



Commentary

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# Under a Merciless Sun: Venezuelans Stranded Across the Colombian Border

*As Venezuela's economy plumbs the depths of collapse, a new cohort of refugees is trekking across parched landscapes to Colombia. It consists of the most vulnerable, including poor expectant mothers, unaccompanied children and the sick, people with no defence against the predations of armed bands.*

It is a measure of life's hardships in Zulia state, the oil production hub in north-western Venezuela, that its people must brave lawless borders just to get to the hospital. Across the frontier, in Colombia, the San José de Maicao hospital is full of pregnant Venezuelan women, some of them sitting on the floor. One new mother I met there had arrived in the morning after traversing a *trocha*, an illegal crossing between the two countries, which have no diplomatic ties. She borrowed money to pay a shadowy armed band for safe passage, and once in the maternal ward, gave birth to a healthy daughter. She lay in bed, the baby in her arms, a bit bewildered at her good fortune. Infant mortality is high among refugee mothers, most of whom, like this young woman, receive no prenatal care. She got to San José de Maicao just in time for a safe, orderly delivery.

Such harrowing tales of flight have become common in Zulia. Hunger, power cuts and collapsing public services have turned this region – once accustomed to easy wealth and ice-cold air conditioning – into one of the areas of Venezuela suffering the greatest humanitarian need, according to the UN. The human rights NGO Codhez, based in Zulia, calculates that seven

in ten households have daily incomes of \$1.09 or less, meaning that families often cannot eat three meals a day. Its hospitals are at once rundown and prohibitively expensive for most Zulia residents because they now demand payment in dollars for basic services that were once free. The nearest escape valve is the Colombian border. More than 160,000 Venezuelans now live across it, in the Colombian state of La Guajira, after escaping their home country's tumult.

But La Guajira, in Colombia's far north east, is no sanctuary. More than half the population of this semi-arid desert state lives in poverty. With Venezuela to the east and the mountains of Perijá – a hotbed of guerrilla activity – to the south, La Guajira is in a double bind. It faces not only the humanitarian needs of migrants and refugees, who now make up roughly 19 per cent of the population, but also the violence of guerrillas, *narcos* and other men with guns who prey upon its very desperation.

*“Contraband fuel is the economic mainstay on the Colombian side of the border.”*



Inhabitants of La Bendición de Dios, an informal neighbourhood near Maicao, line up to receive water. CRISIS GROUP/Bram Ebus

## The Border Crossing Boom

The only official crossing from Zulia into La Guajira brings new arrivals to the small village of Paraguachón. Movable metal barriers featuring the logo of Colombia's migration office stand along the main road. Scrawny, malnourished Venezuelans, exhausted after their long trip, mingle with locals hawking basic medicines and food items. As in other Latin American border towns, the informal economy hums with activity, as porters trot by pushing handcarts piled with luggage, moneychangers offer stacks of bolívars to the few Venezuelans returning home and penniless migrants sell their hair to wig makers for a fistful of dollars.

But a lot more is going on in this particular border town. A nervous resident points out that various armed groups – *narcos*, guerrillas and others – rule Paraguachón. They have tightened their stranglehold on La Guajira's border since 2015, when the Venezuelan government of Nicolás Maduro closed the entire frontier in response to attacks on the Venezuelan army by unknown parties. Following the closure, the *trochas* became regular transit points and a

gold mine for criminal gangs collecting informal tolls. The border reopened in 2016, but the illegal crossings retained their appeal to smugglers, traffickers, and the many migrants and refugees without identity papers.

Just a short distance from the official crossing in Paraguachón are two major *trochas*: *la ochenta* (the eighty) and *la cortica* (the short one). In plain view of Colombian police, motorbikes bearing jerrycans bump alongside old white Toyota pickups crammed with passengers and goods over the sandy roads to and from Venezuela.

A total of 90 *trochas* are located in Maicao, the municipality that includes Paraguachón. According to Colombia's Ombudsman, an independent state agency charged with protecting civil and human rights, the number along the border between La Guajira and Zulia runs close to 200. At each of these points, criminals charge fees for passage, turning the *trochas* into big business and a trigger for competition with each other, as well as with state security forces. Aida Merlano, a fugitive Colombian parliamentarian



wanted for electoral fraud, found refuge in Venezuela via a *trocha* in the La Guajira badlands. Three alleged al-Qaeda operatives arrested in January in the U.S. sneaked from Venezuela into Colombia using a similar route.

