

Venezuelan refugees now number 3.4 million; humanitarian implications massive, warns UN

As the number of refugees and migrants from Venezuela continues to rise – hitting the 3.4 million mark this month – United Nations agencies sounded the alarm on Friday over the humanitarian needs these women, children and men face, and the strain this represents for communities hosting them.

The UN refugee agency ([UNHCR](#)) and the UN migration agency ([IOM](#)) issued [statements](#) based on data from national immigration authorities and other sources, showing that, on average, in 2018, 5,000 people left Venezuela every day in search of protection or a better life. The vast majority of them – 2.7 million – are hosted in countries of Latin America and the Caribbean.

Currently, Colombia hosts the highest number of Venezuelan refugees and migrants, with over 1.1 million. It is followed by Peru, with 506,000, Chile 288,000, Ecuador 221,000, Argentina 130,000, and Brazil 96,000. Mexico and other countries in Central America and the Caribbean are also hosting significant numbers of refugees and migrants from Venezuela.

“The countries of the region have shown tremendous solidarity with refugees and migrants from Venezuela, and implemented resourceful solutions to help them,” said Eduardo Stein, joint UNHCR-IOM Special Representative for Venezuelan refugees and migrants.

“But these figures underscore the strain on host communities and the continued need for support from the international community, at a time when the world’s attention is on political developments inside Venezuela,” he stressed.

To date, Latin American countries have granted about 1.3 million residence permits and other forms of regular status to Venezuelans. Asylum systems have also been reinforced in order to process an unprecedented number of applications. Since 2014, over 390,000 asylum claims have been lodged by Venezuelans – close to 60 per cent (232,000) happened in 2018 alone.

As the numbers continue to rise, so do the needs of these refugees and migrants, as well as those of the communities hosting them. Governments in the region are leading the response and working to coordinate efforts based on the [Quito Declaration](#) for example, adopted in September and which has been an important step towards a regional approach to scale up the assistance and protection of Venezuelan nationals and facilitate their legal, social and economic inclusion.

The next regional meeting of this process will take place in the Ecuadorian capital in the first week of April.

To complement these efforts, a humanitarian [Regional Refugee and Migrant Response Plan](#) was launched last December, targeting 2.2 million vulnerable Venezuelans and 500,000 people in host communities across 16 countries.

Without scaled-up humanitarian assistance 'more and more people' at risk in South Sudan

More funds are urgently needed to scale-up humanitarian assistance, particularly as some 50,000 people will face extreme food insecurity during the lean season, between May and July.

Already food insecure, Unity, Jonglei, Upper Nile and Lakes states risk famine if the overall situation deteriorates further and humanitarian assistance dries up.

“Unless we scale up humanitarian and recovery activities soon, more and more people will be at risk,” said Simon Cammelbeeck, WFP’s Acting Country Director in South Sudan.

Malnutrition levels are already critical and threaten to worsen, with some 860,000 children under age five severely malnourished.

“This is especially worrying as those most in need of assistance are malnourished women and children,” Mr. Cammelbeeck lamented.

While the world’s youngest nation has been mired in conflict for nearly all seven years of its existence, in early 2018 President Salva Kiir and his former Vice-President and his long-time political rival, Riek Machar, signed a peace accord, which has increased some access for UNICEF.

UNICEF has made “significant progress in treating severe malnutrition in children,” with a recovery rate above 80 per cent, according to Andrea Suley, its ad interim Representative in South Sudan.

“Yet,” she explained “our nutrition programme has a funding gap of 88 per cent,” saying: “If funding is not timely secured, the children we know how to save may not make it.”

The UN agencies have conducted relief operations since the conflict erupted in late 2013, including mobile teams travelling, usually by helicopter, to reach people in isolated areas.

“Sustained humanitarian support is required to address the immediate food assistance needs,” said UN Humanitarian Coordinator in South Sudan Alain

Noudehou, adding that it is also “critical to support resilience

[Shrinking biodiversity poses major risk to the future of global food and agriculture, landmark UN report shows](#)

The study, released on Friday, delivers a stark message: that there is a real risk of the plant and animal species that provide our food, fuel and fibre (as well as the many animals, insects and micro-organisms that make up crucial parts of the food chain) disappearing for good.

The FAO received a large amount of information from 91 countries, provided specifically for the report, and the analysis of the latest global data to compile the report, which was prepared under the guidance of the [Commission on Genetic Resources for Food and Agriculture](#), the only permanent intergovernmental body that specifically addresses biological diversity for food and agriculture.

Plants and livestock under threat

While 6,000 plant species are cultivated for food, just nine of them account for two-thirds of all crop production. When it comes to livestock, around a quarter of breeds are at risk of extinction: just a handful provide the vast majority of meat, milk and eggs. And more than half of fish stocks are at risk of extinction.

Wild food species are also rapidly disappearing, with just under a quarter of known wild food species are decreasing. However, the true proportion is believed to be much higher as more than half of reported wild food species is unknown. In addition, species that contribute to the food ecosystem, such as pollinators, soil organisms and natural enemies of pests, are under severe threat. Examples include bees, butterflies, bats and birds.

FAO chief José Graziano da Silva, quoted in a statement published on Friday, described biodiversity as “critical” for safeguarding global food security, and called for food to be produced in a way that doesn’t harm the environment: “Less biodiversity means that plants and animals are more vulnerable to pests and diseases. Compounded by our reliance on fewer and fewer species to feed ourselves, the increasing loss of biodiversity for food and agriculture puts food security and nutrition at risk.”

Main reasons for shrinking food and agriculture biodiversity

Human intervention is overwhelmingly at fault, says the report. Examples include the way land water are used and managed; pollution; overexploitation

and overharvesting; climate change; and population growth and urbanization.

