

VENEZUELA CRIES FOR HELP

Venezuela, once the richest country in South America, has fallen in recent years into one of the deepest humanitarian crisis this century has seen. Human rights violations are a constant for Venezuelans, who flee en masse seeking asylum in neighboring countries such as Colombia or Brazil. In fact, the United Nations estimate 5.3 million Venezuelan migrants by the end of this year, rivaling the Syrian refugee crisis.

The Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR) proclaimed by the UN General Assembly clearly states that everyone has the right to a standard of living adequate for the health and well-being of himself and of his family, including food, clothing, housing and medical care (article 25). However, many Venezuelans face malnutrition, since buying food has become almost impossible due to hyperinflation, forcing families to wait long hours in a queue only to receive rations that are not enough to cover their basic necessities. The Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO) states that 3.7 million people showed signs of malnutrition in 2018.

Adequate medical care is also scarce, since hospitals continue to suffer from frequent electricity shutoffs, which also affect water supply and public transport services. In addition, more than 13,000 doctors have left Venezuela in the last four years. This lack of medicines and medical personnel leads to the impossibility of starting or continuing the treatment of chronic diseases such as HIV, cancer, diabetes or hypertension. What is more, diseases that had been eradicated such as malaria, tuberculosis, measles or diphtheria have resurfaced and spread easily throughout the country. Cholera has also started to affect the population and has become more widespread due to the difficulties the access to potable water presents and the poor hygiene conditions in many facilities.

According to the UDHR, motherhood and childhood are entitled to special care and assistance (article 25.2) but pregnant mothers and newborns in Venezuela are considered to be specially vulnerable since the lack of proper medical attention often leads to the tragic death of both mother and baby during labor.

Article 26 of the UDHR guarantees everyone's right to education and declares it free at least in the elementary stages. Nevertheless, many Venezuelan children have stopped attending school since their families cannot afford the cost of clothing, books and transport.

Freedom of opinion and expression as described in article 19 UDHR is a right which is difficult to exercise in Venezuela, since deviating from the official information the government provides or opening criticizing public service officials or policies can easily lead to imprisonment. Independence of the judiciary is also not guaranteed, and, therefore, arbitrary arrests and detentions are frequent, which clearly violates article 9 of the UDHR. Venezuela's most famous political prisoner is Leopoldo López, who led a major anti-Maduro march in 2014 and was then charged with criminal incitement and sentenced to 14 years in prison. Reporters and Human Rights activists are received with hostility as they are frequently accused of trying to destabilize the democratic system of Venezuela. Censorship is extremely common and the consequences of the economic and

social crisis the country is living are often blamed on “the enemies of the State” such as the United States. For example, their many electricity shutdowns are considered by the State-approved media as “electromagnetic attacks against Venezuela”.

Institutional violence is usually directed towards the Venezuelan people when they protest in order to improve their precarious situation. The National Guard and demonstrators often clash resulting in many injured or detained civilians and even some deaths. As hunger rises so do political and social tensions which inexorably lead to an escalation of violence. In fact, the UN Human Rights Office has declared to be extremely worried about reports of police forces using excessive force against demonstration, risking their right to physical and moral integrity.

One of the most flagrant examples of this crisis can be found in the city of Maracaibo, once the heart of the Venezuelan oil industry. Now, only ruins and misery remain. The lack of electricity was soon joined by the scarce water and oil supply, which led to difficulties when trying to preserve food. Not only are the most basic human rights of the people in Maracaibo being violated, but also their rights regarding the environment. For example, the Maracaibo lake, the biggest in South America, has also become the most polluted one, due to constant leaks of oil and fuel inside its waters. This affects both the rich biodiversity from the lake but also locals who continue to take baths since authorities refuse to acknowledge these leaks and, consequently, inform the population of the risk those polluted waters pose to their health.

Venezuela is on the verge of a total political, social and economic collapse, which has led to violations of human rights so grave that the International Community has recognized the importance of the humanitarian crisis Venezuelans are living. This crisis affects the country in every possible level resulting in consequences for civilians which are similar to those of a war, which may be shocking but undeniably true.

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