

Refugees fleeing crisis in Venezuela confront poverty in Peru

By our reporters
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South America is witnessing one of the greatest migrations in recent history, with increasing numbers of Venezuelans fleeing their country due to the collapse of its economy. Many lack jobs, suffer from hunger and are compelled to wait in line for hours for dwindling stocks of food and other basic necessities.

Under President Nicolás Maduro, the worldwide fall in oil prices has resulted in an economic catastrophe, exacerbated by the growing sanctions and pressure exerted by US imperialism, which under President Donald Trump has made it clear it does not rule out a military invasion of Venezuela.

The shock therapy applied by President Maduro has resulted in the highest inflation in the world, the biggest devaluation of any currency, an increase in taxes, massive unemployment and the hollowing out of the social subsidies extended under the “missions” established under former President Hugo Chavez.

It is estimated that since 2014 nearly two and a half million Venezuelans have left the country.

In Brazil they have been the victims of xenophobic attacks so violent that many Venezuelans have decided to return to their homeland. On the border with Colombia, they are abused by the Venezuelan authorities, who harass them and even steal their belongings. Anti-Venezuelan sentiments are being whipped up in Colombia.

The main road, or “corridor,” of emigration starts in Cucutá, Colombia, and ends in Chile. It is estimated that there are about one million Venezuelans in Colombia, 150,000 in Ecuador, almost 450,000 in Peru and close to 150,000 in Chile. Venezuelans had been allowed to cross national borders showing only an identity card. On the border between Ecuador and Peru, the number of Venezuelans crossing reached 4,500 per day.

In recent months there has been increased harassment all along the Venezuela-Chile “corridor.” First, Colombia and Ecuador began to demand passports and then Peru followed suit. On the border between Ecuador and Peru, the flow of immigrants dropped considerably to less than 500 per day.

Reporters from the WWSW recently visited the “Without Borders” shelter located in the Lima district of San Juan de Lurigancho. This working-class district is one of the most populated in the capital and is where the majority of Venezuelan immigrants are concentrated.

The shelter lodges about 170 refugees. It is maintained through donations, and provides one bed per family or one bed for couples of men or women. During the day, because there are no rooms as such, the mattresses are stacked against the wall, and at bedtime are distributed on the floor of the premises. At “Without Borders,” Venezuelans receive, in addition to a mattress, food and limited medical care.

The WWSW interviewed several refugees who asked to remain anonymous. A 22-year-old girl spoke of her journey, beginning with the long bridge that connects Venezuela with Colombia, until arriving in Lima:

“My husband and I came as backpackers. The majority of those who emigrate are young because there are no job opportunities. Gathering the money for the trip was very complicated.

“I regret not having been able to enjoy my country like my parents who lived years when the economy was better. I, on the other hand, had to stay in line up to 12 hours to get shampoo, conditioner and other personal items. In Caracas, you cannot be on the street after 7 pm, because you risk being assaulted.”

She spoke of the violence she had witnessed in her country: “Five people got out of a van and told us to

get in to rob us. I did not resist. But a lady did. Then the thief pulled out a gun and shot her in the head.”

Under the rule of the late President Chavez, she said: “There were many public jobs. These jobs are still there, but they have cut the benefits. Sometimes three months go by without pay.”

When asked what she thought of the possibility of a military invasion of Venezuela led by US President Trump, she emphatically replied: “No way! They could kill anyone. It would be a violation of human rights.”

A young mother, Yesli, said: “We are exploited on the border.” She had made the journey with her entire family, including parents, brothers and a two-year-old son.

“When we got to the border they told us there were no buses,” she said. “We were more than 100 Venezuelans in the group and we had to wait until 3 am when the bus arrived. At the border, the police asked for passports, and if you did not have one, they would send you back. There were so many crossing the Venezuela-Colombia border bridge that there was only room for people and they pushed us. It took us half a day to cross the bridge.”

She told how she witnessed the abuse of her compatriots: “They put them on the bus and the suitcases down below. When they arrived at the destination, they saw that their suitcases had been stolen. In Colombia they treated us badly. If a Venezuelan was in the hospital, the doctor would pass him or her by without paying attention.”

She said “the Ecuadorians cheated us. They told us that we had to exchange our dollars for soles before boarding a taxi at 5:30 am. My brother realized that we had been robbed because the money was just enough to get to the border with Tumbes and from there by taxi to Lima.”

“It cost my family \$ 150 per person to get from Venezuela to Lima,” she added.

“To travel, families sell everything, house, kitchen, beds and clothes. My mom sold her three-bedroom house, bathroom and an outdoor patio, all for \$1,500.”

The Venezuelans said that in their country people spoke of Peru as if it were a paradise. But any such illusions were quickly dispelled upon their arrival. “When you are in the shelter, you receive food and don’t pay rent,” said one. “But when you go out, the weekly pay of 240 soles (about US\$75) that I earned

was not enough to buy food and pay rent. One is told that in Peru you will be able to buy a television, etc. Everything was a lie.”

The shelter welcomes Venezuelans for a period of 15 to 30 days. In that time they have to look for work and then leave so that someone else can take their place. There the dream of a better life in Peru ends.

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