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15 November 2018

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Colombia and Venezuela: Treatment by authorities and society of Venezuelans and Colombians with Venezuelan citizenship in Colombia, and of Colombians and Venezuelans with Colombian citizenship in Venezuela (2015-October 2018)
Research Directorate, Immigration and Refugee Board of Canada, Ottawa

1. Situation of Venezuelans in Colombia

1.1 Statistics

Sources report that approximately one million Venezuelans have moved to Colombia over the course of 2017 and 2018 (*Miami Herald* 14 June 2018; Al Jazeera 2 Aug. 2018). In correspondence with the Research Directorate, Amnesty International's International Secretariat for the Americas stated that

[t]he figures published by the Colombian government show that the number of Venezuelans in [Colombia], in both regular and irregular situations, is 550,000. However, international agencies and civil society organizations working in Colombia told Amnesty International that by the end of November 2017, there were possibly more than a million Venezuelans living [in Colombia]. (Amnesty International 7 Nov. 2018)

The Floridian newspaper *Miami Herald* reports Colombian authorities as stating in June 2018 that, according to a nationwide census, 442,462 Venezuelans were living in Colombia without "proper documentation," while 376,572 Venezuelans were residing in Colombia legally (*Miami Herald* 14 June 2018).

According to Amnesty International, Cúcuta and Maicao are two border cities with the "largest influx of Venezuelan people" (Amnesty International 7 Nov. 2018). The *Miami Herald* specifies that, according to the nationwide census study of Colombia, over 23 percent of the population of Villa del Rosario, on the outskirts of Cúcuta, is Venezuelan, while 16 percent of the population in Maicao is Venezuelan (*Miami Herald* 14 June 2018).

1.2 Treatment of Venezuelans in Colombia

1.2.1 Treatment by Authorities

In an interview with the Research Directorate, a former professor of political science at the Instituto de Estudios Superiores de Administración (IESA) in Caracas and the current Chief Executive Officer (CEO) of the Canadian Venezuelan Engagement Foundation (CVEF) [1] stated that "Colombian authorities' treatment of people who arrive from Venezuela is generally with respect" (CVEF 7 Nov. 2018). In an interview with the Research Directorate, Kyle Johnson, Colombia Analyst for International Crisis Group, stated that

[t]he treatment that those arriving from Venezuela experience from Colombian authorities depends on identity. The likelihood of receiving fair treatment from police authorities as a Venezuelan is [lower] than for someone who can prove their Colombian citizenship. For example, Venezuelans, who fear being deported and mistreated by authorities, are less likely to file complaints on harassment or violence with the police. This is different for a Colombian with Venezuelan citizenship who may identify themselves as a Colombian only, and as a result, may face different

treatment. In general, complaints of harassment are not a priority for police authorities – they may act in the moment when the complaint is filed, but they will not follow through with a case. (International Crisis Group 9 Nov. 2018)

The same source further stated that

[c]rimes committed by Venezuelans is a statistic that is actually recorded by Colombian authorities and is regarded as a security threat and a problem. This, as such, affects the treatment of Venezuelans in Colombia. The judiciary is overwhelmed – it does not have enough resources. However, there is pressure to deal with crimes committed by refugees. Local authorities do not receive complaints filed by victims who are refugee claimants, mostly because they are less likely to file complaints. However, action by Colombian authorities is quite quick when the perpetrator of a crime is a refugee claimant. (International Crisis Group 9 Nov. 2018)

According to an article written in the *New York Times* by Geoff Ramsey and Gimena Sánchez-Garzoli of the Washington Office on Latin America (WOLA) [2], "Colombian law does not grant citizenship to children born to nonlegal resident foreigners. Many of those fleeing are unable to document their Venezuelan citizenship, leaving their children born in Colombia at risk of being stateless" (Ramsey and Sánchez-Garzoli 29 Aug. 2018). Corroborating information could not be found among the sources consulted by the Research Directorate within the time constraints of this Response.

According to sources, in August 2018, President Santos granted [through a decree (Reuters 2 Aug. 2018)] a two-year temporary resident status to approximately 440,000 Venezuelans in Colombia (Al Jazeera 2 Aug. 2018; Reuters 2 Aug. 2018). Ramsey and Sánchez-Garzoli also report that Santos "announced plans" to grant some 400,000 Venezuelans with temporary resident status (Ramsey and Sánchez-Garzoli 29 Aug. 2018). Sources indicate that the temporary resident status gave them access to education, health care and employment (Al Jazeera 2 Aug. 2018; Ramsey and Sánchez-Garzoli 29 Aug. 2018). Reuters explains that in order to identify those who would be eligible for this status, Colombian authorities had asked Venezuelans who did not have formal permission to remain in Colombia (such as those without a work or tourism visas) to register in a survey, so they could assess their need for social services (Reuters 2 Aug. 2018). Ramsey and Sánchez-Garzoli also mention that this temporary resident status was granted to Venezuelans who enrolled in a nationwide registry (Ramsey and Sánchez-Garzoli 29 Aug. 2018).

