

LACES
MODEL UNITED NATIONS



INTERCLASS III

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United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees
Venezuelan Refugee Crisis

Note: Throughout this guide, Venezuelans seeking settlement or protection abroad are often referred to as migrants. Many are officially refugees, and many more would be considered refugees under international guidelines. However, many flee using other forms of visa or registration (or no form at all), so their host nations don't officially consider them refugees.

I. Committee Background

The United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) is the UN's chief refugee agency. Created in 1950, the UNHCR is governed by both the General Assembly (GA) and Economic and Social Council (ECOSOC). As the world began to recover from World War II, the UNHCR worked to assist millions of displaced people throughout Europe. Today, its work stretches across the globe. It currently operates in Yemen, South Sudan, Syria, Europe, and many other regions.

Several key international agreements govern the treatment of refugees and the UNHCR's operations. The 1948 Universal Declaration of Human Rights established the right of everyone to seek asylum in other countries. The 1951 Convention Relating to the Status of Refugees enumerated the rights of refugees, formalizing the international policy of non-refoulement. This states that nations may not return a refugee to their nation of origin if they could face persecution. It also established procedures for the functioning of the UNHCR and its cooperation with states. The 1967 Protocol Relating to the Status of Refugees expanded the scope of the Convention, making refugee protection universal.

II. Topic Background

A. Political and Economic Context

Instability has been a hallmark of Venezuelan politics since its first cries for independence in 1797. In 2006, former outsider candidate Hugo Chavez was re-elected, and began nationalizing Venezuela's oil industry. Soon after, he had nationalized the telecommunications, electricity, steel, and other industries. In 2012, widespread price controls on a variety of goods were established in an effort to reduce inflation, already at 19.9%. However, as the costs of production became higher than the legal sale price, Venezuelan companies stopped producing goods, forcing the Venezuelan government to import necessities. After his death, he was replaced by his former Vice President, Nicolás Maduro, who won a very close special election, the results of which were challenged by his opponent.

The economy soon worsened, with inflation rising above 50%. Popular opinion shifted, sparking large protests over the government's handling of the economy. As oil prices plummeted and the Venezuelan economy's collapse accelerated, the opposition political party won a majority in Venezuela's legislature. This party gained momentum, but the growth of an opposition movement only caused Maduro to strengthen his power. The government was quick to crush any protests, resulting in many fatalities since 2014.

Since, Maduro and his allies have taken even more drastic steps to consolidate power. The Maduro-backed government has arrested political opponents and the Supreme Court unsuccessfully attempted to dissolve the legislature (this attempt was stopped by Maduro after substantial international outcry). Elections since then, for both a constituent assembly and a presidential election, have been mired in fraud, and resulted in widespread international sanctions on Maduro and Venezuela. In January 2019, the leader of the legislature and opposition party, Juan Guaidó, declared himself the interim President of Venezuela, claiming that Maduro's election fraud invalidated his win. Many nations were quick to stand behind Guaidó, with over 50 declaring support for him by September.

Protests have since escalated, with tens of thousands demonstrating against the Maduro regime. They have often been met by tear gas, rubber bullets, and water cannons. Between January and May 2019, the Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights reported 66 demonstration-related deaths. The NGO Foro Penal Venezolano also reported that at least 15,045 persons were detained for political motives between January 2014 and May 2019. Many of these detentions occurred as a result of protests.

Amidst the political chaos, the economy continues to worsen. By April 2019, Venezuela was experiencing 10,000,000% inflation. Almost 90% of the population lives in poverty, with 21% of Venezuelans malnourished as of 2018. In health-care, Venezuela is currently lacking 85% of its normal medicine supply. 70% of hospitals have had issues with water supply. The economic crisis has had profound implications for all Venezuelans.

B. Refugee Crisis

Between political repression and severe inflation, poverty, and shortages in medicine, the crisis in Venezuela has prompted many to flee. There are now 4.3 million Venezuelan refugees and migrants abroad. 1.3 million reside in Colombia, with many more in Peru, Chile, Ecuador, and Brazil. The United States and Spain have also accepted considerable numbers of Venezuelan migrants. Many of these nations are not equipped to handle such a massive increase in population, however.

