



# Broken Ties, Frozen Borders: Colombia and Venezuela Face COVID-19

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**What's new?** Under the threat of the COVID-19 pandemic, Colombia and Venezuela have decreed lockdowns and closed their shared border. Both countries now confront a prolonged economic shutdown and public health crisis that will expose millions of Venezuelan migrants to great risk at a time when bilateral ties remain severed.

**Why does it matter?** Although reported cases of infection remain relatively low in both countries, the dispute over political power and the collapsing economy in Venezuela make it especially vulnerable to a major outbreak. COVID-19's impact could also rekindle deep unease over high inequality, defective public services and corruption in Colombia.

**What should be done?** With at least 1.8 million Venezuelans in Colombia and a lengthy shared border, the two countries should re-establish official cooperation during the pandemic. Allies of government and opposition in Venezuela should support urgent steps to pause the conflict there and enable the country to receive life-saving foreign aid.

## I. Overview

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The COVID-19 pandemic may have arrived late in Latin America, but its effects so far lay bare the strains that states and societies face in trying to curb contagion while keeping economies afloat and public order intact. As most of the region's governments close borders, ground air traffic, impose stiff social distancing and send police and military to patrol the streets, simmering grievances and violent conflicts come under new pressures. The region's most toxic crisis, Venezuela's contest for political power, had already driven millions to cross borders with Brazil and Colombia in search of a better future. Now that virus fears have closed these frontiers again and forced Venezuela and Colombia into nationwide lockdowns, the danger of bottling up the poor and shutting down ailing economies at a time of continued political hostilities is becoming clearer. The humanitarian imperative ought to be everyone's priority: for Venezuela's domestic rivals, that means halting their conflict to allow vastly

greater foreign aid flows; for Bogotá and Caracas, it means finding ways to cooperate in battling the health risks both countries share.

Both Venezuela and Colombia have already been hit by unrest and flare-ups of violence as public health directives kick in, including deadly prison riots, episodes of looting, and impromptu protests by the poor and hungry. But it is Venezuela's fate that stirs the greatest concern across the region. Many countries, including some that do not recognise Nicolás Maduro as the legitimate Venezuelan president, argue that it would be reckless to hinder emergency humanitarian aid. They fear that a collapsing health care system, soaring malnutrition rates and pre-existing epidemics such as malaria make Venezuela exceptionally vulnerable to contagion. In contrast, others seem to believe that the moment may be right to deliver the fatal blow to a government they regard as corrupt and dictatorial. This thinking appears to have led some to applaud the U.S. decision to file charges of narco-terrorism and other crimes against Maduro and other leading government figures on 26 March.

What is certain is that Venezuelan migrants and refugees who have left the country are among the most vulnerable to the disease given the conditions in which they live and work. At least 4.9 million Venezuelans have already fled poverty rates of around 90 per cent in their home country, only to struggle to make ends meet in their new lands; these migrants and refugees face the greatest risks due to their lack of access to health care and, often, pre-existing illnesses. Thousands of them are now heading back by foot to their home country after suffering the economic fallout of lockdown in Colombia, where the biggest single population of Venezuelan refugees, estimated at 1.8 million, lives. Despite this flow of returnees, the possibility remains that the number of migrants escaping Venezuela could also grow in the coming months as the virus spreads in that country while the economy contracts further or unrest worsens.

Colombia has made major efforts to ensure that Venezuelan migrants and refugees have legal residency and access to public services, even if one million still have no formal right to remain. But it cannot guarantee their stable or formal employment – least of all under conditions of social distancing and virtual lockdown. Colombia is also beset by a host of other dilemmas as it strives to balance the need for infection control with the danger of reigniting 2019's urban unrest over inequality, flawed public services and corruption. Small pockets of discontent are likely to grow as continuing measures designed to curb COVID-19's spread worsen the economic forecast. The state has limited fiscal resources to support its vulnerable citizens, meaning that many local governments are collecting donations to cover a shortfall in aid programs for those affected by confinement measures.

Informal economic ties, migratory movement in both directions and simple geography dictate that the fates of Colombia and Venezuela's efforts to combat COVID-19 are intertwined, at least to a considerable degree, and whether the respective governments like it or not. The sooner the duelling forces in Venezuela can declare a truce in their conflict, and the quicker that Bogotá and Caracas can lay aside their disagreements to cooperate in fighting the disease's threat, the better for Colombians and Venezuelans, particularly the most disadvantaged among them.

## II. The Spread of COVID-19 and State Responses

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Colombia was one of the first countries in Latin America to announce obligatory self-isolation for incoming travellers, declare a mandatory nationwide preventative “quarantine” and ban all passenger air traffic, generating support for these measures from across a normally polarised political spectrum.<sup>1</sup> The steps it has taken, however, raised serious questions in certain quarters, above all the imprisoned and others who see themselves as highly vulnerable to an epidemic, those who fear a sudden termination of their livelihoods and those who worry that armed groups, including criminal outfits and guerrillas, will take advantage of quarantine to consolidate their influence.

Concerns about the virus’s capacity to spread in chronically overcrowded jails sparked clashes in thirteen prisons throughout the country on 20 and 21 March, with 23 killed in Bogotá’s La Modelo facility. Despite an obligatory city-wide quarantine, family members protested for hours in front of La Modelo the following day.<sup>2</sup> Indicating how perilous the situation remains, the government declared a state of emergency in Colombia’s jails that will allow greater military involvement and give the National Penitentiary and Prison Institute more leeway in disciplining and moving detainees.<sup>3</sup> In the first week of April, two inmates died in the city of Villavicencio as a result of COVID-19 infection.<sup>4</sup>

Elsewhere, hundreds of low-income workers and Venezuelan migrants protested on 23 March ahead of the expected national quarantine. Holding placards pronouncing that they feared hunger more than infection, they demonstrated in front of the mayor’s offices in Bogotá and in its sprawling southern suburb, Soacha.<sup>5</sup> Two dozen supermarkets throughout the country were reportedly looted the same week.<sup>6</sup> Farther afield, along the Pacific coast, communities that have borne the brunt of fighting between guerrillas and drug traffickers expressed their frustration that COVID-19 has galvanised a speedy reaction when top government officials did not bat an eye at the “epidemic of violence” they have lately endured.<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> On 20 March, President Iván Duque announced a nationwide preventative “quarantine” between 24 March and at least 13 April (since extended to at least 27 April). The quarantine, which requires all non-essential workers to stay home except to seek medical care, buy groceries or visit pharmacies, won immediate public praise, including from both sides of the political spectrum, the president’s conservative Democratic Center party and former left-leaning presidential candidate, Gustavo Petro. See, for example, tweet by Gustavo Petro, @petrogustavo, 11:26pm, 20 March 2020. In other countries, measures like the Colombian government’s have been called a “stay-at-home order” or something similar, but for simplicity’s sake this briefing will use the term quarantine.

<sup>2</sup> Crisis Group telephone interviews, NGO officer with access to prisons, adviser to Colombian senator, March 2020.

<sup>3</sup> Resolution 001144, INPEC, 22 March 2020.

<sup>4</sup> “Dos presos de la cárcel de Villavicencio murieron por coronavirus”, *El Tiempo*, 11 April 2020. A group of prisoners sent a letter to President Duque threatening a hunger strike after the deaths in Villavicencio jail, demanding the liberation of vulnerable prison populations in Colombia’s 134 jails, including adults over 60 years old, as well as pregnant and sick women. “Presos amenazan con huelga de hambre por demora en decreto de emergencia”, *Semana*, 11 April 2020.