Regarding assistance provided to Venezuelans, Johnson said that there are ... organizations that are working to deliver humanitarian support to individuals coming across the Colombia-Venezuela border, including international organizations and church groups. These organizations provide food, shelter, water and sometimes transportation. Their response, which is primarily provided in the border areas like Cúcuta, is rather slow and limited – they are not able to reach everyone. There are some support services slowly popping up in Medellín, Cali and Bogotá that are catering to individuals who have crossed the Colombia-Venezuela border. (International Crisis Group 9 Nov. 2018)

According to the same source, "[a]ccessing housing is a big problem for those arriving from Venezuela, especially in bigger cities like Bogotá. In Cúcuta, it is a bit easier to access housing, especially if one has a family network, and because there are temporary housing options for refugees" (International Crisis Group 9 Nov. 2018). According to Ramsey and Sánchez-Garzoli,

[t]he Colombian government is reluctant to provide temporary housing for Venezuelans who lack resources to travel further. There is just one government-run shelter on the border, and while it has capacity for 240 people, it sits mostly empty. ... [T]his shelter is open only to a tiny minority of Venezuelans who have passports and can show proof that they plan to travel on. Catholic missions have stepped in but can meet only the most urgent shelter needs. As a result, Venezuelans on the Colombian border sleep on the streets, or pay for floor space in cramped dwellings rented out by enterprising locals. (Ramsey and Sánchez-Garzoli 29 Aug. 2018)

Corroborating information could not be found among the sources consulted by the Research Directorate within the time constraints of this Response.

1.2.2 Treatment by Society

According to the Globe Post, a US news website, "[m]any Colombians are concerned that the refugees are taking away jobs because they are willing to work for far less money, while others believe that the Venezuelan women are entering the country to become prostitutes" (The Globe Post 15 Aug. 2018). According to the CEO of CVEF,

[i]n poor neighbourhoods in Colombia, there is high competition for lower income jobs. This has led to conflicts and disputes within those neighbourhoods, especially involving people who have arrived from Venezuela in Colombia, including Colombians. (CVEF 7 Nov. 2018)

Johnson stated that

[i]n terms of access to employment, many employers are taking advantage of Venezuelans' desperation to work and as such, they are hiring people at extremely unfair and illegal wages. When one has the Colombian identity card (cédula de ciudadanía), access to formal work becomes easier. (International Crisis Group 9 Nov. 2018)

Corroborating information could not be found among the sources consulted by the Research Directorate within the time constraints of this Response.

Sources indicate that there have been xenophobic expressions against people arriving from Venezuela in Colombia (The Globe Post 15 Aug. 2018; CVEF 7 Nov. 2018; International Crisis Group 9 Nov. 2018). Ramsay and Sánchez-Garzoli stated that tensions against Venezuelans in Colombia are "high" and, without providing further information, stated that Venezuelans are increasingly subjected to "discriminatory attacks" (Ramsey and Sánchez-Garzoli 29 Aug. 2018). According to Johnson, "there is xenophobia in the big cities like Bogotá and Medellín, and it is growing in Norte de Santander and Cúcuta. Verbal attacks towards those arriving from Venezuela is more and more common" (International Crisis Group 9 Nov. 2018). In May 2018, the Colombian Ministry of Foreign Affairs (Ministerio de Relaciones Exteriores) published a statement in which its Migración Colombia department [translation] "expresses its concern about the threats that have circulated on social media networks against Venezuelan citizens who are in Colombian territory" (Colombia 26 May 2018). In the same statement, Migración Colombia indicates its commitment to work with national authorities to locate the individuals responsible for threats against Venezuelans (Colombia 26 May 2018). Further and corroborating information on the actions of Colombian authorities against the threats or attacks faced by Venezuelans could not be found among the sources consulted by the Research Directorate within the time constraints of this Response.

According to the Globe Post, "[t]he UNHCR is promoting social media and media campaigns to combat ... discriminatory attitudes" against Venezuelans in Colombia, including through the initiative "Somos Panas Colombia" (The Globe Post 15 Aug. 2018). Further and corroborating information could not be found among the sources consulted by the Research Directorate within the time constraints of this Response.

1.2.3 "venecos"

According to sources, the vice-president of Colombia used the word *venecos* (BBC 27 Jan. 2017; RT 28 Jan. 2017; *El Nuevo Herald* 2 Feb. 2017) to refer to Venezuelans in a presentation in January 2017 (BBC 27 Jan. 2017). Reuters specifies that the vice-president used the "term for Venezuelans while vowing foreigners would not benefit from social programs" (Reuters 27 Jan. 2018).