Registration and information collection remain a major problem. As of June 2019, 34% of the Venezuelan migrant populations

Routes of Venezuelan migration



Google

Source: UNHCR

BBC

didn't have any type of permit. Tourist visas are the most common form of residence permit or visa for Venezuelan migrants. Host nation's immigration and refugee systems can't function ideally with so many migrants registered under the wrong type of visa. Only 15% of those interviewed by the UNHCR had applied for asylum, the best legal protection given their situation. Despite this, host nations' asylum-processing systems are already inundated with applications.

Legal entry into host nations has also become more difficult. Ecuador, Peru, and Chile have all instituted additional restrictions on Venezuelan entry. In Ecuador, this decreased official Venezuelan entries by half, but increased illegal entries by 29%. These often occur in dangerous regions with illegal armed actors or mining areas. Such illegal entries complicate host nations' responsibilities and pose a threat to Venezuelan migrants.

Once in a new nation, Venezuelan migrants and refugees face additional challenges. The UNHCR has classified employment as their primary need. 66% of those interviewed reported being unemployed or in a precarious employment situation. 64% of those interviewed have been formal employees, business owners, or civil servants in Venezuela, demonstrating how displacement negatively impacts employment opportunities. Housing has also been recognized as a priority need. While over 95% of those interviewed had stable accommodations in their host nations, 43% of Venezuelan migrants reported difficulty finding a home. This was mainly due to a lack of resources, a guarantor, or documents, or because of xenophobia. Education also remains a problem for newly settled Venezuelan migrants. Due to disruptions related to travel, many migrant children remain out of school. Beyond these initial travel-related causes however, numerous children can't attend because of a lack of public school funding and space or a lack of documentation. Among families interviewed by the UNHCR, 52% of children were not in school. Between employment, housing, and education, newly settled migrants and refugees face considerable challenges.

III. Past International Involvement

International involvement has generally been limited to South America. Colombia, Chile, Peru, and Ecuador have accepted the most Venezuelan migrants and refugees, though relative to their population, some Caribbean nations have accepted more. Host nations face substantial economic and infrastructural challenges. The UNHCR requested US\$738 million for Venezuela operations in 2019, but most July 2019 estimates showed that it was only 24% funded, mostly by the United States. This is largely due to the fact that many nations consider the crisis a strictly regional problem, unlike other crises, such as the Syrian refugee situation.

UNHCR actions have mainly focused on coordinating an international response. Through its 2019 Regional Refugee and Migrant Response Plan for Refugees and Migrants from Venezuela, the UNHCR identified four main areas of intervention: direct emergency assistance, protection, socio-economic and cultural integration, and strengthening the capacity of the host government. In the Plan, the UNHCR reported on key needs for each host country and explains

cooperation with local governments and NGOs. The UNHCR has also assisted directly in establishing refugee camps. In Brazil and Colombia, the UNHCR has created these integrated assistance centers adjacent to the Venezuelan border, to ease stress on isolated towns with limited housing and health-care infrastructure. Demand, however, has already exceeded their capacity.

Yet another side of international involvement relates to Venezuelan migrants' classification. In The Quito Declaration on Human Mobility of Venezuelan Citizens in the Region, South American nations committed to receiving Venezuelans with expired identification, helping to ease the refugee process. The same Quito body has since made additional strides toward better refugee identification plans. While many Venezuelans can be classified as refugees under the 1951 Convention Relating to the Status of Refugees and subsequent 1967 Protocol (*see Committee Background for more*), the UNHCR has recommended group classification. According to the UNHCR's Guidance Note on International Protection Considerations for Venezuelans - Update I, the majority of fleeing Venezuelans can be considered refugees under the Cartagena Declaration, and thus host nations should protect Venezuelan citizens, regardless of whether they can be classified as refugees under the 1951 legislation. Despite significant international efforts, Venezuelan migrants and refugees continue to suffer, both in travel and resettlement.

IV. Questions to Consider

1. Which Venezuelan leader does your country support? How has your country reacted to past Venezuelan actions?
2. Does your country have specific ties to Venezuela or its allies? Does your country have specific ties to other South American countries?
3. What has your country done in past refugee crises?
4. What can be done to ease Venezuelan migrant's travels?
5. How can the UNHCR ensure refugee protection for all Venezuelans? What can be done to improve visa and registration systems?
6. How can the UNHCR improve migrants' lives once in their host nations?
7. What can be done to decrease the burden on nations neighboring Venezuela?

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