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Human Mobility from Venezuela: from Regularization to Uncertainty

Since 2010, Latin America has experienced considerable changes in migration flows directly linked to the complex humanitarian crisis affecting Venezuela. In 2025, the UN Refugee Agency (UNHCR) identified Venezuela as the country with the largest number of refugees in the world. Approximately 7.9 million people have left the country. Of these, about 6.71 million are living somewhere in the region, with Colombia, Peru, the United States, and Brazil hosting the largest numbers of migrants from Venezuela.

Within the framework of *Cartagena +40* –an event held in Santiago, Chile, in 2024 to commemorate the 1984 Cartagena Declaration on Refugees– the Chile Declaration and Plan of Action (2024-2034) was adopted. This ten-year roadmap aims to address current challenges related to forced displacement, including the Venezuelan exodus, by incorporating best practices and the participation of numerous countries across the region. However, this instrument is not legally binding, meaning that governments may incorporate the agreements reached on a voluntary basis.

Although in the early stages of the exodus triggered by the crisis the countries of the region responded in a way that

could be described as supportive, the sustained increase in migration and the development of various electoral processes –especially presidential elections– have revealed a gap between the commitments assumed in multilateral forums and the way migration is actually managed within each country.

1. The Era of Regularization in the Region

A few years ago, the landscape was substantially different from what is observed today. Institutional efforts were primarily focused on migration regularization, rather than on adopting restrictive or punitive measures.

During the early stages of the crisis, most countries in the region relaxed visa requirements or implemented extraordinary regularization mechanisms, recognizing the difficulties faced by Venezuelan nationals in meeting the standard requirements of visa regimes.

In this context, several temporary regularization policies were promoted across the continent, such as the Temporary Stay Permit Card (CPP) in Peru, the VIRTE visa in Ecuador, and the Temporary Stay Permit (PTP) in Panama. Also noteworthy are the Temporary Protection Statute for Venezuelan Migrants (ETPV) implemented in Colombia, as well as mechanisms introduced in the United States, including Temporary Protected Status (TPS) and Humanitarian Parole.

The ETPV in Colombia is a protection mechanism complementary to the asylum system, developed under the government of President Iván Duque (2018–2022). This instrument received international recognition for its temporary nature and for its goal of facilitating migrants' transition into the ordinary visa system

within a period of up to ten years, with the possibility of later obtaining residency and naturalization.

The ETPV is composed of two main components: the Single Registry of Venezuelan Migrants (RUMV), which functions as a system for the identification and characterization of the migrant population, and the Temporary Protection Permit (PPT), which serves as an official identification document.

To date, approximately 2.1 million people have been approved for the PPT, and around 1.9 million already possess the physical document. However, the deadline to apply for the PPT expired at the end of 2023, with only a few limited exceptions remaining.

In the case of the United States, according to data from the Department of Homeland Security, approximately 117,000 Venezuelans benefited from the Humanitarian Parole program. This program grants temporary permission to remain in the country and allows the admission of foreign nationals for urgent humanitarian reasons or significant public benefit, even when they do not meet the ordinary visa requirements, according to the U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services (USCIS). Additionally, approximately 600,000 Venezuelans have received Temporary Protected Status (TPS) since 2021.

The cases of Brazil and Argentina are somewhat exceptional in the region. Brazil, in particular, implemented Operation Welcome (*Operação Acolhida*), a humanitarian initiative launched by the federal government in 2018 to receive and assist migrants and refugees –primarily Venezuelans– entering the country. This policy is implemented in coordination with United Nations agencies and civil society organizations, with the objective of providing protection and promoting the socioeconomic integration of this population.

Brazil also allows Venezuelans to apply for a two-year temporary residence permit, which is renewable and can lead to permanent residency, even in cases of irregular entry, and it accepts expired identity documents. Currently, it is estimated that more than 80 percent of the Venezuelan population in Brazil holds regular migration status.

As for Argentina, the country has a long migration tradition that has facilitated more open regularization policies than those of many other countries in the region. In this context, Argentina had already expanded the possibility for Venezuelan citizens to apply for temporary residence that can later transition into permanent residence, with more flexible requirements than those applied in other countries.

However, due to geographical distance and the economic crisis of recent years, the South American country had not been the primary destination for many Venezuelan migrants. In the current context, this is beginning to change.

2. The Increase in Migration and Political Changes

For several years, Venezuela has experienced a combination of political, economic, and social conditions that indicate the country is going through a complex humanitarian crisis, severely affecting all aspects of life and different sectors of society. Among the main factors shaping this situation are the collapse of public services, shortages of basic goods, macroeconomic disruptions –such as hyperinflation– forced migration, systematic human rights violations, rising insecurity, and profound institutional weakening.