<sup>5</sup> Crisis Group telephone interview, residents of Soacha, March 2020. See also, for example, tweet by Gustavo Gómez Córdoba, Colombian journalist, 4:28pm, 24 March 2020.

<sup>6</sup> Tweet by Paz y Reconciliación, @parescolombia, think-tank, 1:01pm, 2 April 2020.

<sup>7</sup> According to their statement, “the worst pandemic that the municipality of Alto Baudó is witnessing is called VIOLENCE, fueled by the dispute among armed groups over illegal territorial control”.

The 2,219km border with Venezuela was also an immediate target for the Colombian government's efforts to stall the virus. On 14 March, President Iván Duque closed the seven official border crossings, which have since been sealed shut with additional police and military support. More than 5,000 uniformed officers were also sent to watch over Colombia's many illegal border crossings, known as *trochas*, while hundreds of Venezuelans have been deported from across Colombia since the closure.<sup>8</sup> On the Venezuelan side, Freddy Bernal, a leading member of the ruling United Socialist Party of Venezuela (PSUV) party whom President Maduro has designated "protector" of the Táchira border state, published a video in which he appeared surrounded by heavily armed soldiers and announced that his forces would be watching over the *trochas* and arresting those wishing to cross over from Colombia.<sup>9</sup> In the border area, Bernal is known to control *colectivos*, violent para-police groups that are loyal to *chavismo*, the ruling movement created by the late President Hugo Chávez.<sup>10</sup>

Venezuela ordered schools closed immediately after reporting its first coronavirus cases on 13 March. Two days later, Maduro announced a "collective social quarantine" for Caracas and six states regarded as particularly vulnerable. All except essential activities were shut down and passengers on public transport required to wear face masks. Within 24 hours, the quarantine had been extended to the entire country.<sup>11</sup> The government had already suspended all flights to and from Europe and Colombia for 30 days beginning on 12 March and banned mass gatherings, measures that have since been extended for another month. Maduro appointed Vice President Delcy Rodríguez to head the effort to tackle the pandemic, while Defence Minister General Vladimir Padrino López was prominent in the response as the government deployed the National Guard, the Bolivarian Militia and the police special forces unit FAES (notorious for its reported shoot-to-kill policy) to enforce the lockdown.<sup>12</sup> Health Minister Carlos Alvarado, who had sought to downplay the threat, has been assigned a more minor role.<sup>13</sup>

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"Una Vez Mas la Sub Región del Baudó, Registra una Grave Situación de Orden Público y Crisis Humanitaria", statement issued by community organisations of Alto Baudó, 19 March 2020.

<sup>8</sup> Crisis Group phone interview, humanitarian worker, April 2020. The special adviser on border issues to the Colombian president, Felipe Muñoz, told a journalist that the Colombian government took the decision to close the border, among other reasons, because of lack of information regarding the coronavirus crisis in Venezuela. He acknowledged that the government was aware that it is impossible to stop the flow of people over informal crossings, but that its measures should stop masses of people from gathering in and around the official border crossings. Teresa Welsh, "To stop COVID-19 spread, Colombia halves Venezuela response services", Devex, 17 March 2020.

<sup>9</sup> See tweet by Freddy Bernal, @FreddyBernal, senior *chavista* official, 3:27pm, 23 March 2020.

<sup>10</sup> Crisis Group Latin America Report N°78, *A Glut of Arms: Curbing the Threat to Venezuela from Violent Groups*, 20 February 2020. Days after his announcement, a video circulated on WhatsApp in which unknown armed persons kill and dismember supposed migrant smugglers who were taking people through the *trochas* for increased payments during the closure near San Antonio, Táchira state.

<sup>11</sup> "Nicolás Maduro ordena cuarentena y suspende actividades laborales en Caracas y seis estados", Prodavinci.com, 15 March 2020.

<sup>12</sup> On the FAES (Fuerza de Acción Especial) and its excessive use of violence, see the report by UN High Commissioner for Human Rights Michelle Bachelet, "Human Rights in the Bolivarian Republic of Venezuela", UNHCHR, 5 July 2019.

<sup>13</sup> César Heredia Terán, "De la 'gripe común' a la cuarentena social: discurso oficial ante el COVID-19", Cotejo, 19 March 2020.

Even among opposition politicians there is a recognition that the government's quick actions were appropriate in the circumstances.<sup>14</sup> But they also came at a convenient moment for the government, which was facing an opposition attempt to revive street demonstrations. Opposition leader Juan Guaidó immediately suspended the planned campaign in response to the emergency.<sup>15</sup>

Political motivations aside, these tough measures also reflect the need to shield the Venezuelan health system, which after years of mishandled government spending and economic decline is extremely dilapidated and ill equipped to handle an epidemic. Venezuela has not published regular weekly epidemiological reports since 2014, and the only publicly available information on the outbreak comes from daily updates by Vice President Rodríguez or her brother Jorge, the information minister.

The government listed 46 hospitals across the country charged with receiving cases of COVID-19, but there are only 206 intensive care unit beds in public facilities. The number of those with ventilators – vital life-saving equipment for people most seriously affected by the virus – is a matter of controversy. Although the government insists there are thousands of ventilators, according to a national hospital survey carried out in 2019 by the Venezuelan NGO Médicos por la Salud (Doctors for Health), the true figure is 84.<sup>16</sup> The same survey found that only 9 per cent of hospitals had “regular and continuous” running water.<sup>17</sup> Many lack even soap, surgical gloves or other essential supplies. Should the pandemic hit Venezuela hard, the health care system could rapidly be overwhelmed, with consequences not only for coronavirus patients but for countless others needing care.

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### III. Border and Migration Effects

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Numerous non-state armed groups operate along the border between Colombia and Venezuela.<sup>18</sup> Their control over the *trochas*, which has increased in recent years following sporadic border closures, provides them with a stable source of illicit income and a conduit for trafficking in numerous goods, such as contraband fuel, minerals and drugs.<sup>19</sup> During the years of worsening economic and political crisis in Venezue-

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<sup>14</sup> Crisis Group virtual meetings, opposition MPs and others, 31 March-3 April 2020.

<sup>15</sup> “Guaidó replantea sus protestas de calle contra Maduro por el coronavirus”, Agencia EFE, 13 March 2020.

<sup>16</sup> “Venezuela cuenta con solo 84 camas para enfermos del coronavirus en sus UCI”, ABC, 18 March 2020. Others have estimated the total even lower, at 73. “Coronavirus: ¿cuántas camas en las UCI de los hospitales para atender la emergencia?”, *El Nacional*, 15 March 2020.

<sup>17</sup> “Encuesta Nacional de Hospitales, Balance Final 2019”, Médicos por la Salud, December 2019.

<sup>18</sup> Colombian guerrillas have operated on and across the Venezuelan border for decades, as have paramilitary organisations and their criminal heirs, Venezuelan crime syndicates and *colectivos* loyal to sectors of the Maduro government. These groups work together in volatile alliances or fight each other for territorial control. Venezuelan state security forces also participate in these illicit economies and territorial disputes. Crisis Group Report, *A Glut of Arms: Curbing the Threat to Venezuela from Violent Groups*, op. cit. Crisis Group Latin America Report N°73, *Gold and Grief in Venezuela's Violent South*, 28 February 2019.