Contraband fuel is the economic mainstay on the Colombian side of the border. With their faces covered in cloths or towels, adults and children, some no older than ten, wave funnels at passing cars while their skin burns under La Guajira's merciless sun. They are engaged in *pimpineo*, the sale of dirt-cheap Venezuelan gasoline that is smuggled across the border in jerrycans (*pimpinás* in Spanish) and then poured straight into fuel tanks or retailed in soft drink bottles. In 2019 up to mid-November, Colombia's Fiscal and Customs Police seized over

230,000 gallons of contraband fuel and confiscated about 300 vehicles along the La Guajira border. Still, trafficking continues unabated.

Two indigenous Wayuu women agreed to meet to talk about smuggling fuel. They chose a discreet location, fearing violent reprisal from local gangs should they be seen conversing with a stranger. The smugglers, or *pimpineros*, use three courtyards on the Venezuelan side, to fill the jerrycans with gasoline, the women said. The fuelling station is located next to the local command building of the Venezuelan National Guard. "They [the National Guard] eat off us. They live from this", one woman explains, adding that plainclothes Guard officers charge a fee on the contraband fuel, which costs about \$1.50 per *punto* (5 litres), and \$15 per *pipa* (60 litres).

## A Surfeit of Crime

The stakes are high around the *trochas*. The smugglers recruit poor Wayuu children as *moscas* (flies) to look out for soldiers or police, giving them cellphones to sound the alarm. The children also carry guns, sometimes assault rifles, so that they, too, can collect the fees for safe passage.

For ordinary civilians, the crossings have become more bane than boon. Recent arrivals in Colombia report that Venezuelan security forces and armed groups confronted them at several checkpoints in a single trip. One social worker based in Riohacha said women using the *trochas* risk sexual abuse, sometimes reaching



For years already, contraband gasoline from Venezuela has been fueling the informal economy of La Guajira's border areas. CRISIS GROUP/ Bram Ebus

*"The children began getting trapped in shoot-outs."*



Many youngsters from the region are recruited by armed groups and criminal organizations. Some of them are posted along the border to work as *moscas* and monitor the movements of border authorities. CRISIS GROUP/ Bram Ebus

their destination with their clothes ripped off. In a refugee shelter in Maicao, a distraught Venezuelan man told me that all his money was stolen when walking across. He had come to Colombia with his daughter, who has Down syndrome, in search of essential health care.

Internecine violence makes matters worse. Criminal organisations and Wayuu clans collect fees from the traffic through various *trochas*, and often clash with each other in disputes over who is in control. Also joining the fray is the guerrilla National Liberation Army (ELN), whose Luciano Ariza faction, part of the Northern War Front, engages in extortion and live-stock smuggling further south along the border, toward the Perijá mountains.

The sheer variety of illicit business makes the rivalries even more pointed. Weapons, minerals and human beings are trafficked into Colombia, while drugs move in the opposite direction. “This is a continuous time bomb”, said one resident in Paraguachón. “The *narcos* and the guerrillas want control over the border, and the Wayuu, the owners of the territory, are involved in a war that only benefits the people who do not belong here”. Meanwhile, the breakdown in communication between

the security forces on either side of the border makes it easy for criminals to dodge arrest or to hide out on whichever side is more hospitable to them. Locals say the police are paid off not to interfere.

A short distance from Paraguachón, on the Colombian side of the border, lies a *rancheria*, a Wayuu settlement, filled with victims of these border skirmishes. Around 35 huts built of logs and plastic sheeting house up to six families each. Some of the children are blond, a symptom of the malnutrition common in La Guajira. According to the World Food Programme, the basic needs of 90 per cent of the state’s rural population are unsatisfied.

All the Wayuu in the hamlet recently decided to leave their homes on the Venezuelan side of the border after teachers in the local schools walked out over low wages and never came back. To continue their education, the Wayuu children had to attend classes on the Colombian side. At first, they crossed the *trochas* every day. But then, the local Wayuu leader explained, the children began getting trapped in shoot-outs between armed factions and security forces. So all the families relocated.



