

Despite COVID-19, new wave of Venezuelan migrants heads to Colombia



SAN CRISTOBAL, Venezuela (Reuters) – Yaidis Colmenares’ tired and gaunt face leaves little need for explanation as to why the desperate Venezuelan mother of three is fleeing her native country for Colombia.

The 37-year-old weighs 19 kilos (42 pounds) less than she did 10 years ago, she says. She could barely afford to buy food with the money she earned selling candy on the metro in Caracas, amid a strict coronavirus quarantine.

Last week, she walked and hitchhiked 800 kilometers (500 miles) to Venezuela’s western border city of San Cristobal in the hope of reaching neighboring Colombia with her 13-year-old son, her eight-year-old daughter, and her one-year-old baby strapped to her chest.

“Look how malnourished I am,” said Colmenares as she walked with a group of 15 people through a park near a major avenue to avoid roadblocks set up by police and the National Guard to enforce a nationwide quarantine.

“Now everything is in dollars. We have to run or we’ll die,” she said, referring to the increasing dollarization of basic goods in Venezuela that makes them inaccessible to the vast majority of the population, who get paid in local currency.

Venezuelans face an increasingly dysfunctional economy in which fuel shortages make basic transportation impossible and basic goods and services are so expensive that most cannot afford them. Simple chores such as house cleaning and washing clothes have become a constant struggle due to the lack of electricity and running water.

The renewed emigration threatens to swell the ranks of the Venezuelan diaspora throughout South America, a refugee crisis of proportions never witnessed in the region.

The United Nations estimates that some 5 million Venezuelans left the country between 2015 and 2019, mostly for other parts of South America, to escape a hyperinflationary economic collapse under President Nicolas Maduro.

This year, at least 100,000 Venezuelans returned to their country as the pandemic shuttered businesses and left those working as informal street vendors unable to make a living.

Those who returned say they were stigmatized by the government for fueling the disease and ended up in a hand-to-mouth existence that was marred by blackouts, crime, and chronic fuel shortages.

Human Rights Watch in a report this week said returned migrants have faced abusive treatment from Venezuelan authorities, including being held in overcrowded quarantine centers with limited access to food and water.

WALKING THROUGH ROADBLOCKS

Colombia's migration agency this week said Venezuelan migrants started trickling back in via informal crossing points around a month ago. Colombia's borders officially remain closed until at least Nov. 1.

Director-General Juan Espinosa of the agency said last week the number of Venezuelans seeking refuge in neighboring Colombia could reach around 2 million within three to five months once the border reopens, up from 1.73 million at the end of July.

Some San Cristobal residents try to support the new wave of migrants by offering advice on the shortest routes or helping them avoid roadblocks and checkpoints set up by the police and the National Guard.

When 30 migrants on their way to the Colombian border were stopped by troops on Oct. 12, a group of neighbors arrived and sang the national anthem as they waved a Venezuelan flag. The troops eventually allowed them through.

"Look at all these Venezuelans who are emigrating because of you, Maduro, don't try to cover up what's happening," shouted Ambar Orellana, 27, walking through San Cristobal with her husband and two children in hopes of reaching Peru.

Orellana said bus drivers carrying migrants had to pay off troops to get through

roadblocks and that those on foot were charged \$20 each.

Venezuela's information ministry did not immediately reply to a request for comment on the new wave of migration or the accusations of public officials seeking bribes from migrants.

Juana Contreras, a homemaker in her 60s who lives on the road that leads to the border, said she began in recent weeks cooking arepas – traditional Venezuelan corn pancakes – as well as soup with vegetables to give to migrants.

“They leave because they cannot afford to eat or feed their family,” said Contreras. “It is satisfying to do this because we don’t know if we will suddenly have to do the same. It would be very hard at my age.”

(Reporting by Anggy Polanco, additional reporting by Oliver Griffin in Bogota, writing by Brian Ellsworth and Vivian Sequera; editing by Diane Craft)

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