutality, escalating starvation, crime, and mortality rates, all leading to a significant number of refugees emigrating from the nation. When the presidency passed to Nicolás Maduro in 2013, the crisis grew worse as a result of the government's lack of responsibility and plummeting oil prices. Instead of addressing falling oil revenues, on which Venezuela is heavily dependent, the government refused to acknowledge its existence, to the extent of using violence to repress protesters. The consensus that most of the international community has come to agree upon is that Venezuelan authorities, primarily those under the authority of Maduro, are largely to blame for the atrocities that have been committed, the lack of explicit communication with the public, and irresponsibility in the face of the crisis.

Extreme violence and extrajudicial killings committed by the Venezuelan government are becoming widespread: in 2018 and 2019 alone, the United Nations (UN) reported that the Special Action Forces (FAES)—a unit under the command of the Venezuelan National Police—was the cause of more than 6,800 deaths. There was also documented evidence that the FAES had engaged in the torture of prisoners. In response, the Maduro regime deemed the report as “biased”. So far, the UN has characterized these killings as “aimed at neutralizing, repressing and criminalizing political opponents and people critical of the government,” allowing Maduro to retain his power. It is on reasonable grounds that the UN suggests that the government is guilty of corruption, committing human rights violations, repressing civilians, and economic mismanagement.

The average Venezuelan faces the dilemma of staying in the country while being unable to meet basic needs or emigrating and becoming a refugee/migrant. By 2017, more than 50% of Venezuelans were not able to meet their basic food needs with the income level that they had, leading to a massive hunger crisis. In 2019, the UN reported that an estimated 94% of Venezuelans lived in poverty and up to 25% were in need of humanitarian assistance. As of present times, almost 20% of the Venezuelan population (amounting to 5.4 million emigrants) has left the country. Even with the ever-pervasive threat

of COVID-19, people continue to leave the country to escape the “violence, insecurity, lack of food, medicine, and essential services”. The Venezuelan Crisis has led to one of the largest cases of displacements in the world.

Definition of Key Terms

Refugee

A refugee is a person who has left their country to escape from war, conflict, or persecution. This persecution is often based on race, religion, and political opinion. Declaring oneself a refugee entitles a person to non-refoulement, which is a principle of international law dictating that refugees have the right not to be sent back to the country they left.

Hyperinflation

Hyperinflation describes rapid, uncontrollable inflation, which is an increase in the general price level of an economy. While minor inflation is normally a positive sign for the economy, hyperinflation can cause severe economic damage and cause prices to spiral out of control. Hyperinflation typically describes instances where price levels increase by more than 50% per month.

Extrajudicial killings

Extrajudicial killings, or extrajudicial executions, occurs when government authorities execute people without the sanction of any legal processes. Considered by most as one of the most unethical human rights violations, extrajudicial killings have become a common sighting in Venezuela. Death squads especially target those who are opponents of or have expressed dissent about the government.

Asylum

Asylum is the protection granted to a person by a state or foreign embassy, deeming the person a political refugee. Asylum-seekers mainly consist of refugees who are seeking protection in a foreign country. Similar to refugees, asylum-seekers flee to escape persecution or human rights violations.

Background Information

The refugee crisis

Causes and effects

One of the largest migration crises in Latin American history, the exodus of Venezuelans is primarily due to government oppression and shortages of food and healthcare. Emigration has also been motivated by the rising crime and inflation rates, general uncertainty about the future of the country, and an ongoing political battle. Returnees who are unable to attain legal status as emigrants in other countries are often subject to abuse upon their arrival back in the country. There are documented cases of pro-government organizations “threatening, verbally-harassing, and mistreating” returnees. Although Venezuelan refugees may be able to escape the political, economic, and humanitarian crises of their country, many are unable to fully integrate into another country. Being emigrants means that their ability to obtain work permits may be undermined; thus, they may not be able to have regular access to education and healthcare. Experiencing exploitation, xenophobia, and abuse in a foreign country is common for Venezuelan refugees. Some Venezuelans may even find themselves stranded at borders without being able to receive the necessary legal protections to become a refugee—this issue is due to the lack of a coordinated regional migration system.

Statistics

- 5.4 million refugees and migrants have left Venezuela, according to government figures. Actual numbers may be much higher.
- 800,000 Venezuelans have applied for asylum worldwide.
- 130,000 migrants forced to return to Venezuela because of COVID lockdowns
- 32 is the median emigrant age

Government issues

Persecution of political opponents

The Venezuelan government has kept its power by persecuting any and all political opponents. Previously, political opponents have been jailed, essentially preventing them from running for office. Hundreds of political prisoners remain in prisons and intelligence headquarters, with some being incarcerated without any charges. Though Maduro has pardoned several political prisoners in the past, many others still remain in detention. Often times, sentences and arrests are for an arbitrary amount of time. Political opponents with larger followings, such as the opposition leader Leopoldo López, are forced into exile.

