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Venezuela-Colombia Border: Epicenter of Hemisphere's Largest Migratory Crisis during COVID-19

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COVID-19's pandemic declaration worsened the Táchira-Norte de Santander border as the epicenter of the second largest forced migratory crisis in the world due to the Complex Humanitarian Emergency in Venezuela. COVID-19 changed the direction of the flow from emigration to returned migration, at a border that had already moved from open to semi-open, and since the pandemic, became closed to all formal movements.

Introduction

The Táchira-North of Santander border (TNS) of about 140 kilometres has four of the seven formal border crossings in the approximately 2160 kilometres of common borderline between Colombia and Venezuela. The two countries have had strong relations, and TNS was the most important and transited terrestrial hub, especially with the Andean

Community membership until 2011, when Venezuela formally withdrew. TNS was the main terrestrial port for goods and people, because the Pan American Highway and the Andean Road System crosses its territory. Prior to 2011, relations between the two countries were stable, and a significant exchange and flow of all goods, services and people occurred, to the point that it was called by some “an integrated borderland region” (Bustamante et al. 2016, 274).



TNS has witnessed different migration flows. Up to 2002, Venezuela was a recipient of migrants primarily from Colombia, but also from other South American countries. Since then, it slowly became a migrant ejector: until 2015, emigrants consisted of upper and middle-class citizens, either because they were politically persecuted or because they found that the deterioration of political and economic conditions affected their welfare. They frequently left the country through international airports, and rarely traversed TNS. From 2015 up to February 2019, relations between Colombia and Venezuela became hectic, and progressively shifted until

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Venezuela tightened and finally closed the border crossing to all goods and services. Nicolás Maduro—whose Presidency is not recognized by Venezuelan opposition leaders and a third of the international community since January 2019—decided to break relations with Colombia, declaring that Colombia was attempting to overthrow him. However, despite political upheaval, 2015 represents the milestone when Venezuelans began to cross the border with migratory purposes and Venezuela became a migrant ejector. In 2017 there was a sudden increase of emigrants and also concern of South American countries, especially Colombia. That year, political harassment and imprisonment of dissenters multiplied (Rodríguez and Ramos 2019). Emigration increased up to March 12, 2020, when the border was ‘cordoned off’ due to the COVID-19 pandemic declaration in Venezuela (El Mundo 2020). Colombia did the same on March 14 (Migración Colombia 2020a). Since then, TNS has a new and increasing form of migration: returning Venezuelan migrants.¹

The Border Before COVID-19

Between 2015 and 2020, TNS inhabitants suffered a severe decline in living conditions. Various factors were in force: the armed conflict and the implementation of the FARC agreement in Colombia (Rodríguez and Ramos 2019); the reduction to near closure of the flow of goods and services between Colombia and Venezuela; the ever-increasing number of Venezuelan migrants who arrived with the intent to migrate and then remained; the worsening of basic services, hyperinflation, and several economic and social crises in Venezuela. Moreover, added to these factors, was the long-term political crisis in Venezuela, aggravated by the contested legitimacy of the Maduro regime from January 2019. The conflation of these dimensions has been officially called a Complex Humanitarian Emergency (CHE)² (Asamblea Nacional 2019; UCAB 2020).

There are no official statistics of Venezuelan emigration nor of precisely how many have crossed by TNS, because Venezuela does not publish them and Colombia does not effectively collect them. Nonetheless, international agencies, e.g. the International Organization for Migration (IOM) and the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), have provided an approximate number that has helped orient public policies in Colombia and other receiving nations. They have estimated that 4.5 million Venezuelans fled the country through December 2019 (ACNUR 2020, 3), i.e. 14.36% of the Venezuelan population. Of these, 90%—4.2 million—crossed the border with Colombia (Universidad del Rosario and Konrad Adenauer Stiftung 2019, 11). The estimation of those who crossed the border in TNS is about 75% or 3.1 million.³