## “The Zone”

The most notorious armed outfit to have operated in the area was a relative upstart. La Zona (The Zone) undertook a swift and brutal expansion before its equally rapid demise. Along Zulia’s borders, and especially in the Venezuelan town of Guarero, the gang is accused of distributing lists of names and pictures of young people associated with other gangs or with no known affiliation. They were all marked for death, and according to a woman from Guarero, most of them were in fact killed. In an October 2019 report, the Colombian Ombudsman pointed to mass displacement from the town, with entire Wayuu families running away lest La Zona attack them or target their children for recruitment.

“The neighbours left”, said a Wayuu woman from the town who fled to Colombia. “Guarero is abandoned. Many people have gone far away to protect their lives”. She agreed to meet me in the dusty backyard of the Maicao family that employs her as a maid. It was the evening, and the oven-like daytime heat had finally subsided. Sitting on a plastic chair, she shooed the insects

attracted by the flickering light bulb away from her face. Starting in early 2018, she stated, La Zona killed more than 100 people from the town, including her nephew, who was shot execution-style in broad daylight. The killers drove away afterward without impediment, she said; in fact, the Venezuelan National Guard stopped traffic to clear their way. “This happened in front of many people”, she declared in disbelief.

From mid-2019, however, La Zona met with a far more ruthless response from both Venezuelan security forces and other armed groups, both of which resented the criminal outfit’s rise and coveted its border revenues. “All [the Venezuelan] security forces started to look for the leaders of La Zona in their houses, and they have been carrying out extrajudicial killings”, said a human rights defender based in Zulia. “They ran away over the savannahs, and now they are stealing to survive”, added a Guarero local.

The Colombian ELN guerrillas have taken the opportunity to increase their presence in Zulia. A refugee in Maicao indicated that the



Surrounded by handcarts, a soldier patrols the road that connects Paraguachón with Venezuela. CRISIS GROUP/ Bram Ebus

insurgents move only at night and hand out pamphlets in the villages they visit. The guerrillas have sought to hold meetings in Wayuu *rancherías*, and sworn to combat La Zona

and its predatory offshoots. In the eyes of the Wayuu woman from Guarero, they could be a solution to the region's problems, since they claim to want to protect the people.

## Refugees

Violence, poverty, hunger and the need for basic public services are driving people out of Zulia. Aid institutions in La Guajira regard the incoming migrants and refugees as fundamentally different from those of previous years. The first migrant wave comprised wealthy people with passports, headed for Florida, Panama, Spain and other international destinations. By 2016-2017, many middle-income families were joining the well-off in exile, travelling to South American nations such as Colombia, Chile and Peru. In the third phase, around 2018, people lacking passports and the money to travel began trekking across the border to their destinations. They became known as *los caminantes* (the walkers).

But in La Guajira, arguably, a fourth phase has begun: the exodus of the sick and unwell. Each day people arrive with worse health conditions, including chronic diseases and mental

disorders, a local social worker explained to me. Many of these extremely vulnerable people are stuck after criminals or corrupt Venezuelan officials stole their belongings, money and identity papers – or they simply had no money to begin with. In a refugee shelter in Maicao, the courtyard filled up with refugees drowning out each other's voices to tell me their stories. A woman from Maracaibo complained with evident distress that she cannot reach her family in Barranquilla, Colombia – less than 300km away – after she was robbed of all her possessions in a *trocha*.

For those who get stuck, the UN High Commissioner for Refugees has set up a reception centre with space for 600 people, but the waiting list is long – over 4,000 at present. Tens of thousands of Venezuelans end up in informal settlements on the outskirts of towns such as Riohacha, Maicao and Uribia, where naked



Many Venezuelans that cross from Zulia state into La Guajira get stuck in informal settlements in the arid region. The lack of possibilities to pay for further transport makes La Guajira a bottleneck in which many migrants and refugees are stuck. CRISIS GROUP/Bram Ebus

children with scabies play in the dirt and men walk for kilometres to haul back jerrycans of water for household needs. There is no electricity or sewage disposal. Most of the time, the inhabitants tell me, they have too little food to eat three meals a day.

