

Tom Lantos Human Rights Commission

Briefing

“Venezuela: Economic Sanctions and Human Rights”

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I would like to thank the Lantos Human Rights Commission and co-chairs Congressmen McGovern and Smith for hosting today’s briefing.

Refugees International (RI) is a non-profit, non-governmental organization that advocates for lifesaving assistance and protection for displaced people in parts of the world impacted by conflict, persecution and forced displacement. Based here in Washington, we conduct fact-finding missions to research and report on the circumstances of displaced populations in countries such as Somalia, Iraq, Ethiopia, and Syria, among many others.

Refugees International has been focusing on the Venezuelan forced migration crisis through advocacy, field assessments, and reporting on different host countries in the region, including Colombia, Ecuador, Trinidad and Tobago, and Curaçao. I traveled to Colombia and to Ecuador in March. In Colombia, I was at the border with Venezuela, in Cúcuta, as well as in Bogotá, and in Ecuador, I was in Quito, Ibarra, and at the border with Colombia in Tulcán. In both countries, I travelled with RI colleagues Sarah Miller and Daphne Panayotatos, whose perspectives are also reflected in my comments.

I have been asked today to discuss two issues: the ongoing humanitarian crisis, with a particular focus on forced migration and principles that ought to guide delivery of international humanitarian assistance, including assistance provided by the United States.

Migration Patterns and Humanitarian Needs

In terms of numbers affected, the Venezuelan displacement crisis ranks second only to the Syrian crisis—and it continues to grow rapidly. The humanitarian challenges are immense. Venezuelans are fleeing their country, where they have suffered political persecution, other human rights violations, and dramatic shortages of medicine and food. About three million people have left the country since 2015, and recent estimates predict that the number of Venezuelans forced out of their country will reach five million by the end of 2019.

The good news is that governments within the region have been reasonably understanding about the realities of Venezuelan forced migration—borders have largely been kept open and governments have articulated a regional commitment to a more coordinated response designed to facilitate the social and economic integration of Venezuelans into host states, as well as improvements in the process of granting legal status. Refugees International has supported these efforts. Understanding that individual country conditions vary—as do processes for regularization—we have generally encouraged governments to incorporate standards of the Cartagena Declaration, which recognize that serious disturbances of public order causing flight should provide a basis for protection in a host country.

Of course, the less than good news is that the migration crisis is enormous and nothing governments do can completely ameliorate enormous suffering. Moreover, practices have varied among governments,

and efforts must be made to push back on restrictionist approaches. For example, in Ecuador, the subject of a recent Refugees International report, many Venezuelans lack access to social services, including health, education, housing, and livelihoods. Some have also been victims of sexual and gender-based violence (SGBV), discrimination, and xenophobia exacerbated in January by the killing of an Ecuadoran woman by a Venezuelan migrant. New entry requirements imposed in late 2018 and early 2019 in Ecuador effectively closed the border to many Venezuelans, in some cases separating families. This policy drove many to take irregular routes into the country, sometimes via smugglers and traffickers, thus exposing them to greater risks and denying them the protections that regular status affords. Restrictive measures also have prevented many Venezuelans from accessing the labor market—a particularly harmful outcome, given that Venezuelans fleeing today have more acute needs than earlier arrivals. Some groups—including women and children, and lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and queer (LGBTQ) individuals—are particularly vulnerable.

So in the countries in the region, there are ongoing challenges that require not only enlightened leadership by government officials, but also much stronger financial and political support from the international community—which has not provided the magnitude of both humanitarian and broader assistance that would aid both the Venezuelans and their host communities. An international humanitarian appeal is dramatically undersubscribed, and—again—much more must be done.

Principles that should guide Delivery of Humanitarian Assistance

In 1984, in justifying its decision to provide humanitarian aid to famine-affected Ethiopia, the Reagan administration declared that “a hungry child knows no politics.” This sentiment—although implemented imperfectly by U.S. administrations over the years—has nonetheless served as a guide to U.S. policymakers for decades. As Refugees International and others have emphasized in other contexts, the sentiment about need-based aid is reflected in the international Good Humanitarian Donorship Initiative that the United States helped establish during the administration of George W. Bush. That Initiative set out best practices, including the proposition that humanitarian assistance to vulnerable populations should be “solely on the basis of need, without discrimination between or within affected populations.”

This is known as the principle of impartiality in the delivery of humanitarian aid, and the Good Humanitarian Donorship Initiative articulates other principles for the appropriate delivery of humanitarian aid—that is, emergency life-sustaining and life-saving assistance—reflecting humanitarian best practices. For the purposes of today’s discussion, two of the most critical of these additional principles—beyond aid based on need—are neutrality and independence.

Neutrality means humanitarian aid providers should not take sides in a political conflict and, by implication, that governments providing humanitarian aid must not use that aid to support one side or the other. And independence means that humanitarian aid providers, and humanitarian action, to use the UN definition, “must be autonomous from the political, economic, military or other objectives that any actor may hold with regard to areas where humanitarian action is being implemented.” This also means that governments providing humanitarian aid must do so in a way that helps to safeguard the independence of humanitarian organizations.

Intuitively, these principles make ethical sense, but they also are important operationally—as they help to ensure that basic, life-saving aid gets to those who need it most. Of course, there is no guarantee that fidelity to these principles ensures that parties to a military or political conflict will permit aid to be

delivered. But there is clear evidence that ignoring these principles makes it more likely that parties to a conflict will restrict aid delivery, arguing that such aid is simply politics by other means.

For this reason, Refugees International was deeply concerned by the effort of the United States to force humanitarian aid into Venezuela in February of this year, as the move appeared to have more to do with politics and less to do with effectively assisting vulnerable people. Indeed, U.S. officials clearly linked the aid initiative to efforts to confront and challenge Maduro. And the few relief groups operating inside Venezuela said that it made their work more difficult.

Of course, this does not mean the United States or other governments have no business pressing for respect for human rights and political change in Venezuela. Nor does it mean that U.S. officials have no business supporting efforts to alleviate the humanitarian suffering of the people of Venezuela. In fact, as United Nations Under-Secretary-General and Emergency Relief Coordinator Mark Lowcock described in a briefing at the United Nations in April, the dimensions of the humanitarian crisis within the country, economic contraction, malnutrition and shortages impacting the health system, millions in need of health and food aid, and other basic support—are overwhelming.

But it does mean that such efforts must be completely separated from the political objectives of the United States or any other actor. Thankfully, there is a broad network of international and non-governmental organizations committed to humanitarian principles to which the United States has subscribed, and those provide significant and substantial opportunities for governments, including the Government of the United States, to support assistance in a responsible manner that meets the needs of the most vulnerable populations.