The migration flow was so unusual and unpredictable that no authorities or facilities were sufficient to organize and prevent chaos at the border. International organizations helped manage the exceedingly high flow of emigrants; some of them are United Nations agencies such as the IOM and the UNHCR, as well as Doctors Without Borders, the Argentinian White Helmets, the International Committee of the Red Cross, and the Jesuit Refugee Service. Venezuela’s government tried to distract attention from the worsening CHE and the causes for migration, using expressions such as “asymmetrical war” from Colombia—“a puppy of the USA”, Maduro said—whose government is supposedly involved in a *coup d’état* against Venezuela. The Colombian side of the border suffered negative impacts of the CHE and of migration. For example, unemployment in the metropolitan area of Cúcuta, capital city of North of Santander, has increased to 18.1% in February 2020 (from 17.7% in February 2019), the third largest in Colombia, whose unemployment rate is 12.2% for the same month / year (Gaceta Regional, March 29, 2019; La República, March 31, 2020). The migratory trend seemed unstoppable heading into 2020 as different national and international organizations forecast the possibility of 6.4 million Venezuelan migrants leaving the country by the end of the year (Stein 2019), a forecast that the COVID-19 pandemic brought to a standstill.

There were, nevertheless, positive effects of Venezuelan migration to Colombia, especially those in the TNS border region that prevented higher unemployment rates. Some economic sectors have become dynamic. For instance, the service sector in areas such as transportation (flight and road trips), retail sales, university teachers, real estate, international calls, the reception and exchange of remittances from Venezuelan migrants worldwide because Venezuela has an exchange rate control and the currency value is lower than the black market rate. Even more, some of the benefits with long-range perspective are the labor market, a demographic bonus, capital investment and co-development (Banco Mundial 2018).

The Arrival of COVID-19

COVID-19 has had a particularly dramatic effect on life in TNS. On March 12, Venezuela issued a State of National Alarm Declaration (the legitimacy of which was contested by some law professors and Constitutional Law Chairs) and since March 16, applied a quarantine at the border with Colombia. In the border municipalities of Táchira, the government accompanied it with curfew and closure of border passages and gates. Movement between municipalities was indiscriminately restricted, only somewhat alleviated during the day, and only for people who transport food, have production farms or facilities, or work in health services. In addition, petrol shortages and precarious public services decrease

movements. In North of Santander there are restrictions to movement of people and vehicles according to specific schedules and sometimes curfews. Nevertheless, the number of COVID-19 cases continued to increase (Table 1).

On March 12, Venezuelan migrants had to stay wherever they were. Some were travelling to TNS; some were caught at the border zone. Others had recently arrived or were arriving at their intended destination but had not settled down. They suffered the most from the COVID-19 pandemic declaration. They are also the most vulnerable together with the inhabitants of TNS, because it has become a paralyzed and overcrowded place (Figure 1).

The deteriorating conditions and restrictions everywhere forced the most vulnerable Venezuelan migrants in Colombia or other South American countries to attempt to return. Many intended to return through TNS, although sometimes authorities diverted them to the Zulia or Apure border crossings in order to avoid overcrowding in TNS. This time both countries stopped most official crossings. Without any formal option to move further, those who were already on the Venezuelan side and wanted to emigrate formally, and those who wanted to cross illegally and could still do it, stayed in TNS border area. However, illegal border crossing became the primary, and sometimes only, option of movement between the two countries and within TNS border towns if they wanted to return. Formal pendular migration⁴ ceased.

After a month, migrants who were caught on the road decided to return to the border by their own means but faced further restrictions. Then the governments attended to their return, sometimes in special caravans organized by different local or national authorities as well as by the migrants themselves in Colombia. The handling of the situation by the Maduro regime has given way to the so-called “Doctrina Táchira”. This doctrine refers to a refinement of the different strategies used to restrict entry to returning migrants by establishing a limited and always-changing system of days and quotas,⁵ but also to limit the distribution of petrol.

Táchira*	North of Santander	Dif.	Venezuela*	Colombia
1,046**	1,388	342	14,263	233,541
1,120***		268		

Table 1. Covid-19 cases in TNS region, Venezuela & Colombia, 24 July 2020. Data sources: *La Opinión*: <https://bit.ly/30QGtYt>, *Diario La Nación*: <https://bit.ly/3jMXsUf>, *Patria Blog*: <https://bit.ly/2Eki3yS>, *Efecto Cocuyo*: <https://bit.ly/3IXx0HG>.

* Figures provided by Maduro government, accepted by Pan-American Health Organization.

