



Venezuela's refugee crisis is an international emergency

March 4, 2020 **Ilan I. Berman** *The Hill*

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Ask someone to name the world's worst refugee crisis, and the most likely answer you'll hear is "Syria." That's clearly correct... but only in the near term. Today, the number of refugees from Syria's brutal nine-year civil war hovers at around 6.6 million, according to the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR). However, if things don't change, that staggering tally is on track to be eclipsed by another, largely overlooked crisis taking place closer to home, in Venezuela.

The figures are as significant as they are striking. As of the end of 2019, the number of refugees and migrants from Venezuela recorded by regional monitors in Latin America was fast approaching 5 million. That cohort, however, is growing quickly. According to the Organization of American States (OAS), approximately 5,000 people a day are now seeking refuge abroad from Venezuelan strongman Nicolas Maduro's socialist dictatorship. The OAS, moreover, estimates that if Venezuela's slow-motion descent into anarchy isn't somehow arrested, the number of refugees from the country will number "between 7.5 and 8.2 million" by the end of this year, and the situation will overshadow Syria's to become the world's leading refugee emergency.

Countries in the region are being dramatically affected by the fallout. Neighboring Colombia, for instance, has absorbed some 1.6 million Venezuelan refugees to date in a migration wave that is severely straining government resources and adversely impacting the national economy. Peru has experienced much the same dynamic, as — to a lesser extent — have countries like Ecuador, Brazil and Chile. That's because eight out of ten Venezuelan refugees have remained in Latin America and the Caribbean, so local governments have been forced to bear the brunt of Venezuela's unfolding collapse.

But as dire as the situation currently is, it has the potential to become much, much worse. The international community is currently grappling with the emerging coronavirus pandemic, which has already dramatically impacted global markets and led many nations to begin to implement restrictions on travel and migration. While the Americas have so far not been significantly impacted by the disease, regional governments are nonetheless readying their responses. These are likely to include potentially significant restrictions on entry for foreign visitors — something which will make it more difficult for Venezuelans to find safe haven in nearby nations. That will become a virtual certainty if Venezuelan refugees are identified as potential carriers of the virus, leaving them with truly nowhere to go.

So far, the international response has been woefully inadequate to address the scope of the problem. Although OAS officials say that some \$600 million has been raised to date from international donors (the U.S. prominent among them), that figure represents less than half the \$1.3 billion that NGOs estimate will be needed to adequately mitigate the impact of the crisis this year.

The ultimate solution to the Venezuelan refugee problem, however, isn't economic but political.

Over the past three years, the Maduro regime has presided over a full-blown economic and political meltdown that has left Venezuelans penniless, hungry and increasingly driven to abandon the nation as a failed state. Yet, despite all this, Maduro himself shows no signs of leaving the political scene, thanks in large part to extensive support from international partners like Russia and China. It is Maduro's corrupt and brutal rule that represents the true engine of the country's deepening misery.

That should be instructive for the U.S. and its allies.

For now, the international community needs to focus on mitigating the effects of Venezuela's refugee emergency before it becomes a truly Hemispheric one. Yet a truly lasting answer to the problem involves creating conditions within Venezuela that will lead citizens who are still there to stay, and those who have left to return. None of that will happen, however, until a more legitimate, benign and representative government take power in Caracas.

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