

Venezuela, the largest migration of the first quarter of the 21st century

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The Venezuelan is the largest migratory phenomenon of the 21st century in Latin America. All international organizations that deal with the subject ratify it. By June 5, 2021, a report from the Coordination Platform of the Response for Migrants and Refugees of Venezuela concludes that more than 5.7 million people have left the country and that, of that total, about 31%, one million seven hundred forty-two thousand, is in Colombia.

This last datum makes Venezuelan migration to Colombia the largest migratory phenomenon between two border countries in the entire history of Latin America. Not even the migration of Nicaraguans to Costa Rica, when the war between the Sandinistas and the contras occurred in the late 1980s, nor that of Haitians to the Dominican Republic, after the devastating earthquake of 2011, had these colossal dimensions. Furthermore almost 80% of Venezuelan migrants have crossed the Colombian border in just four years, between 2017 and 2021. In the last two years --- during which time diplomatic relations between the two countries have been broken off and their land borders closed --- most have entered on foot without legal control through the so-called "trails", green paths where there are no customs or official checkpoints, only Venezuelan national guards and Colombian guerrillas charging bribes in dollars and pesos to allow passage.

These are overwhelming facts and figures. To be clear, the 5,700,000 people who have left represent almost three times the population of Caracas, the capital of Venezuela. It far exceeds the sum total of the inhabitants of Chicago and Houston, two cities ranked in the ten most populous in the United States. They account for almost exactly the same number as the population of Santiago de Chile, one of the two megacities of the Southern Cone of Latin America. And it exceeds the total population of Costa Rica, one of the most influential nations in Central America, by two hundred thousand souls.

It is a disturbing image. Along with the Syrian, it is the largest human displacement of the 21st century. With a difference: the Syrians are escaping a dreadful civil war while the Venezuelan exodus is produced by a political

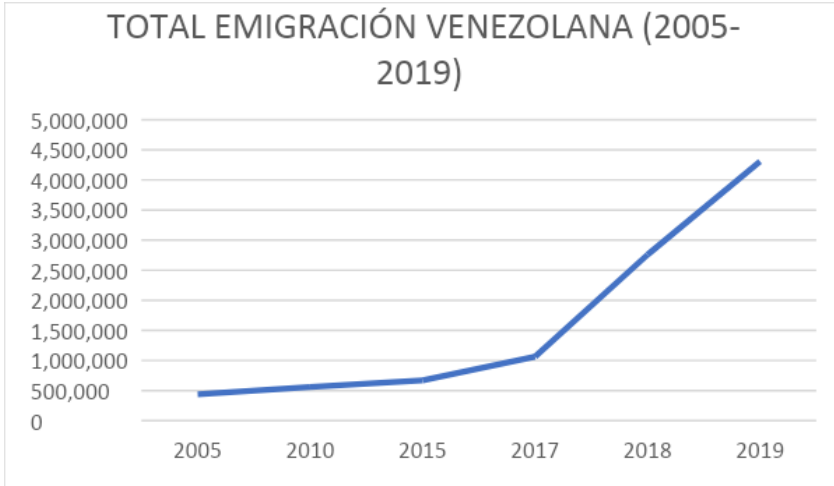
apocalypse that has destroyed democratic institutions, its productive apparatus, and unraveled the social fabric.

In Latin America, migration phenomena have occurred, and do occur, due to very specific causes. Thousands of inhabitants of the Southern Cone in the 1970s and 1980s had to leave fleeing the political persecution of right-wing military dictatorships. Millions of others have been escaping in suicide rafts from Cuban communist statism for sixty years. Millions of Central Americans and Mexicans have fled to the United States from poverty. Just as Colombians did to Venezuela from the 1960s looking for better living conditions during the oil boom. And then to other parts of the world, escaping from the insecurity generated by the warlike confrontations between the guerrillas, the paramilitaries, drug trafficking terrorism, and the official army.

However, in the Venezuelan migration, it happens that all these causes together --- political persecution; extreme poverty; shortage of food, drugs, and services; systematic violation of human rights; insecurity due to organized crime or protected by the State; chronic inflation and falling income; loss of democratic freedoms --- converge for the first time to generate this great exodus in a nation that had never experienced migratory experiences. On the contrary, it had been a place that received Asian, European, Arab, and Latin American immigrants arriving by the millions from the 1940s onwards.

TOTAL VENEZUELAN EMIGRATION (2005-2019)

YEAR	2005	2010	2015	2017	2018	2019
EMIGRANTS	440.000	560.000	670.000	1.062.376	2.757.893	4.307.930



Migrants or refugees?