<sup>19</sup> The border between Colombia and Venezuela has been closed before, resulting in increased movement over informal crossings and generating more revenues for the criminal organisations controlling them. The Maduro government closed the border in 2015 but reopened it a year later

la since 2013, control of the *trochas* became a cash cow for armed groups and crime syndicates that levy a “toll” on each person wishing to cross and the goods they carry with them, usually between \$1 and \$25. Venezuelan migrants and refugees, as well as residents living close to the frontier, make regular use of these informal crossings during periods when borders are officially closed or to bypass authorities when transporting contraband or travelling without the requisite documents when borders are open.

On average prior to the most recent border closure, more than 50,000 Venezuelans used the official crossings daily, most of them visiting Colombia on short trips to attend schools, visit medical facilities or buy food or medicines, and returning each afternoon before the border closes for the night. An estimated 1.28 million families in Venezuelan frontier regions depend on products they can buy across the border, according to calculations by the Colombo-Venezuelan Chamber, a binational business platform.<sup>20</sup> In contrast, Colombian government sources estimate that 3-3,500 people are now crossing the *trochas* each day, with an unspecified number staying in Colombia.<sup>21</sup>

So far, contrary to some media outlets’ initial predictions of a wave of migrants fleeing Venezuelans, there has been no major increase in use of the *trochas*.<sup>22</sup> Security experts in Zulia and Táchira states explain that one reason is the shortage of fuel in Venezuela, preventing potential migrants from paying for transport to the border.<sup>23</sup> Black-market prices for 20 to 25 litres of fuel in San Cristóbal, capital of Táchira, have risen from \$12 to \$36 as a general lack of petrol and quarantine measures severely restrict distribution.<sup>24</sup> Fuel is so scarce on the Venezuelan side that state officials and security officers who were previously involved in fuel smuggling are reserving the limited amounts available for activities that are considered essential, such as food transport and policing. Meanwhile, gunmen stationed at the *trocha* between Ureña and San Antonio de Táchira, towns on the Venezuelan side of the busiest official crossings, are reportedly charging triple the normal price for its use following the closure. Witnesses say the men are now taking the precaution of wearing face masks.<sup>25</sup>

At the same time, thousands of Venezuelans living in Colombia have set off back to their home country, many of them driven to do so by the lockdown’s economic

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after an agreement with the Colombian government. It was closed again for several months following the failed effort by Maduro’s national and international opponents to get humanitarian aid into Venezuela on 23 February 2019.

<sup>20</sup> The calculation is based on the number of border mobility cards, which allowing cross-border movement for local residents, and numbers of official and informal daily crossings.

<sup>21</sup> Crisis Group telephone interview, senior Colombian official, 25 March 2020.

<sup>22</sup> “‘Si paramos, no comemos’: el drama de los venezolanos en medio de la cuarentena”, Infobae, 24 March 2020.

<sup>23</sup> Crisis Group telephone interview, security expert in Venezuela, 24 March 2020.

<sup>24</sup> Non-official fuel prices have risen sharply due to the collapse of Venezuela’s refining capacity, the effect of U.S. sanctions on imports of petrol and, most recently, quarantine restrictions on service station sales and fuel distribution. “Fuel shortages pile pressure on Venezuela’s Maduro”, *Financial Times*, 11 April 2020. “Venezuela, la antigua potencia energética de Sudamérica, deja sin combustible a sus ciudadanos en plena crisis del coronavirus”, Infobae, 29 March 2020. “Venezuela’s military take over fuel pumps as shortages increase”, Bloomberg, 18 March 2020.

<sup>25</sup> Crisis Group telephone interview, security expert in Venezuela, 24 March 2020.

hardships.<sup>26</sup> During the first three days after the border closure, 27,000 Venezuelans who live close to the Colombian border and were in the neighbouring country went back home. In addition to them, about 8,000 returnees, including thousands of Venezuelans living in Colombia but also others travelling from Peru and Ecuador, have made it back across the border in recent weeks.<sup>27</sup> Many trekked out of Bogotá and other Colombian cities or have taken special bus services to begin the journey, which covers 550km from the capital across the Andes mountain range to Puente Simón Bolívar, the main border crossing near the city of Cúcuta.<sup>28</sup> Walking along the highway north of Bogotá, one young couple from the Venezuelan state of Aragua recounted that they had left their dwellings in the Colombian capital after the lockdown denied them the chance to work. “We paid \$6 a night for our room”, they said. “In Venezuela, at least we don’t have to pay rent. We have a place to stay”. On the road they depend on handouts from locals and passersby. Venezuelans residing in an informal settlement on Bogotá’s periphery commented that they rely almost completely on gifts of food and other acts of local solidarity.<sup>29</sup>

Authorities on both sides have sought to ensure that the returnees can make use of the main official border crossing.<sup>30</sup> Cúcuta Mayor Jairo Yánez announced on 4 April that a “humanitarian channel” would be opened with the support of authorities on both sides and international organisations, allowing a first contingent of 600 Venezuelans to return to their home country following a series of health checks and a period of compulsory quarantine.<sup>31</sup> Colombian officials are preparing for further coordinated repatriations, while international humanitarian organisations based in Venezuela are reportedly able to receive 200 returnees daily.<sup>32</sup>

Distrust between the two countries over these migrant flows nevertheless remains palpable. Venezuela’s government has accused Colombia of using the returns to smuggle paramilitaries and mercenaries into the country with the aim of fomenting instability.<sup>33</sup> Meanwhile, officials from the UN High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) and the Colombian government have reportedly sought to discourage any uncontrolled flow of migrants due to the health risks it poses for the migrants and its possible effects on underequipped health centres in border regions. According to one senior UNHCR official, basic conditions for safe return to Venezuela are not being

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<sup>26</sup> “Cientos de venezolanos regresan a casa en medio de la pandemia”, *El Tiempo*, 4 April 2020. President Maduro has claimed that the migrants are fleeing xenophobia.

<sup>27</sup> Crisis Group telephone interviews, senior UNHCR official, 9 April 2020; Colombian migration official, 15 April 2020.

<sup>28</sup> “¿Qué está pasando con los venezolanos que regresan a su país?”, *El Tiempo*, 9 April 2020.

<sup>29</sup> About 80 per cent of the around 400,000 Venezuelans living in Bogotá work in informal sectors and live hand to mouth. Crisis Group interviews, Venezuelan migrants and refugees in and around Bogotá, 6-8 April 2020.

<sup>30</sup> In certain instances, pregnant women and people with chronic diseases that require treatment have also been allowed to cross at Puente Simón Bolívar.

<sup>31</sup> Milagros Palomares, “Abren canal humanitario en Cúcuta y Arauca para el retorno de casi 600 venezolanos”, *Proyecto Migración*, 4 April 2020. “Cientos de venezolanos regresan a casa en medio de la pandemia”, *El Tiempo*, 4 April 2020.

<sup>32</sup> On Colombian state policy toward Venezuelan migrants and refugees, see “Colombia incluye en su respuesta frente a COVID-19 pero necesita más apoyo internacional”, Colombia Presidency, 6 April 2020. Crisis Group interview, senior humanitarian official, 13 April 2020.