Torture is not uncommon in prisons for political detainees. Military personnel detainees have been tortured by pro-government intelligence and security forces under the basis of “plotting against the government,” even when no evidence is present. If unable to locate a wanted political opponent, authorities may even detain and torture known family members. Political opponents are not the only victims of the government’s violent acts; during major public protests against the regime, Venezuelan security forces organized several crackdowns where demonstrators were physically attacked. Peaceful protesters were shot, beaten, and raided after offering no resistance. As of now, although thousands of people arrested for their connections with protests have been released under government-specified conditions, thousands more remain in prison. More recently, the COVID-19 pandemic has been used repeatedly by the government as an excuse to “repress dissent, detain and prosecute dozens of political opponents, including legislators, journalists, healthcare workers who criticize the government’s handling of the pandemic, and lawyers who provide legal support to demonstrators protesting lack of access to water, gasoline, or medicines”.

Extrajudicial killings

More than 19,000 extrajudicial killings occurred between 2016 and 2019, which the government justified by alleging “resistance to authority”. Additional security operations in 2020 account for 2,000 more deaths. The main organization carrying out these killings is the FAES; it targets low-income communities, using torture and violence to instil fear and maintain control. The 2015-2017 Operations to Liberate the People was a title for a series of security force raids in low-income communities which resulted in people accusing government authorities of “extrajudicial killings, mass arbitrary detentions, mistreatment of detainees, and forced evictions”.

Presidential dispute

On January 23rd, 2019, Venezuelan opposition leader Juan Guaidó declared himself as acting president. This was a direct challenge to President Maduro, who had just been officially re-elected several days before. Guaidó disputed the results of the May 2018 presidential election and has maintained that his movement is peaceful and backed by non-violent followers. Guaidó is backed by the National Assembly (a transitional government) and around 60 countries, while Maduro is backed by the Constituent National Assembly, Supreme Tribunal of Justice, and around 20 countries. The UN has recognized Maduro's government to be the "legal representative of Venezuela". Both parties accuse one another of being "usurpers". The key players in this presidential crisis, however, are the security forces. So far, they have remained loyal to Maduro, largely due to his provision of incentives such as frequent pay rises and distribution of control of important industries to military leaders.

The humanitarian crisis

Failure of healthcare system

Under Chávez, Venezuela became overly reliant on imported goods, subsequently affecting the availability of medical equipment. Presently, the government's refusal to recognize the importance of the health sector has led to the complete collapse of Venezuela's healthcare system, which in turn has led to the "resurgence of vaccine-preventable and infectious diseases". Illnesses that are considered treatable and containable in many countries are still prevalent in the country—these illnesses include "malaria, yellow fever, diphtheria, dengue and tuberculosis". Medical supplies and medicines are limited, basic utilities in hospitals are lacking, and many healthcare workers have been persecuted or have emigrated; these issues have all led to a further decline in the effectiveness of the healthcare system. According to the Venezuelan Medical Federation, most hospitals only had "7% of required supplies," and many patients died from easily-preventable sicknesses. Malnutrition and infant mortality rates are also rising significantly. Access to maternal health and reproductive services are similarly dire, and hundreds of women die during pregnancy, childbirth, and postpartum. Communication and transparency is also a shortcoming of the government: there has not been an update to Venezuela's epidemiological data since 2017, and attempts by healthcare authorities to update figures have been impeded.

Food shortages

According to an estimate by the World Food Program, “one out of three Venezuelans is food insecure and in need of assistance”. The malnourishment crisis originated back when Venezuela was under Chávez’s rule; Venezuela depended on imports for more than 70% of its food, so when oil prices dropped in 2014, citizens were unable to afford enough food to meet basic needs. The national food production industry was unprepared for such a situation, and so, with the country suffering from a diminished food supply, the military came into control of the food. Subsequently, bribes and corruption became common, food trafficking arose, and the average citizen became malnourished. Although there were attempts to ration food, there was simply not enough supply for the needy. In 2020, up to 30% of children under age 5 were chronically malnourished, and roughly 3.7 million people were undernourished. The effects of the food shortage are exacerbated by the failing health system: without proper healthcare, those suffering from malnourishment are unlikely to recover.

COVID-19

As of November 2nd, 2020, Venezuela has an estimated 90,000 confirmed COVID-19 cases and 800 deaths, according to the government. These statistics can be doubted on reasonable grounds, given the lack of government transparency, persecution of medical authorities, and failing health system; it is extremely probable that the actual figures are much higher. The spread of COVID-19 has been exacerbated by the overcrowding in low-income communities, prisons, and hospitals. Furthermore, a large proportion of total healthcare facilities lack the basic equipment needed to mitigate COVID deaths such as gloves, alcohol gel, soap, intensive care beds, respirators, etc.