To understand with a minimum of clarity what happened in Venezuela, it is necessary to turn to the concept of Complex Humanitarian Emergency. It is a category introduced by the United Nations Organization to qualify the crisis situation in which many of the nations belonging to the communist bloc of Eastern Europe remained after the fall, at the end of the 20th century, of the Berlin Wall.

The Complex Humanitarian Emergency situation is a type of social crisis caused not by a specific variable, for example an economic crisis or a civil war, but by the combination of multiple political, economic, and sociocultural factors that seriously impact all walks of life, the daily spaces, institutions, and areas of the society that suffer from it.

They are crises, and the Venezuelan one is clearly a classic example, that are usually triggered in the context of political and economic disintegration, resulting from a combination of factors such as the weakening, bankruptcy, and fragmentation of the State; the strengthening of the informal and illicit economies under the articulation of clandestine networks; the normalization of distorted economic phenomena such as hyperinflationary crises that persist for a very long time; conflicts promoted by groups of armed civilians and associations with international terrorism; famines and epidemics; the increase of poverty and, what concerns us today, forced mass migrations caused by situations of poverty and political, religious, or ethnic persecution.

For this reason, international organizations such as UNHCR establish a difference between simple migration and forced migration. This leads us to clarify that it is very different to speak of migrants, refugees, and asylum seekers. According to the UNHCR glossary, a **refugee** is "a person who cannot return to their country of origin due to a well-founded fear of persecution or serious indiscriminate threats to life, physical integrity, or liberty."

By contrast, a **migrant** is understood to mean "all cases in which the decision to migrate is made freely by the person in question for reasons of 'personal convenience' and without the intervention of external coercive factors." And as an **asylum seeker**, those who seek international protection in countries with individualized procedures. Not all asylum seekers are recognized as refugees, but all refugees in these countries are initially asylum seekers.

It is clear then that it is one thing to move by voluntary decision from one country to another, even to move within the same country. That is an immigrant. And another, very different, to move forcibly, under coercion. That is a refugee. That is the reason why the United Nations Refugee Organization (UNHCR) is asking the international community to grant Venezuelans refugee status. It is because the migration that has made us leave the country, especially since 2017, is not a personal choice but a forced condition. A way to try to preserve life, human rights, or to make a personal sacrifice to help family members who, for whatever reason, cannot or do not want to leave their country.

The solidarity of Colombia

The person who writes these lines is a political exile living in Bogotá. I am therefore a witness to the way in which Colombia has tried to resolve in the best possible way the arrival of almost 2,000,000 Venezuelans. It is forcing the central government to take bold measures to prevent massive displacement from leading to a social crisis because it is not a single type of immigration. There are at least four different phenomena. Destination migration, those who have come to establish their residence in Colombia. Return migration, that of Colombians who had made their lives in Venezuela and now return with dual nationality. Transit migration, made up of thousands of Venezuelans who cross Colombia, many times on foot, and leave --- via Ecuador, Peru, Chile, and Argentina --- across the Rumichaca bridge located in the department of Nariño in the extreme southwest of the country.

And the pendular migration, the most numerous, formed by a population that enters Colombia for one or a few days in search of food, informal work, medical attention, or to bring or carry contraband products and then returns to their place of residence. A pendular movement that occurs between the Zulia, Táchira, Apure, and Amazona states in Venezuela and the departments of La Guajira, Norte de Santander, Arauca, and Guainía, respectively, of Colombia. Some days the pendulum moves up to 50 thousand people. There are Venezuelan migrants who survive with relative well-being, some because they had sufficient savings before the installation of the tragic political project known as “Socialism of the XXI century,” others because they have managed to insert themselves into the local job market or start businesses that work. However, there are thousands who endure harsh work and great suffering.

These are AIDS patients, cancer patients, or patients who must undergo dialysis, who in Venezuela will never find the drugs they need to stay alive and must go to other nations to look for them. From university professors with doctorates and several languages under their belt, who are not resigned to earning eight dollars a month and prefer to drive an Uber in Bucaramanga, Colombia, or serve in a restaurant in Cuenca, Ecuador, than to continue being humiliated by the ultra-right military and the far-left civilians who rule their country.

Those who survive as informal vendors or seasonal farm laborers. And many, we do not know the percentage, who end up in absolute destitution, some as beggars others as martyrs of male or female prostitution, or hired killers recruited by criminal gangs, the National Liberation Army or the dissidents of the FARC, the two guerrillas that betrayed the Colombian peace process and that the Maduro government protects.

We no longer know exactly what we are. If we are immigrants or outcasts. If we are refugees. We only have the certainty that we were expelled from our country by a totalitarian, militaristic project, sustained by drug trafficking that impoverished our nation and that unfortunately many naive university scholars abroad do not understand and, worse, still celebrate. Those of us who suffer it firsthand know well what it is about.