<sup>33</sup> “Venezuela denuncia intento de ingreso de paramilitares al país”, *TeleSur*, 6 April 2020.

met.<sup>34</sup> After crossing the border, Venezuelan returnees are placed in compulsory quarantine, where conditions are insalubrious.<sup>35</sup>

Colombian and Venezuelan security forces have also detained a number of migrants moving to the border, including about 130 Venezuelans who tried to return to their homeland via the border state of Apure but were retained by the Venezuelan authorities and placed under quarantine.<sup>36</sup>

Although the decision to close the border with Venezuela was understandable in light of the importance of stopping the coronavirus from spreading, it has had several drawbacks. Colombian authorities have suspended all migration services, including residency and visa applications and permits. Aside from the officially sanctioned crossings, migrants and refugees who find a way to traverse the informal crossings are not checked for their health status, and most of the riverine border that separates Venezuela and Colombia in the Amazon remains uncontrolled by the authorities.<sup>37</sup> “There is no epidemiological control at any of the borders, at any of the crossings. ... So, all the people have free passage”.<sup>38</sup> Furthermore, several new *trochas* reportedly opened in the days immediately after the official border closed.<sup>39</sup>

The harmful effects are also felt by people living on both sides of the Colombian-Venezuelan border, who share deep cultural, economic and ethnic ties. Past closures have hurt their livelihoods through restrictions on trade. Not surprisingly, the desperation of people on the Venezuelan side as well as among local residents, migrants and refugees on the Colombian side has become conspicuous. In Paraguachón, the border town in Colombia’s La Guajira state, local Colombians and migrants looted a truck carrying food products on its way to Venezuela.<sup>40</sup> “Hungry people are more irrational than normal and feel under real pressure”, said one resident, adding that people on both sides of the border are particularly anxious since they depend on informal trade and smuggling over the frontier.<sup>41</sup>

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<sup>34</sup> Crisis Group telephone interview, senior UNHCR official, 9 April 2020.

<sup>35</sup> Zulma López, “Venezolanos migrantes cumplen cuarentena en cuatro planteles educativos en San Antonio del Táchira”, *Efecto Cocuyo*, 11 April 2020.

<sup>36</sup> Crisis Group telephone interview, security expert in Venezuela, 24 March 2020.

<sup>37</sup> “Migración Colombia suspende vigencia de sus trámites por cuarentena”, Colombian Foreign Ministry, 26 March 2020. Nor are humanitarian organisations able to watch over the crossing as was the case previously. Aid groups have had to cease all monitoring activities as part of the national quarantine measures. Crisis Group telephone interview, humanitarian official, April 2020.

<sup>38</sup> Crisis Group telephone interview, humanitarian official, April 2020.

<sup>39</sup> Crisis Group telephone interview, security expert in Norte de Santander, 19 March 2020.

<sup>40</sup> In Paraguachón, prior to the closure, the land border with Venezuela was opened every night to cargo and trucks. Businesspeople transported food, among other products, to private buyers in Venezuela. The lootings were reportedly carried out by Colombians “who because of the economic boom that is rumoured on the border have come and settled here with their families”, as well as Venezuelan migrants and refugees. Crisis Group telephone interview, resident of Paraguachón, 29 March 2020.

<sup>41</sup> Crisis Group telephone interview, resident of Paraguachón, 29 March 2020.



#### **IV. The Threat of Armed Violence**

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Across Colombia, armed groups have reacted to COVID-19 with a mix of fear, contempt and opportunism. On 29 March, the largest leftist guerrilla group, the National Liberation Army (ELN), declared a unilateral one-month ceasefire with the government as a humanitarian gesture.<sup>42</sup> While the ceasefire is welcome, it is unclear how it will affect the ELN's fight for territorial control, particularly with the Gaitanista drug cartel along the Pacific coast and another guerrilla group, the Popular Liberation Army, in Colombia's north east.<sup>43</sup> Residents of the Pacific departments of Chocó and Nariño reported that heavy fighting between the ELN and Gaitanistas went on throughout March and continued unabated, forcing more mass displacement and confinement.<sup>44</sup> Areas disputed between the two largely lack a permanent state presence or health care systems able to combat a pandemic.

The ELN appears to support quarantine-like measures and may be imposing its own movement restrictions in an attempt to prevent its fighters from becoming infected.<sup>45</sup> The same is true of armed groups that emerged out of defunct paramilitary units and some dissident factions of the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC), the main parts of which signed a peace deal with the government in 2016. At least one FARC dissident group in northern Cauca, another Pacific department, has seized upon the military's shift in focus toward border control and public order to make a show of force. In the first days of the national quarantine, the Frente Dagoberto Ramos attacked a handful of police stations across the department and escalated harassment of the Nasa indigenous community's autonomous guard.<sup>46</sup>

Many of these armed groups have long coveted the profit-making opportunities along Colombia's border with Venezuela, while both the ELN and FARC dissidents have taken advantage of the neighbouring country's political and economic troubles to expand there in recent years.<sup>47</sup> Along both sides of the border, continuous shootouts among rival groups and with state forces have exposed civilians to extreme insecurity. In the second week of March, eight bodies with bullet wounds and burns were found close to Cúcuta, the most important city on the Colombian side of the border, while on the Venezuelan side five corpses were discovered on the same day in Ureña, in the state of Táchira. Armed groups operating along the border apart from the ELN

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<sup>42</sup> "El ELN Frente a la pandemia por el coronavirus COVID-19", ELN statement, 29 March 2020.

<sup>43</sup> In a statement issued in early April, the ELN's Western Front said the ongoing presence of paramilitary groups obliged the guerrillas to continue fighting in certain areas. "Aclaraciones desde el frente de guerra occidental del ELN", ELN statement, April 2020.

<sup>44</sup> "Desplazamientos masivos en el municipio de Roberto Payán (Nariño)", Flash Update UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs, 23 March 2020; and "Desplazamiento masivo y confinamiento en el municipio de Alto Baudó (Chocó)", Flash Update UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs, 21 March 2020.

<sup>45</sup> Crisis Group telephone interviews, residents of Cauca and Córdoba departments, March 2020.

<sup>46</sup> Crisis Group telephone interview, official, Association of Indigenous Cabildos of Northern Cauca, March 2020.

<sup>47</sup> Crisis Group Latin America Briefing N°40, *Containing the Border Fallout of Colombia's New Guerrilla Schism*, 20 September 2019.

have declared no ceasefires as yet, but neither is there clear indication that violence has risen since the border closure.<sup>48</sup>

One of the most violent border towns in Táchira, Boca de Grita, appears mostly calm only weeks after firefights among the criminal group Los Rastrojos, members of the ELN and Venezuelan security forces shocked the village in mid-February 2020, causing many residents to flee to Colombia.<sup>49</sup> Locals reported in recent days that members of Los Rastrojos still move in the village's surroundings but do not impede health workers' activities. "Medics accompanied by nurses and National Guardsmen go from house to house and over all the streets with a megaphone to tell them about the measures needed to stop the virus from propagating", one resident said.<sup>50</sup>

## V. Health and Livelihoods at the Border

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Eyewitness reports indicate that the response to the virus on both sides of the border has been far from robust. One hospital medic in the Colombian city of Maicao, in La Guajira state, complains that doctors lack protective equipment, each having just one mask to wear for three consecutive weeks. Up until the declaration of Colombia's national quarantine, people in Maicao continued to gather in large numbers. "Here, really, the discotheques are open; there are parties; everything is going on".<sup>51</sup> At the same time, fresh Venezuelan migrants and refugees continue to arrive despite the official border's closure, although absolute numbers have decreased. "[T]hey are coming over the *trochas*", the medic added. "There is no control".<sup>52</sup>

Demand for health care from both migrant Venezuelans and local Colombians in La Guajira, which was already appreciable before the pandemic, remains high.<sup>53</sup> But local hospitals and aid NGOs have decided to tend to fewer people so as to reduce the risk of crowding, restricting the number of patients in waiting rooms and reducing opening hours. There are currently four ventilators set aside for Colombians without health insurance and for Venezuelans in Maicao, although the latter number over 160,000 in La Guajira, roughly 20 per cent of the state's population (far more ventilators are available for Colombians with health insurance). "The only thing we can work with at this moment is with the blessing of God. Because all the available ventilators are sold already. There is no other form of attention. You can't control it with antibiotics. You can't control it with medicines. Nothing", the medic consulted in Maicao added.<sup>54</sup>

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<sup>48</sup> Humanitarian workers nevertheless report that a number of armed groups are taking advantage of quarantine conditions to extend their territorial control, including through threats against local social leaders. Crisis Group telephone interview, humanitarian official, 1 April 2020.