According to sources, "venecos" is a pejorative term (BBC 27 Jan. 2017; CVEF 7 Nov. 2018) or a derogatory term (*El Nuevo Herald* 2 Feb. 2017; Reuters 27 Jan. 2017). According to sources, "venecos" is a term to refer to Venezuelans (BBC 27 Jan. 2017; *El Nuevo Herald* 2 Feb. 2017) or "Venezuelan Colombians" who "went to Venezuela to live and then decided to return to Colombia" and are therefore not considered "original Colombians" (CVEF 7 Nov. 2018). Reuters reports that "[t]he Spanish word 'veneco' is widely used around South America to refer to Venezuelans in a disparaging way" (Reuters 27 Jan. 2017). According to sources, the Venezuelan government has called the term "venecos" [translation] "denigrating and offensive." (BBC 27 Jan. 2017; RT 28 Jan. 2017; *El Nuevo Herald* 2 Feb. 2017).

According to Johnson,

[t]he implication of the word "veneco" depends on the situation at hand – in some cases it is regarded as a discriminatory remark, but in other contexts its meaning is ambiguous. Some people are bothered by it, others are not. For example, it can be used offensively against someone because they are Venezuelan. It can also be used against a Colombian who has lived in Venezuela for a long time to deny their Colombian identity. (International Crisis Group 9 Nov. 2018)

The Floridian Spanish-language newspaper *El Nuevo Herald* cites the Colombian vice-president as stating that [translation] "[t]he nickname 'venecos' that I used is common in Norte de Santander and does not carry anything derogatory for Venezuelan citizens" (*El Nuevo Herald* 2 Feb. 2017).

2. Situation of Colombians with Venezuelan Citizenship in Colombia

2.1 Overview

According to sources, there are Colombians who had moved to Venezuela when Venezuela was experiencing an economic boom around the 1980s (International Crisis Group 9 Nov. 2018; CVEF 7 Nov. 2018). The CEO of CVEF stated that this population was

received with open arms in Venezuela, they were treated very well in Venezuelan society and they were very well integrated. Over the years, Colombians also influenced Venezuelan culture. There are a fair amount of mixed families composed of Colombians and Venezuelans and there are now second-generation Colombians who were born in Venezuela. (CVEF 7 Nov. 2018)

According to sources, there were also Colombians who moved to Venezuela in the 1990s, (International Crisis Group 9 Nov. 2018; BBC 27 Jan. 2017) in order to flee violence (International Crisis Group 9 Nov. 2018). According to the BBC, many Colombians who had arrived in Venezuela between 1970 and the 1990s are currently returning to Colombia (BBC 27 Jan. 2017). The BBC indicates that, according to the UN, approximately 18,000 Colombians have voluntarily left Venezuela in recent years (BBC 27 Jan. 2017). Sources report that the number of Colombians who had been living in Venezuela and returned to Colombia recently is 160,000 (*Miami Herald* 14 June 2018) or 250,000 (Reuters 2 Aug. 2018). According to sources, in recent years, those who are leaving Venezuela for Colombia include Colombians with Venezuelan citizenship (International Crisis Group 9 Nov. 2018) and Colombians who had resided in Venezuela (CVEF 7 Nov. 2018).

2.2 Treatment of Colombians with Venezuelan Citizenship in Colombia

According to Johnson,

[t]here are two recent waves of Colombians with Venezuelan citizenship going to Colombia. The first wave was around August and September 2015 until 2016, when Maduro closed the border and forcibly expelled people. At this time, Colombian authorities were overwhelmed with the flow and they saw the individuals as victims of the Maduro regime. Despite their incapacity to handle the situation, those arriving from Venezuela were nevertheless welcomed and were provided with all the relevant services possible. In the second wave, from the second half of 2016 to present, with a spike in July 2017, the flow of people to Colombia increased drastically, where Colombians with Venezuelan citizenship as well as Venezuelans began arriving in Colombia from Venezuela. In the eyes of society and the authorities, they are seen as one group entering Colombia from Venezuela – a distinction in terms of national identity is not necessarily made. On a local level, for example in Cúcuta, the ability to distinguish or disaggregate between refugee claimants is common - as a result of the frequent movement of people and family ties across borders. The institutional response, however, is to basket them all into one group, namely Venezuelans. (International Crisis Group 9 Nov. 2018)

According to the same source,

Colombians who are currently coming from Venezuela do face discrimination from authorities and society as there is a reluctance to assist them: "well, you chose to leave to Venezuela, so why should I help you now that you are back in Colombia?" This is something that Venezuelans who have been fleeing to Colombia do not experience, as there is a more sympathetic sentiment towards them from Colombians. (International Crisis Group 9 Nov. 2018)

When asked whether Colombians with Venezuelan citizenship face any challenges in accessing health care, employment, housing, social services and/or education, the CEO of CVEF stated that this depends on their immigration status – if one has status in Colombia, one's ability to access such social services, for instance, should not be an issue. However, if one does not have status, this is a problem as it will then not be possible to receive official health care and one would be dependent on the refugee [determination] process. (CVEF 7 Nov. 2018)

According to Johnson, "[l]imited access to health care is a general issue faced by the population at large, as hospitals are in massive debt" (International Crisis Group 9 Nov. 2018).