For lack of a better alternative, many Venezuelans stay in these camps for some time. According to Miguel Romo, director of the Colombian migration authority's local branch, La Guajira is unprepared for the influx. The state government has little money, and it is dogged by corruption charges: there have been thirteen governors in the last eight years, many of whom have faced serious allegations of graft. Nevertheless, he acknowledged, the Venezuelans are unlikely to leave La Guajira, and thus humanitarian aid risks becoming "a bottomless barrel".

The informal economy – including organised crime – absorbs Venezuelans without the means to move further inland or abroad. Exploitation and death are commonplace. Maicao is one of the most dangerous towns in La Guajira, with a murder rate over twice the national average. "We are in an environment where there are no mourners", said a woman in Maicao who runs a foundation working with vulnerable children and women. There are so many deaths, she explains, that the living have no time to grieve. In October 2019, the Colombian police broke up a criminal network run by Venezuelans and Colombians that forced underage boys and girls into sexual slavery. Many Venezuelans, including unaccompanied minors, sleep on thin squares of cardboard in shop or office doorways. Rapes occur nightly, according to the foundation manager. "Everything has broken down here", she said.

Local hospitals, meanwhile, are thronged with Venezuelans, who according to a doctor in Maicao make up around 70 to 80 per cent of incoming patients, some of them with conditions such as tuberculosis and HIV in terminal stages. The hospitals in La Guajira are not prepared to give the complex care that people with such illnesses require, and there is no money to transport the Venezuelan patients to better-equipped facilities elsewhere. In theory, emergency rooms should take in Venezuelans without documentation, but an aid worker admitted that many do not receive treatment. Since 2014, a Colombian migration official said, more than 100 corpses have been left unclaimed in the Riohacha morgue by families who cannot afford to pay for repatriation.

Along with the ill and the dying come the newborn. Beside the new mother I met in the San José de Maicao hospital were numerous other pregnant Venezuelan women who were unable to give birth in Zulia's hospitals, which often cannot perform a caesarean-style delivery, and which are now charging patients in dollars for surgical gloves, gauze pads, anaesthetic and other medical gear. The government is supposed to provide such items – indeed, all health care – for free in Venezuela. An obstetrician explains that pregnant 13- or 14-year-olds are a common sight.

"We are working blind", says the doctor. About 80 per cent of Venezuelan women have no passport, and the poorer young women coming here are even less likely to have one. The lack of affordable prenatal care in Venezuela means that most reach the hospital in La Guajira without the vital information such checkups provide about the general health of mother and baby.

## Responding to the Flight

La Guajira cannot cope with all the stranded Venezuelans' demands. Until it is able to offer adequate employment, the black market will continue to flourish – and the attendant violence to rise – in *trochas* such as those around Paraguachón.

At the same time, the scale of the economic calamity in Venezuela – where dollarisation and the scrapping of import and price controls have benefited only a tiny minority in Caracas – means that Venezuelans will continue to arrive in La Guajira without the money to travel





There are two informal border crossings, or *trochas*, that connect with Paraguachón, called *la ochenta* and *la cortica*. Cars carrying contraband goods slowly bump up and down the sandy roads. CRISIS GROUP/Bram Ebus

any farther. Until Venezuela's government and opposition make progress toward a negotiated settlement that allows the economy to stabilise, foreign donors should step up their investment in health care and social services for migrants and refugees. Colombian government figures indicate that outsiders have given \$397 million to tackle the Venezuelan migration crisis over the past two years, even though the UN emergency call for 2019 alone asked for nearly twice that sum. Of the total, the EU and European countries have contributed 44 per cent, of which 11 per cent comes from EU donations.

Life is harsh in La Guajira, and that affects everyone – not just the Venezuelan newcomers. Donors should help make the above services available to Colombian residents as well. If

international aid serves the Venezuelans alone, the Colombians could react with xenophobic outrage, feeling that they are being treated as second-class citizens in their own country.

Until conditions improve for migrants, refugees and residents, violent crime will continue to afflict the border area. An uncontrolled frontier with no cooperation between security forces is a bonanza for organised crime and an ordeal for the defenceless. The two countries could doubtless contain the criminality far more effectively if they could find a way to mend the bilateral relations that they severed early last year. No amount of diplomatic point scoring can justify the pain that all these people are suffering.



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