<sup>49</sup> "Familias huyen hacia Venezuela por enfrentamientos entre el ELN y Los Rastrojos en la frontera", *El Nacional*, 16 February 2020.

<sup>50</sup> Crisis Group telephone interview, resident of Boca de Grita, 21 March 2020.

<sup>51</sup> Crisis Group telephone interview, medic in La Guajira, 20 March 2020.

<sup>52</sup> Ibid.

<sup>53</sup> Bram Ebus, "Under a Merciless Sun: Venezuelans Stranded Across the Colombian Border", Crisis Group Commentary, 25 February 2020.

<sup>54</sup> Crisis Group telephone interview, medic in La Guajira, 20 March 2020.

Elsewhere along the border and inside Colombia, the difficulties of managing the needs of homeless Venezuelan migrants and refugees as well as those of locals under conditions of obligatory quarantine are becoming evident.<sup>55</sup> Venezuelan women in particular find themselves at extreme risk, and are increasingly exposed to sexual and gender-based violence.<sup>56</sup> Some refugee shelters have shut their doors to new arrivals and several kitchens have closed down.<sup>57</sup> Humanitarian relief organisations report that quarantine measures are severely restricting the movement of aid workers – including those wishing to monitor violence levels – although material provisions are still reaching parts of the border.<sup>58</sup>

Meanwhile, the question of who pays to house, feed and assist Venezuelans during the national quarantine has become a matter of political dispute in Colombia. While some local authorities have included Venezuelans in their city-level assistance programs, other large cities, including Bogotá and its suburb Soacha, have said this task falls within the remit of the federal government's migration authorities, which subsequently denied having any such responsibility.<sup>59</sup> Only a small portion of Venezuelans – those who have navigated the bureaucracy to list themselves not only as residents but also in a national poverty register – are eligible for government assistance. Some will also benefit from the postponed payment of water and electricity bills for poorer families, while the government also plans to hand out an estimated 200,000 food parcels.<sup>60</sup> Aid organisations for their part are increasingly prioritising cash

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<sup>55</sup> Only an estimated 44 per cent of the Venezuelan migrant and refugee population in Colombia has legal residency. The remaining 56 per cent (over one million) are undocumented and are not formally entitled to public services. "Mas de 1 millón 825 mil venezolanos estarían radicados en Colombia", *Migración Colombia*, 3 April 2020.

<sup>56</sup> Closed refugee shelters mean that women need to sleep in the streets, exposing them to all kinds of related risks. Closed borders mean that women depend on informal crossings where sexual or gender-based violence frequently occurs. Julia Zulver et al., "Covid-19, VBG y la respuesta humanitaria en Cúcuta", *La Silla Vacía*, 27 March 2020.

<sup>57</sup> In the Norte de Santander department, two kitchens serving over 4,000 meals a day have been ordered to close. "Migrantes venezolanos no tienen protección ante el coronavirus en Norte de Santander", *El Espectador*, 21 March 2020. A shelter in Pamplona, on the route taken by Venezuelans to cross Colombia on foot has been closed up to 30 May. Milagros Palomares, "Refugio de caminantes en páramo de Berlín estará cerrado hasta el 30 de mayo", *Proyecto Migración*, 21 March 2020.

<sup>58</sup> Crisis Group telephone interviews, humanitarian official, 1 April 2020; humanitarian official, Norte de Santander, 31 March 2020.

<sup>59</sup> Barranquilla is allowing Venezuelans to register for aid, according to community reports. Crisis Group telephone interview, official, Coalition for Venezuela Barranquilla, March 2020. In early April, Bogotá Mayor Claudia López said the city had no obligation to assist Venezuelans during the quarantine. She said this responsibility should fall to Colombia's migration authorities. "Dura respuesta de C. López a críticas por pedir ayuda para venezolanos", *El Tiempo*, 2 April 2020. The mayor of Soacha on 3 April said his municipality would not accept the presence of a migrant shelter that had been planned with Ministry of Interior assistance. See tweet by Juan Carlos Saldarriaga, @juancsaldarriag, Soacha mayor, 1:41pm, 3 April 2020. The plans for the shelter were subsequently cancelled. The same day, however, migration authorities announced that they had no responsibility to provide material support to Venezuelans. *Migración Colombia*, "Mas de 1 millón 825 mil venezolanos estarían radicados en Colombia", 3 April 2020.

<sup>60</sup> "Pagos de servicios públicos en época de coronavirus", *Noticias Caracol*, 2 April 2020. "Colombia incluye en su respuesta frente a COVID-19 pero necesita más apoyo internacional", *Colombia Presidency*, 6 April 2020.

transfers to Venezuelan refugees and migrants, which they regard as easy to deliver to thousands at a time with minimal physical contact.<sup>61</sup>

Remote regions along the Colombian-Venezuelan border are likely to suffer more because they lack basic food products and fuel. In the Cumaribo municipality, in the south-eastern Colombian state of Vichada, hardships in Venezuela have already made themselves felt on the other side of the border. Food products and fuel were traditionally bought in neighbouring Venezuela and brought over to Colombia, but this supply line dwindled as these products became increasingly scarce in southern Venezuela.<sup>62</sup> Local Colombian products remain exorbitantly expensive as transport to the nearest city, Villavicencio, takes two days over unpaved roads that are impassable in the rainy season.

Frustration in these areas at the additional threats posed by exposure to the virus and its economic side effects has already boiled over. Indigenous groups feeling abandoned by the state blocked the main road in Casuarito, also on the Venezuelan border in Vichada state, and demanded between \$12 and \$75 from each passing vehicle, threatening drivers who refused to pay.<sup>63</sup> The bishop of Guainía state in Colombia's Amazon region, Joselito Carreño, echoed their concern over health conditions in his region and in the neighbouring Venezuelan state of Amazonas. "We understand that in Venezuela the health situation, the presence of food, everything, is completely neglected in this border region. There are desperate people and they want to cross the border to come to Colombia".<sup>64</sup>

At present, the capital of Guainía, Puerto Inírida, has three big informal neighbourhoods, inhabited in total by 350 to 400 families of Venezuelan migrants and refugees. These settlements have no sewage system, access to water or electricity supply. Most inhabitants depend on informal economic activities and contraband across the border, and they have few means to provide for their families now that the border is closed and a quarantine in place. The only hospital in Puerto Inírida has just one ventilator.

Health conditions are also appalling in gold mines on the Venezuelan side of the border, where thousands of miners live and work but which are suffering a malaria outbreak and are surrounded by armed groups, notably ELN units and FARC dissidents.<sup>65</sup> According to Bishop Carreño, "some of the miners will leave the mines to take fuel and food to their families, and if there were cases of coronaviruses in [Puerto] Inírida then they could be infected by coming here and then taking it back to the mine, where medical services barely exist".<sup>66</sup>

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<sup>61</sup> Multiple NGOs and aid organisations aim to reach 50,000 people, knowing that most will use the money for shelter and food. Crisis Group telephone interviews, senior NGO and UNHCR representatives in Colombia, 9 April 2020.