According to the report *Social Deprivation Gaps in the Complex Humanitarian Crisis in Venezuela* published by HumVenezuela¹, stable access to drinking water constitutes the most urgent need, followed by the lack of quality health services and persistent failures in electricity provision. The report notes that the multi-dimensional nature of the crisis means that affected individuals face multiple deprivations simultaneously, which tend to reinforce one another. While some indicators of quality of life have shown a sustained deterioration for more than two decades, the growing movement of Venezuelan citizens to other countries in recent years demonstrates a clear intensification of the crisis.

An examination of the flows of people who have crossed the Darién Gap irregularly over the last decade reveals a sustained and accelerated increase beginning in 2020. While approximately 8,500 people crossed in 2020, the number exceeded 130,000 in 2021, rose to more than 248,000 in 2022, and reached its highest level in 2023, when nearly 520,000 people crossed the Darién Gap in an attempt to reach the southern border of the United States.

As the number of people experiencing human mobility in the region increased, presidential campaigns and public policy approaches toward migrant reception began to undergo significant transformations. One of the most visible cases was that of the United States, particularly during the presidential campaign of Donald Trump, in which the need to restrict migration was repeatedly emphasized. However, electoral processes throughout the region revealed that this rhetorical and political shift was not an isolated phenomenon, but rather a broader and increasingly widespread trend.

1 HumVenezuela, *Brechas de privación social en la crisis humanitaria compleja en Venezuela*, Junio 2025.

With the election of new presidents in Panama, Peru, Ecuador, and more recently Chile, it became evident not only that migration was instrumentalized as a campaign issue —often linked to security concerns— but also that integration and regularization processes remain unstable, as they depend largely on the political will of the sitting president.

In this context, the Humanitarian Parole program is no longer in effect, and nearly 170,000 people have been deported from the United States, of whom more than 4,000 are Venezuelan nationals. Likewise, most of the special permits and relaxed migration requirements previously implemented across the region to facilitate the integration of Venezuelan citizens are no longer in effect.

This situation is not limited to governments with right-wing political orientations. In Colombia, for example, during the presidency of Gustavo Petro, migration policy has not occupied a central place in the government's agenda. Although the previous administration succeeded in advancing protection for nearly two million people, six months before the end of the current presidential term no comprehensive policy has been formulated to address individuals who entered the country after the ETPV application deadline expired.

3. Changing Narratives: The Criminalization of Migration

Adding to the uncertain landscape surrounding the regularization and integration of Venezuelan migrants in the region is a growing narrative of stigmatization and criminalization across the continent. The shift in U.S. migration policies has generated greater pressure on Latin American countries, intensifying internal tensions and leading several governments to adopt more restrictive measures. In this context, Peru, Ecuador, and Chile have recently announced the militarization of certain border

areas to strengthen controls over the entry of migrants into their territories.

Over the past year, statements by public officials and political leaders have frequently linked migration –particularly from Venezuela– to rising security concerns. One example was the statement made by Peru’s Minister of Foreign Trade and Tourism, Úrsula León, who defended the declaration of a state of emergency in Lima in March 2025 as a measure to contain rising crime, attributing it primarily to Venezuelan criminals who had migrated in recent years.

In this context, several crimes committed in South America have been associated with *Tren de Aragua*, a Venezuelan-origin criminal organization that now operates in multiple countries across the subcontinent.

It is true that the region faces numerous challenges, including security problems linked to transnational organized crime. However, this phenomenon predates the Venezuelan exodus and cannot be explained solely by recent migration flows. Nevertheless, for many governments across the continent, it is politically easier to attribute the current complex situation to groups of foreign nationals who have arrived in recent years. This criminalization of migrant populations not only fuels fear and xenophobia in host societies, but also creates social barriers that hinder integration processes.

4. An Uncertain Future

Based on the analysis presented above, it can be concluded that responses to migration resulting from Venezuela’s complex humanitarian crisis –even in countries with more developed migration policy frameworks– have largely been government

responses rather than state policies. This situation generates instability in the integration processes of people in situations of human mobility and contributes to increasing their vulnerability.

Although there are voluntary repatriation programs and some people have chosen to return to their country of origin, the truth is that living conditions in Venezuela have not experienced substantial improvements nor show clear signs of change in the short term. This suggests that outward migration flows from the country will likely continue in the near future.

The criminalization of migration increases pressure on migrants—particularly those in an irregular situation—and does not contribute to the construction of sustainable long-term responses that benefit both host countries and populations in situations of human mobility. In contrast, greater regional coordination oriented toward regularization could allow for a more effective response to a problem with clear transnational effects. Available evidence has shown that a well-managed and organized migration approach generates economic, social, and cultural benefits for receiving societies. In this sense, regularized Venezuelan migration, as has already occurred in other contexts, can become a driver of development for host societies. The question, then, is whether it is possible to return to an approach of solidarity and welcome in the current regional political context.