** 148 community cases, 898 estimated at government shelters.

*** Figures from the Ministry of Health differ from those provided by the Presidency Commission of COVID-19.

At first, governments put in place migratory and health protocols,⁶ but as the number of migrants increased, it became evident that in Venezuela there were not enough facilities to host them until they were given clearance to return to their homes. As a result, many returning migrants stayed on the Colombian side, unless they illegally crossed. By July 19, there were 2,500 migrants wandering, waiting and hoping to return home (La Prensa Táchira, July 19, 2020). Colombia provided some lodging (La Opinión, July 18, 2020), while Venezuela denied the Human Right of Entry to their home country. Disparities regarding statistics resurfaced. The Colombian Migration Agency has indicated that since March 14 to July 22, 90,000 Venezuelans have legally returned home, 76% of these through TNS (Migra Venezuela 2020) while the Maduro regime in Táchira estimates that by July 21, 45,391 have done so (El Venezolano Colombia 2020).

Another means of distracting attention from the Maduro regime’s mishandling of the returning migrants is stigmatization. They are called ‘fascists and camouflaged *coup* plotters’, ‘infected’, ‘biological weapons’, ‘bioterrorist’ and ‘*trocheros*’ (when they cross the border by informal crossroads named ‘*trochas*’) (CDH 2020, 1-2). COVID-19 is called the “Colombian Virus”, emulating Trump with the “Chinese Virus”. Despite the formal disruption and friction between governments, meetings at different levels—national, regional and local—have addressed current topics, by means of the Pan-American Health Organization, to implement certain protocols with migrants (Muñoz 2020).



Figure 1. Migrants at the Border, May 2020. Top: migrants in *cambuches* waiting to cross to Venezuela in North of Santander. Bottom: a line of returning Venezuelan migrants near the TNS border. Photos: Rosalinda Hernández.

In the economic sector, the formal flow of goods gave way to astounding growth of smuggling since the pandemic, to the point that Colombian food and medicine are openly sold on the streets and from door to door and even in formal businesses in Táchira. In San Antonio, an estimated 500 people are dedicated to this activity (La Prensa Táchira, July 21, 2020). Remittances have fallen by 80% in the currency exchange offices in North of Santander (Caracol Radio 2020).

Conclusions

TNS is decaying and suffering greatly from the lack of any clear articulation of policies, especially border policies during the COVID-19 crisis; it is, progressively, a formally closed border and is suffering the negative consequences of closed bilateral relations on human security. The migratory crisis, the COVID-19 pandemic and the closure of the border only worsen life conditions in the TNS region.

COVID-19 has deepened and extended the Venezuelan CHE beyond the border to North of Santander, which no longer benefits from pendular migration, remittances, permanent migration or the services provided to the migratory flow.

The return of Venezuelans will continue until the COVID-19 pandemic reverses because living conditions are quite precarious in the hosting countries, and people still count on family support networks in Venezuela. If the CHE continues or worsens with and after the pandemic, the emigration flow will likely resume with or without formal open borders and TNS will continue to be the passage.

National and international authorities, public and civil society organizations at all levels must remain vigilant and denounce human rights violations whenever they occur. There is also an urgent need of aid both to migrants and to the inhabitants at the border as they have increasingly suffered from the pandemic and the lack of understanding between governments. The lack of resources and ongoing fear of prosecution make the work of national organizations in Venezuela significantly problematic.

Notes

- 1 In this paper, we follow a qualitative research method using primary (newspapers, interviews) and secondary sources, as it is an exploratory study of recent and changing events.
- 2 Following the ideas and categorization of human crises and complex emergencies of FAO (2020), Transparencia Venezuela (2017) and UN-Human Rights Council (2020), which point out that human crises and emergencies can be multifactorial, and have economic, social, political and human rights patterns beyond accepted standards.

- 3 This percentage is confirmed by the rate provided by Colombia which points out that 76% of the returning Venezuelans make it through TNS (Migra Venezuela 2020).
- 4 Pendular migration refers to people who usually live or work in the border region and commute back and forth, usually crossing through a single border crossing (Migración Colombia 2017, 6).
- 5 At first, everyone could enter. Then, a daily quota of 700 people was established, followed by 300 per day during three days of the week and more recently it is 350 daily from Monday to Friday (Migración Colombia 2020b).
- 6 First, returning Venezuelans were received in San Antonio del Táchira, where their migratory status was checked, along with body temperature and a quick test for COVID-19. If negative, they were sent to improvised shelters (schools/sports facilities) in the border municipalities and the metropolitan area of San Cristóbal. If positive, they were sent to a health center. Then, after a 14-day period, a second test was taken. An "illegal" returned migrant did not follow these protocols, but if detected, an epidemiological fence was established. A recent disposition stipulates that they would be sent to prison and prosecuted if they illegally cross the border (CDH 2020).

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