<sup>62</sup> Crisis Group focus group, indigenous representatives in Cumaribo, 24 November 2019.

<sup>63</sup> "Indígenas realizan retén ilegal en la vía a Casuarito", *El Morichal*, 21 March 2020.

<sup>64</sup> Crisis Group telephone interview, bishop of Guainía, 22 March 2020.

<sup>65</sup> Crisis Group Report, *Gold and Grief in Venezuela's Violent South*, op. cit.

<sup>66</sup> Crisis Group telephone interview, bishop of Guainía, 22 March 2020.

## VI. The Prospect of a Humanitarian Agreement

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The spread of the coronavirus across Latin America and its impact on vulnerable people in both Colombia and Venezuela, especially along the shared border, make a coordinated health and humanitarian response that can target, tend to and isolate local disease outbreaks of paramount importance. After Venezuela expelled all Colombian diplomats in February last year, however, high-level official communication between the two countries ceased.<sup>67</sup> A modicum of coordination between the two governments over health issues and humanitarian crossings has since resumed in response to the epidemic.<sup>68</sup> But the Colombian government, as well as the U.S. and many other states in Latin America and Europe, continue to refuse to recognise Maduro as the president of Venezuela, regarding his re-election in May 2018 as fraudulent and treating his rival Juan Guaidó, head of the opposition-held National Assembly, as the country's legitimate ruler.

### A. Humanitarian Needs and Political Conflict in Venezuela

At present, 59 countries demand that Venezuela hold an early presidential election. The announcement on 26 March by U.S. judicial authorities that they had indicted President Maduro and fourteen current and former Venezuelan officials on charges of “narco-terrorism” and other crimes heightened pressure on the Venezuelan government while probably undermining prospects of a return to negotiations between the sides.<sup>69</sup> Whether or not that was the intent, U.S. Attorney General William Barr reinforced that perception when he said the coincidence of the indictments with the COVID-19 emergency was “good timing” in that it increased the chances of a change of government in Caracas that could enable a more effective response to the pandemic.<sup>70</sup>

The indictments also came a few days prior to the U.S. unveiling of its first substantive proposal for a peaceful resolution of the country's political dispute. It promised to repeal oil sanctions and those against the government and state oil corporation PDVSA in exchange for the formation of a cross-party Council of State that would

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<sup>67</sup> The expulsions came after the Venezuelan opposition, with U.S. and Colombian backing, sought to force humanitarian aid across the border on 23 February 2019, in an open bid to cause a split between the Venezuelan armed forces and Maduro. “As Venezuela aid standoff turns deadly, Maduro severs ties with Colombia”, *The New York Times*, 23 February 2019. The only, relatively low-level exception to the freeze in relations has until now been communication between migration officials of both countries regarding deportations. Crisis Group interview, high-level Colombian official, Bogotá, 31 January 2020.

<sup>68</sup> “Colombia, Venezuela cooperating to deal with coronavirus”, *Prensa Latina*, 17 March 2020.

<sup>69</sup> On the history of negotiations between the sides, see Crisis Group Latin America Briefing N°41, *Peace in Venezuela: Is There Life after the Barbados Talks?*, 11 December 2019.

<sup>70</sup> See Crisis Group Statement, “A Misguided Attempt to Topple Maduro as the Virus Looms”, 27 March 2020. “Nicolás Maduro Moros and 14 Current and Former Officials Charged with Narco-Terrorism, Corruption, Drug-trafficking and Other Criminal Charges”, U.S. Department of Justice, 26 March 2020. William K. Rashbaum, Benjamin Weiser and Katie Brenner, “Venezuelan leader is charged in the U.S. with drug trafficking”, *The New York Times*, 26 March 2020.

assume control of the executive, pending presidential and parliamentary elections within six to twelve months.<sup>71</sup>

Maduro and his allies were unlikely to have welcomed the initiative, regardless of circumstances, since it assumes that he would step down from power upon the Council's formation. In essence, the U.S. proposal calls for full-scale restoration of democratic institutions, while offering the incumbent only the right to stand in an early presidential election. But the indictments arguably hardened the government's posture further by signalling that there is no safe future for the Venezuelan president and many of his colleagues.<sup>72</sup> Foreign Minister Jorge Arreaza dismissed the plan within hours of its presentation.<sup>73</sup> The onset later that week of major U.S. naval manoeuvres close to Venezuela, announced as part of a counter-narcotics operation, rang alarm bells in *chavista* ranks that Washington was primed to resort to military action to bring down Maduro, reinforcing the government's extreme mistrust of U.S. intentions.<sup>74</sup>

As Crisis Group has pointed out, the indictments' timing, whatever the reason behind it, was especially harmful given domestic developments in Venezuela.<sup>75</sup> Prior to these announcements, movements on both sides of Venezuela's political divide had suggested that consensus around enabling increased humanitarian aid to the country might be possible. Both Maduro and Guaidó had referred to possible deals, albeit each of them in terms that seemed unlikely to appeal to the other. While Maduro has called for a "national dialogue" to address the virus including "all sectors of the opposition" and the Catholic Church, his rival Guaidó has sought the installation of a full-scale National Emergency Government, with representatives from both sides but without Maduro.<sup>76</sup> Meanwhile, civil society was exerting increasing pressure for at least a temporary truce to address the health emergency.<sup>77</sup> Despite agreements by

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<sup>71</sup> "U.S. offers to lift Venezuela sanctions for power-sharing deal, shifting policy", Reuters, 31 March 2020. Details of the U.S. proposal can be found at "Democratic Transition Framework for Venezuela", U.S. Department of State, 31 March 2020.

<sup>72</sup> Crisis Group telephone interview, social scientist, 2 April 2020.

<sup>73</sup> Antonia Laborde, "EE.UU. propone un plan de transición política en Venezuela sin Maduro ni Guaidó", *El País*, 31 March 2020.

<sup>74</sup> On the nature of the U.S. operations, see Adam Isacson, Geoff Ramsey and David Smilde, "Q & A: Putting U.S. Counterdrug Operations in the Caribbean in Context", Washington Office on Latin America, 3 April 2020. Government sympathisers and officials have told Crisis Group that the apparent military pressure has reinforced cohesion and the spirit of resistance in government ranks. Crisis Group virtual interviews, *chavista* officials and sympathisers, 2 and 3 April 2020.

<sup>75</sup> Crisis Group Statement, "A Misguided Attempt to Topple Maduro as the Virus Looms", op. cit.

<sup>76</sup> Regarding Maduro's proposal, see "Maduro llama al diálogo nacional con participación del episcopado", *El Universal*, 26 March 2020. While Guaidó's proposal is not identical to that of the U.S., the opposition has insisted that the two are complementary. Ronny Rodríguez Rojas, "Guaidó propone gobierno de emergencia nacional ante la crisis por COVID-19", *Efecto Cocuyo*, 28 March 2020.