The economy

Hyperinflation

In 2014, under Maduro’s government, Venezuela’s inflation rate became the highest in the world. The annual inflation rate for the general price level of the economy has ranged from percentage points of hundreds to thousands, and total inflation exceeded 1,000,000% in 2018. There are two key causes of the hyperinflation. Firstly, the Chávez administration established “strict currency controls” which subsequently devalued the bolívar and disrupted the economy. Exchange rates fumbled, and eventually the bolívar could not compete with any foreign currencies. Secondly, the central bank was reportedly “printing money to fund gaping public spending deficits,” highlighting the imprudence of the government. It is speculated that Maduro may have encouraged the

growth in money supply at the beginning of 2014, although he has blamed “capitalists” for the goods shortages and skyrocketing inflation rates.

The hyperinflation has made it almost impossible to sell and purchase goods like in a normal market economy, and many citizens turn to emigration to escape it. Unemployment rates have been increasing as well: sources reported that the unemployment rate was around 35% as of October 2019.

Major Countries and Organizations Involved

Special Action Forces (FAES)

The FAES, or *Fuerzas de Acciones Especiales de la Policía Nacional Bolivariana*, is a unit under the command of the Venezuelan National Police. It is one of the major security forces under Maduro, and is responsible for many extrajudicial killings; some political players have directly accused the FAES of being a death squad, formed only with the purpose of repressing political opponents. The UN High Commissioner for Human Rights, Michelle Bachelet, has repeatedly highlighted the human rights violations committed by the FAES, which includes waterboarding and shocking detainees. She is one of the most influential advocates for the disbanding and investigation of the FAES. However, the government has ignored her report altogether by alleging that it was largely false and Maduro has continued to praise the actions of the FAES.

United States of America (USA)

USA and Venezuela had a close relationship before Chávez’s rule; however, once Venezuela became autocratic, the relationship between the two has deteriorated. For instance, the US is extremely critical of the corruption in state-operated oil operations. In the wake of Venezuelan protests in 2017 and 2018, the United States expanded sanctions against Venezuela, specifically those towards people related to Maduro’s administration or people who have been implicated in human rights violations. The US has also imposed sanctions on major pro-Maduro oil and gas companies in Venezuela. During the Presidential Crisis in 2019, the US was one of the first recognizers of Guaido’s claim to presidency. Nonetheless, the US has still provided a significant amount of humanitarian aid to the country; unfortunately, Maduro has rejected humanitarian aid from the USA several times, with Maduro repeatedly claiming that Venezuela’s crisis was partly due to Western capitalist influences.

China

China has recognized Maduro as the legitimate president of Venezuela. The two countries have close trading relations despite the fact that Venezuela's economy is going through a collapse. China's stance is similar to that of Russia's, accusing the US of unwanted interference in Venezuela's internal affairs. During the Presidential Dispute of 2019, China released a statement asserting that it "supports efforts made by the Venezuelan government to protect the country's sovereignty, independence, and stability". However, by mid-2019, China's stance began to shift to a more neutral space due to the fear of alienating other stakeholders in South America and due to Venezuela's inability to repay its large debt to China. Currently, China is supportive of a possible compromise being made between Maduro and Guaido, although it remains opposed to foreign interference and unilateral sanctions.

Cuba

Cuba has long been an ally of Venezuela, with their trade relationship going back more than 25 years. More recently, the Cuban government has been accused of assisting the Maduro government in military and intelligence activities. However, the strong trade relationship between the two countries means that Venezuela's economic crisis will severely affect Cuba's economy. Cuba depends on Venezuela for oil—consequently, Cuba experienced a reduction in power after the collapse of Venezuelan fuel companies.

Colombia

Colombia, due to its proximity to Venezuela, has been one of the most common destinations for Venezuelan refugees. More than 1.3 million Venezuelan refugees currently reside in Colombia after fleeing Maduro's authoritative regime. The Colombian government has denounced Maduro as a violator of human rights and has become a firm supporter of Guaido. After violence broke out along the countries' borders in early 2019, Maduro officially cut diplomatic ties with Colombia. Yet, Colombia's government remains keen to provide humanitarian aid to help rebuild and reinforce deteriorating socio-economic infrastructures in Venezuela.

Russia

Russia is an outspoken supporter of Maduro and has provided military and economic lifelines to the government; at the same time, it has heavily criticized US imposed sanctions. Russia has also facilitated and organized a significant number of arms trades with Venezuela. Critics believe that Russia's unending support for Maduro stems from Russia's objective to undercut US interests and

restore Russia's status on the international stage. Alongside China, Russia has vetoed UN resolutions pushing for a new, supervised presidential election to be held in Venezuela.