3. Situation of Colombians in Venezuela

3.1 Statistics

The BBC reports that, according to the Venezuelan president, more than 5 million Colombians live in Venezuela (BBC 27 Jan. 2017). The same source also states that Colombian authorities rejected this statistic and stated that there are fewer than one million Colombians in Venezuela (BBC 27 Jan. 2017). According to the CEO of the CVEF, there are "[a]t least [one] million to [one and a half] million Colombians [who] live in Petare, Caracas, which is a poor [area] of two million people who live in 800 neighbourhoods" (CVEF 7 Nov. 2018).

3.2 Treatment of Colombians in Venezuela

3.2.1 Treatment by Authorities

Information on the treatment of Colombians by Venezuelan authorities was scarce among the sources consulted by the Research Directorate within the time constraints of this Response.

The CEO of CVEF stated that the challenges that Colombians in Venezuela face, "in terms of access to health care and education, are the same challenges that others in society face, as a result of the economic crisis in Venezuela" (CVEF 7 Nov. 2018).

According to Amnesty International, "[t]he presence of Colombian paramilitary groups in border areas between Colombia and Venezuela has been used by Venezuelan authorities to justify public security operations in Venezuela that have resulted in grave human rights violations" (Amnesty International 7 Nov. 2018). The same source explained that, as part of these public security operations, Venezuelan authorities detained 59 Colombian citizens in September 2016 (Amnesty International 7 Nov. 2018). According to Reuters, Venezuela deported "hundreds of Colombians it accused of criminal activities" in 2016 (Reuters 27 Jan. 2017). According to the BBC, more than 1,000 Colombians were deported from Venezuela

during one of the border closures in 2017 (BBC 27 Jan. 2017). Further information could not be found among the sources consulted by the Research Directorate within the time constraints of this Response.

3.2.2 Treatment by Society

Information on the treatment of Colombians by Venezuelan society was scarce among the sources consulted by the Research Directorate within the time constraints of this Response. According to the CEO of the CVEF, "[t]he treatment of Colombians in Venezuela has been very well" (CVEF 7 Nov. 2018). Further and corroborating information could not be found among the sources consulted by the Research Directorate within the time constraints of this Response.

3.2.3 "Colombiches"

According to the CEO of CVEF, "*colombiches* is a pejorative term that is used against Colombians in Venezuela, in the same way that the term 'venecos' is used" (CVEF 7 Nov. 2018). Similarly, *El Nuevo Herald* states that the words "veneco" and "colombiche" are used in a similar manner (*El Nuevo Herald* 2 Feb. 2017). Further information could not be found among the sources consulted by the Research Directorate within the time constraints of this Response.

4. Situation of Venezuelans with Colombian Citizenship in Venezuela

Information on the situation of Venezuelans with Colombian citizenship in Venezuela, including the treatment by Venezuelan authorities and society, could not be found among the sources consulted by the Research Directorate within the time constraints of this Response.

This Response was prepared after researching publicly accessible information currently available to the Research Directorate within time constraints. This Response is not, and does not purport to be, conclusive as to the merit of any particular claim for refugee protection. Please find below the list of sources consulted in researching this Information Request.

Notes

[1] The Canadian Venezuelan Engagement Foundation (CVEF) is a Montreal-based NGO part of the Venezuelan Engagement Foundation Group that provides humanitarian and educational programs (Venezuelan Engagement Foundation Group n.d.).

[2] Based in Washington DC, the Washington Office on Latin America (WOLA) is a "research and advocacy organization advancing human rights in the Americas" (WOLA n.d.).

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Additional Sources Consulted

Oral sources: Asociación Central de Venezolanos en Colombia; Asociación Civil Paz Activa; Asociación Migrantes de Venezuela; Centro de Investigación y Educación Popular; Centro de Justicia y Paz; CERAC; Fundación Ideas Para La Paz; Fundación Paz & Reconciliación; Human Rights Watch; INDEPAZ; journalists covering political issues in Colombia and Venezuela; Latin America Working Group; Observatorio Hannah Arendt; Washington Office on Latin America.

Internet sites, including: Colombia Reports; eoi.net; International Crisis Group; *La Opinión*; Lechuguinos; National Public Radio; Portafolio; UN – Refworld.

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