<sup>77</sup> See, for example, a communique from one group of Venezuelan activists: "Frente a la epidemia del Covid-19 exigimos un acuerdo humanitario. ¡La vida está en juego, el país lo reclama!", Aquí Cabemos Todos, 29 March 2020. On 4 April, under the banner Agreements for the People, scores of Venezuelan NGOs and personalities launched a campaign for a "pluralistic and inclusive agreement among all sectors" of society to deal with the pandemic. They called specifically for cooperation between the inter-disciplinary expert groups already set up by government and opposition and a proposed Civil Society Advisory Council, along with multilateral aid organisations. They called on

the government and opposition in 2019 with the Red Cross and UN to enable aid shipments, those on the receiving end complain that it remains a drop in the ocean compared to domestic needs.<sup>78</sup>

International donors should urgently make more funds available for short-term efforts to mitigate COVID-19's impact in Venezuela. But funds can only be scaled up if Maduro and Guaidó reach some form of agreement. The International Monetary Fund declined a first \$5 billion aid request from Caracas, citing lack of clarity as to which leader is recognised by the international community.<sup>79</sup> The Inter-American Development Bank recognises Guaidó, while another regional development bank, the Andean Development Corporation, deals with Maduro. Guaidó has called for \$1.2 billion in emergency aid from different sources but acknowledges that a domestic political agreement is indispensable if the money is to be properly disbursed.<sup>80</sup> There is resistance in opposition circles, however, to reaching any form of agreement while Maduro remains in power, purportedly on the grounds that aid would be embezzled and would not reach the intended beneficiaries.<sup>81</sup>

Washington's latest moves have only reinforced this position, and a change of heart by the opposition's most important external ally seems unlikely. Civil society organisations, however, have indicated their willingness to form an interdisciplinary group of specialists that could coordinate the COVID-19 response in collaboration with those advisory panels already formed by government and opposition and with multi-lateral aid providers, were an agreement to be struck. Oversight and practical, on-the-ground assistance from the UN would be required to allay fears of aid being diverted.<sup>82</sup>

### *B. Cooperation Between Colombia and Venezuela*

An understanding between Venezuela and Colombia would be critical to unblocking the logjam between government and opposition in Caracas, as well as to laying the groundwork to address these countries' shared health risks. Maduro and Vice President Delcy Rodríguez have repeatedly called on Colombia to embark on a joint approach to the crisis. But they complain that no one answers the phone, and there is

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foreign governments, including the U.S., Norway, Canada, the EU, Latin American and Caribbean states, along with Russia, China and Cuba, to lend their support to the idea.

<sup>78</sup> "Maduro anuncia acuerdo con la Cruz Roja para entregar ayuda humanitaria en Venezuela", RTVEes/Agencias, 11 April 2019. The primary reason for the huge gap between needs and response is international donors' "political will" to aid Venezuelans, according to a top Red Cross official. This official argues that some countries wanted "to use the civilian population, their desperation, as a tool to destabilise the country". "Red Cross slams 'unacceptable' politicisation of Venezuela aid", Agence France Presse, 2 December 2019.

<sup>79</sup> "IMF rejects Maduro's bid for emergency loan to fight virus", Associated Press, 17 March 2020.

<sup>80</sup> Plan José María Vargas de Emergencia Nacional, Despacho de la Presidencia [*Interina*], República Bolivariana de Venezuela, 28 March 2020.

<sup>81</sup> A leading member of Guaidó's Voluntad Popular party, Freddy Guevara (who has been under the Chilean embassy's protection since November 2017), commented on his Twitter account: "There is no agreement with Maduro that can mitigate the disaster. The true measures can only be taken without him. The sanctions against PDVSA, Conviasa etc. are for drug trafficking, corruption and money laundering. You can't fix that with an agreement. They are matters for the law".

<sup>82</sup> Feliciano Reyna Ganteaume, "Venezuela Urgently Needs a Humanitarian Accord that Prioritizes Life and Dignity", Washington Office on Latin America, 27 March 2020.

little doubting the understandable distrust of the Venezuelan leader's word that prevails in Bogotá.<sup>83</sup>

Some breakthroughs in bilateral cooperation have nevertheless been achieved in face of the emergency. Under the aegis of the World Health Organization and its regional subsidiary, the Pan American Health Organization, Colombian and Venezuelan health ministers took part in a teleconference on 16 March to share epidemiological information.<sup>84</sup> The intention of both governments is that the two will maintain permanent contact, with an eye to unspecified additional measures to control the virus and monitor health conditions along the border. In addition, the Colombian and Venezuelan ombudsmen, independent state agencies charged with protecting civil and human rights in each country, published a joint statement pledging to promote access to health services, regardless of where civilians are, and to activate a channel of communication. The declaration called upon "fellow citizens to unite as brother nations in facing this challenge and caring for each other to overcome this health contingency".<sup>85</sup>

Aside from the imminent health crisis, both countries should also agree on steps to contain xenophobia toward Venezuelan migrants in Colombia and manage its potential effects on bilateral tensions. Opinion polls suggest that a majority of Colombians were alarmed by the extent of Venezuelan immigration even before the pandemic, although until now there have been few serious incidents of violence against migrants.<sup>86</sup>

Still, growing numbers of Colombian municipalities both close to and far from the border are witnessing rising levels of anti-immigrant resentment. Pamplona was the first municipality in Colombia to prohibit undocumented migrants from entering as a measure to keep the coronavirus out, although as of early April authorities had not disclosed any cases of infected Venezuelan migrants.<sup>87</sup> The national government had to step in to look for alternative shelter for Venezuelans who arrived in Pamplona after a two-day walk from the border. In Soacha, a hard-hit suburb of Bogotá, dozens of Venezuelans have reportedly been disappeared in recent months, possibly at the hands of armed gangs that are practising "social cleansing" or aiming to reduce competition for limited employment opportunities.<sup>88</sup> Community groups in Soacha

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<sup>83</sup> "Maduro dice que Colombia no contesta llamadas para frenar juntos el COVID-19", Agencia EFE, 13 March 2020. "Duque descalifica el diálogo como salida al problema venezolano", *Revista Semana*, 8 July 2019.

<sup>84</sup> "A través de OPS, Colombia intercambia información sanitaria con Venezuela", Colombian Health Ministry, 17 March 2020. "OMS y OPS mediarán en comunicación entre Colombia y Venezuela por coronavirus", *El Espectador*, 16 March 2020.

<sup>85</sup> "Defensorías del Pueblo de Colombia y Venezuela velan por atención médica ante coronavirus", Defensoría del Pueblo Colombia, 17 March 2020.

<sup>86</sup> "El rechazo a los venezolanos que muestra la encuesta de Invamer", *El Espectador*, 5 December 2019.

<sup>87</sup> "Migrantes venezolanos no tienen protección ante el coronavirus en Norte de Santander", *El Espectador*, 21 March 2020.

<sup>88</sup> "There is enormous hate toward Venezuelans. It's the poor vs the poor, and huge social tension. This allows for Venezuelans to be killed and disappeared without it being reported". Crisis Group interviews, researcher, Bogotá, January 2020; human rights advocates, Soacha, March 2020.



that previously welcomed and defended Venezuelans now say health services cannot cater to their needs amid the crisis.<sup>89</sup>

Such sentiments are not shared everywhere. A doctor in La Guajira explained that colleagues were more concerned about the viral risk presented by European backpackers along its northern beaches than about Venezuelans showing up at local hospitals.<sup>90</sup> But the perception about Venezuelan migrants and refugees in border areas might quickly change if more of them are diagnosed with the coronavirus.

## **VII. Conclusion**

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The coronavirus pandemic comes at an exceptionally delicate moment for Colombia and Venezuela after their governments turned their backs on one another during the 2019 political dispute in Caracas. The perils to public health and the paralysis of economic activity inescapably will be acutely felt in both countries in the coming weeks, exposing poor urban and rural populations to immense stress. Venezuelan migrants and refugees, who have the least protection of all and are often unable to quarantine themselves, are at particular risk of contracting the disease, losing their precarious livelihoods and becoming stigmatised. Armed groups, meanwhile, could seize the opportunity to extend their writ over border areas via their control over illegal crossings.

