

Venezuela is a world leader in the production of desperation

CÚCUTA, Colombia — The walkers come in a steady flow, individually and in small groups, through most of the day. The serpentine mountain road they take often has little room at the sides, leaving refugees in the path of traffic. The 350-mile journey to Bogota is part forced march and part pilgrimage — impelled by hunger and desperation in Venezuela, but also drawn toward a new start in Colombia, Ecuador, Peru or beyond.

At this point in the Venezuelan crisis, many of the men have already gone ahead in search of work. Their families now follow. Children drag luggage behind them. Mothers carry babies or cranky toddlers. Their clothing is generally unsuited to a trek in which temperatures start in the high-90s but dip into the low-40s in the mountains. Many make the long walk in flip-flops or Crocs.

Along the route are a string of way stations, run and supported by organizations including the International Committee of the Red Cross, Oxfam, Samaritan's Purse and World Vision (my host). A station called El Diamante, sponsored by a local Catholic church, is helping 300 to 400 walkers a day, providing hot food, bathroom facilities, and temporary shelter.

"There is no work and no food [back in Venezuela]," one woman resting at El Diamante told me. "I can't buy diapers or milk." Another added, "I came here because I suffer from diabetes and can't find any medicine there." A man holding his child explained to me, "My son didn't have anything to eat. I need to fight for him."

The president of World Vision U.S., Edgar Sandoval, lived in Venezuela as a teenager. "People all over the world came to Venezuela looking for a better life," he told me. "I still keep in touch with some people in the country. Access to water is an issue. Some make several trips a day with a wheelbarrow to get water for their needs. Malnutrition among children is a significant issue. I know of kids who are 2 years old and not walking or talking. That's when desperation sets in."

Venezuela is now a world leader in the production of desperation. In the early 2000s, socialist strongman Hugo Chavez created a system, funded by oil

revenues, in which food, education, and health care were all essentially free. Salaries were small but were mainly used for extras, not essentials. When the price of oil crashed, so did the system of subsidies. Poor and middle-class Venezuelans were left only with their salaries, paid in a local currency that hyperinflation rendered essentially worthless. Some products are still available, but only when purchased in U.S. dollars.

So: The minimum wage in Venezuela is now worth about \$6 a month, while one kilo of cornmeal (around two pounds) costs about a quarter of that amount. Add to this the rolling blackouts, and hospitals without gauze or painkillers, and no propane for cooking, and chronic shortages of toilet paper and hygiene products. And add to this a regime that stays in power through brutal oppression, enforced by the national guard and deputized street gangs called “colectivos.” The result is a country that more than 4 million refugees have chosen to flee.

The recently reopened Simon Bolivar International Bridge in Cúcuta is where most refugees walk out of Venezuela. Those fortunate enough to get remittances from relatives abroad can pick up dollars at the Western Union on the Colombia side and pay for a bus trip to their destination. But the very poor are left to walk through the mountains or subsist by begging or petty smuggling across the border.

At the Colegio La Frontera, a public school in Colombia that mainly serves Venezuelan students, I met a refugee named Jheyde, a bright, confident, outspoken girl of 13. With support from World Vision, she now doesn't miss a day of school. But she spent years working at odd jobs along with her mother. Jheyde once sold cuttings of her hair for use in wigs. She recalled smuggling pineapples and being forced to pay bribes if caught by the police or the colectivos.

This is what the Venezuelan experiment in Chavism has become: the employment of armed thugs to extort impoverished little girls. A better future will require an end to the Venezuelan regime's cruelty, corruption, and incompetence. But in the meantime, the humanitarian emergency is acute and expanding. Aid organizations are operating at the limit of their resources. And the walkers continue their difficult journey.

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