Timeline of Events

Date	Description of event
January 2010	President Chavez boosts revenue from oil exports by devaluing the bolivar currency.
April 2013	Chavez dies due to cancer. President Maduro is elected.
February 2014	Popular opposition leader Leopoldo Lopez is arrested by pro-Maduro security forces on the charges of causing unrest.
September 2016	Hundreds of thousands of Venezuelan protesters demonstrate against President Maduro, accusing him of causing the crisis
November 2016	Hyperinflation officially takes hold of Venezuela's economy
March 2017	The Venezuelan Supreme Court, under the command of Maduro, declares that it has taken over the functions of the National Assembly. This sparks anti-government protests which security forces quell with violence.
August 2018	The total number of Venezuelan emigrants reaches 2 million
January 2019	Juan Guaidó, leader of the opposition, announces himself as the interim president. During this month, the US also announced sweeping sanctions on state-owned oil companies.

Relevant UN Treaties and Events

- Council Meeting to Discuss the Humanitarian Situation in Libya, 10 April 2019 ([S/PV.8506](#))
- US Draft Resolution Vetoed by China and Russia, 28 February 2019 ([S/2019/186](#))
- Russian Draft Resolution that Failed to Pass, 28 February 2019 ([S/2019/190](#))

Previous Attempts to solve the Issue

Economic Sanctions

As a response to human right violations, corruption, and the repression of free speech, the European Union (EU), Lima Group, US, and several other countries have imposed sanctions against both military and political authorities in Venezuela. While the Venezuelan government has accused Western sanctions for causing its economic collapse, the UN—alongside economists—have asserted

that the problems of hyperinflation and food shortages began much before sanctions were imposed, and a report by Johns Hopkins stated that most sanctions were "limited to cancelling visas and freezing assets of key officials implicated in abuses and corruption, [which] in no way targets the Venezuelan economy." The United States went a step further when President Trump announced an extension of its sanctions to Venezuelan state-owned petroleum companies. Critics argue that US sanctions are aimed at depriving Venezuela of petroleum revenues—which makes up a large proportion of total government revenues—and could negatively affect the population in an act of economic warfare.

Not much can be said about the success of the sanctions as they failed to impact the actions of the Maduro government. It is important to note that the failure of these sanctions may be partly due to the lifelines provided to the Maduro government by allies Russia, China, Cuba, etc. These three countries are extremely critical of US-imposed sanctions, accusing the US of "violating the U.N. charter against non-interference in member states".

Humanitarian Aid

The international community has provided a significant amount of humanitarian aid to the Venezuelan community over the years. However, it is crucial to note the shortcomings and potential risks of delivering humanitarian aid. Firstly, the International Committee of the Red Cross has warned countries about the dangers of delivering shipments without the approval of Maduro's government and the security forces in his command. There have been instances wherein Venezuelan border security forces attacked trucks carrying humanitarian aid in order to maintain a blockade of the border; for example, the Colombian government reported that around 285 humanitarian workers were injured and 2 trucks carrying humanitarian aid set on fire after attempting to cross the border. Secondly, the UN has warned countries—especially the US—about using aid as a way to politicize the crisis and gain support in the power struggle. On a more positive note, Red Cross aid shipments were expected to have helped around 650,000 people. The Red Cross, along with other humanitarian organizations, are focusing on delivering hospital supplies following the outbreak of COVID-19 amidst the country's healthcare breakdown.

Possible Solutions

Complement sanctions with incentives

The harshness of the sanctions imposed by the United States has been a major talking point of countries opposing foreign involvement in Venezuelan affairs. Hence, sanctions can be complemented with incentives to increase the probability of a peaceful political transition. For example, one incentive

could be incremental lifts of sanctions as progress is made towards a diplomatic conversation between the Maduro and Guaido parties. Perhaps legal immunity could be granted to selected political authorities, mitigating the fears of being persecuted by the eventual winning party. The provision of humanitarian aid is also a decent incentive; however, this could lead to accusations of politicizing humanitarianism.

Develop frameworks for reconstruction

It is of utmost importance that the UN Security Council calls on the Venezuelan government to accept humanitarian aid and act in accordance with international human rights laws. It must recommit to alleviating the socio-economic burdens faced by the Venezuelan population, especially as it is in the midst of a pandemic. The international community could play an essential role in assisting with the reconstruction of the healthcare sector or providing much needed medical supplies. The UN could also monitor the discussion between the two governments, facilitating negotiations until a settlement is reached.

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Appendix or Appendices

I. Further reading:

- US Draft Resolution on the Venezuelan Crisis, Vetoed by China and Russia:
https://www.securitycouncilreport.org/atf/cf/%7B65BFCF9B-6D27-4E9C-8CD3-CF6E4FF96FF9%7D/s_2019_186.pdf