Two sets of humanitarian agreements will be essential to prevent the virus's spread from becoming an even greater threat. Within Venezuela, both sides in the political dispute should agree to pause their conflict to enable greatly increased aid flows into the country, potentially via the creation of a UN-backed specialist group of humanitarian experts. For their part, Venezuela and Colombia should freeze their political differences and build communication channels to ensure that they can effectively handle disease outbreaks and security risks straddling their borders, as well as ensure the safe return of Venezuelan migrants. Neither Bogotá nor Caracas is likely to step back from its respective political positions. But since neither government wishes to see an abrupt deterioration in the public's health and welfare, both would be wise to put aside, even if only temporarily, the causes of their estrangement.

**Bogotá/Brussels, 16 April 2020**

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<sup>89</sup> "Think about the health system. It is not sufficient even for us let alone for them. ... We need to get our house in order before we help others". Crisis Group interview, human rights advocate, Soacha, March 2020.

<sup>90</sup> Crisis Group telephone interview, medic in La Guajira, 20 March 2020.

## Appendix A: About the International Crisis Group

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The International Crisis Group (Crisis Group) is an independent, non-profit, non-governmental organisation, with some 120 staff members on five continents, working through field-based analysis and high-level advocacy to prevent and resolve deadly conflict.

Crisis Group's approach is grounded in field research. Teams of political analysts are located within or close by countries or regions at risk of outbreak, escalation or recurrence of violent conflict. Based on information and assessments from the field, it produces analytical reports containing practical recommendations targeted at key international, regional and national decision-takers. Crisis Group also publishes *CrisisWatch*, a monthly early-warning bulletin, providing a succinct regular update on the state of play in up to 80 situations of conflict or potential conflict around the world.

Crisis Group's reports are distributed widely by email and made available simultaneously on its website, [www.crisisgroup.org](http://www.crisisgroup.org). Crisis Group works closely with governments and those who influence them, including the media, to highlight its crisis analyses and to generate support for its policy prescriptions.

The Crisis Group Board of Trustees – which includes prominent figures from the fields of politics, diplomacy, business and the media – is directly involved in helping to bring the reports and recommendations to the attention of senior policymakers around the world. Crisis Group is chaired by former UN Deputy Secretary-General and Administrator of the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), Lord (Mark) Malloch-Brown.

Crisis Group's President & CEO, Robert Malley, took up the post on 1 January 2018. Malley was formerly Crisis Group's Middle East and North Africa Program Director and most recently was a Special Assistant to former U.S. President Barack Obama as well as Senior Adviser to the President for the Counter-ISIL Campaign, and White House Coordinator for the Middle East, North Africa and the Gulf region. Previously, he served as President Bill Clinton's Special Assistant for Israeli-Palestinian Affairs.

Crisis Group's international headquarters is in Brussels, and the organisation has offices in seven other locations: Bogotá, Dakar, Istanbul, Nairobi, London, New York, and Washington, DC. It has presences in the following locations: Abuja, Algiers, Bangkok, Beirut, Caracas, Gaza City, Guatemala City, Hong Kong, Jerusalem, Johannesburg, Juba, Mexico City, New Delhi, Rabat, Tbilisi, Toronto, Tripoli, Tunis, and Yangon.

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**April 2020**

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## Appendix B: Reports and Briefings on Latin America since 2017

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### Special Reports and Briefings

- Counter-terrorism Pitfalls: What the U.S. Fight against ISIS and al-Qaeda Should Avoid*, Special Report N°3, 22 March 2017.
- Council of Despair? The Fragmentation of UN Diplomacy*, Special Briefing N°1, 30 April 2019.
- Seven Opportunities for the UN in 2019-2020*, Special Briefing N°2, 12 September 2019.
- Seven Priorities for the New EU High Representative*, Special Briefing N°3, 12 December 2019.
- COVID-19 and Conflict: Seven Trends to Watch*, Special Briefing N°4, 24 March 2020 (also available in French and Spanish).
- 
- In the Shadow of "No": Peace after Colombia's Plebiscite*, Latin America Report N°60, 31 January 2017 (also available in Spanish).
- Veracruz: Fixing Mexico's State of Terror*, Latin America Report N°61, 28 February 2017 (also available in Spanish).
- Mafia of the Poor: Gang Violence and Extortion in Central America*, Latin America Report N°62, 6 April 2017 (also available in Spanish).
- Power without the People: Averting Venezuela's Breakdown*, Latin America Briefing N°36, 19 June 2017 (also available in Spanish).
- Colombia's Armed Groups Battle for the Spoils of Peace*, Latin America Report N°63, 19 October 2017 (also available in Spanish).
- Venezuela: Hunger by Default*, Latin America Briefing N°37, 23 November 2017 (also available in Spanish).
- El Salvador's Politics of Perpetual Violence*, Latin America Report N°64, 19 December 2017 (also available in Spanish).
- Containing the Shock Waves from Venezuela*, Latin America Report N°65, 21 March 2018 (also available in Spanish).
- Mexico's Southern Border: Security, Violence and Migration in the Trump Era*, Latin America Report N°66, 9 May 2018 (also available in Spanish).
- Risky Business: The Duque Government's Approach to Peace in Colombia*, Latin America Report N°67, 21 June 2018 (also available in Spanish).
- The Missing Peace: Colombia's New Government and Last Guerrillas*, Latin America Report N°68, 12 July 2018 (also available in Spanish).
- Building Peace in Mexico: Dilemmas Facing the López Obrador Government*, Latin America Report N°69, 11 October 2018 (also available in Spanish).
- Saving Guatemala's Fight Against Crime and Impunity*, Latin America Report N°70, 24 October 2018.
- Friendly Fire: Venezuela's Opposition Turmoil*, Latin America Report N°71, 23 November 2018 (also available in Spanish).
- A Road to Dialogue After Nicaragua's Crushed Uprising*, Latin America Report N°72, 19 December 2018 (also available in Spanish).
- Gold and Grief in Venezuela's Violent South*, Latin America Report N°73, 28 February 2019 (also available in Spanish).
- A Way Out of Latin America's Impasse over Venezuela*, Latin America Briefing N°38, 14 May 2019 (also available in Spanish).
- The Keys to Restarting Nicaragua's Stalled Talks*, Latin America Report N°74, 13 June 2019 (also available in Spanish).
- A Glimmer of Light in Venezuela's Gloom*, Latin America Report N°75, 15 July 2019 (also available in Spanish).
- Calming the Restless Pacific: Violence and Crime on Colombia's Coast*, Latin America Report N°76, 8 August 2019 (also available in Spanish).
- Venezuela's Military Enigma*, Latin America Briefing N°39, 16 September 2019 (also available in Spanish).
- Containing the Border Fallout of Colombia's New Guerrilla Schism*, Latin America Briefing N°40, 20 September 2019 (also available in Spanish).
- Fight and Flight: Tackling the Roots of Honduras' Emergency*, Latin America Report N°77, 25 October 2019 (also available in Spanish).
- Peace in Venezuela: Is There Life after the Barbados Talks?*, Latin America Briefing N°41, 11 December 2019 (also available in Spanish).
- A Glut of Arms: Curbing the Threat to Venezuela from Violent Groups*, Latin America Report N°78, 20 February 2020 (also available in Spanish).
- Imagining a Resolution of Venezuela's*, Latin America Report N°79, 11 March 2020 (also available in Spanish).



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