No regions are exempt from biodiversity threats, although the main driving forces differ depending on the region. For example, in Africa a key problem is overexploitation, hunting in poaching; in Europe and Central Asia, deforestation and intensified agriculture are cited; and in Latin America there is concern over pest, diseases and invasive species.

Reversing the trend

The majority of the countries that provided data for the report show an interest in an agriculture-related practice that supports biodiversity, such as organic farming, sustainable soil management and ecosystem restoration.

Most of the countries have also put policies in place for the sustainable use and conservation of biodiversity.

However, the legislation and institutional frameworks are often inadequate or insufficient, and the FAO is calling for much more effective action on a global scale. These include the promotion of pro-biodiversity initiatives, greater efforts to improve the state of knowledge surrounding biodiversity for food and agriculture, and better collaboration among policy-makers, food producers, consumers, the private sector and civil society.

Simple ways for consumers to make a difference include opting for sustainably grown products, buying from farmers' markets or boycotting foods that are unsustainably produced.

How countries are bringing back biodiversity

- USA: Californian farmers allow rice fields to flood in winter instead of burning them after growing season. This provides 111,000 hectares of wetlands for bird species at risk of extinction, leading to increased numbers,
- France: about 300,000 hectares of land are managed using agroecological principles.
- Kiribati, integrated farming of milkfish,
- sandfish, sea cucumber and seaweed ensures regular food and income despite changing weather conditions.

[UN rights office urges Egypt to halt death row executions amid torture](#)

allegations

Fifteen death row inmates have been executed in Egypt so far this month despite claims from many that they were tortured to secure a confession, the UN human rights office, [OHCHR](#), said on Friday.

[According to](#) OHCHR, nine people were executed on Wednesday and six others were subjected to the death penalty earlier in the month.

The sentences were handed down after the killing of Egypt's top prosecutor, Hisham Barakat, as well as police General Nabil Farrag and the son of a judge.

"They are all killings for which the death penalty is permissible under international law although we urge, as you know, our common position at the UN is to advocate the abolition of the death penalty," said OHCHR spokesperson Rupert Colville. "But the issue here is fair trial, use of torture, forced confessions and so on."

A number of other individuals are on death row "and at imminent risk of execution" after being convicted despite similar torture allegations, Mr. Colville said.

In an appeal to the Egyptian authorities to halt all executions, he insisted that where capital punishment was still permitted, trials "must meet the highest standards of fairness and due process" to prevent miscarriages of justice.

"Over the past few years, there has been a succession of cases of individuals being convicted in similar circumstances in Egypt amid disturbing reports of a lack of due legal proceedings," he told journalists in Geneva.

On 20 February, nine individuals were executed for their involvement in the 2015 killing of Egypt's General Prosecutor, Hisham Barakat, according to OHCHR.

"During the trial, detailed accounts of the torture allegedly used to obtain confessions, were apparently ignored by the courts without due consideration," Mr. Colville said.

On 13 February, three other individuals were hanged after being convicted of the 2013 killing a police officer, General Nabil Farrag, according to the UN human rights office.

A week earlier, on 7 February, three men were executed in connection with the murder of the son of a judge in 2014.

"All of them had claimed before the courts that they had been disappeared, or detained incommunicado for prolonged periods, and were subjected to torture in order to make them confess to the crimes," Mr. Colville explained.

The allegations follow a [UN Committee Against Torture](#) probe which concluded in June 2017 that torture is “practised systematically” in Egypt, he added.

The development echoes a similar OHCHR appeal to Cairo in January 2018 after it claimed that 20 people had been executed in a single week.

[Parliamentarians directly called to take action on global issues by UN chief](#)

Addressing parliament elected officials from around the world gathered at United Nations Headquarters in New York on Thursday for an annual hearing, UN chief António Guterres called for their support on legislation and financing of global solutions to global problems, such as climate change, uncoordinated migration and the dangers of some new technologies.

“As a former parliamentarian, I have felt the heavy responsibility of representing people and trying to advance their aspirations,” said [UN Secretary-General Guterres](#), who was elected to the Portuguese Parliament seven times, and served as Prime Minister for the country for over six years.

“[Parliaments can be bastions of democracy](#), and crucial links between the national and the global. Through legislation and spending decisions, parliamentarians can contribute significantly to the [Sustainable Development Goals](#), (SDGs)” he told members of the Inter-Parliamentary Union (IPU), the 130-year-old an organization that works in partnership with the UN to enhance accountability and ensure parliamentarians are involved in global decisions.

The Secretary-General, who was elected to parliament at 26, lamented that “parliaments are still largely a sphere dominated by older men,” noting that “the world needs more women parliamentarians, and more young parliamentarians”.

It is our duty in parliaments and in the UN to re-establish trust –
UN chief Guterres

The paradoxes and challenges of our time

He went on to highlight the main paradoxes the world faces today, namely: the fact that issues are more and more connected but that responses remain fragmented; a growing but slowing economy; the advances enabled by

globalization and technological progress, which are also responsible for increased inequality.

“People, sectors and regions are being left behind – creating a sense of frustration,” he noted. “This in turn has been a factor in reducing trust in governments, in political establishments, and in international organizations.”

“It is our duty in parliaments and in the UN to re-establish trust,” Mr. Guterres stated, delivering his remarks alongside UN General Assembly President, Maria Fernanda Espinosa.

Warning against the dangers of multipolarity, which he described as “a factor of equilibrium”, but “not a guarantee of peace and security”, he said the world needs a “networked” and “inclusive multilateralism”.

“I am deeply convinced that there is no other way to deal with global challenges than with global responses, organized in a multilateral way,” he explained, saying this should include close cooperation with and among inter-governmental institutions such as the World Bank, the African Union, the Arab League and others, but also with the business community, civil society, academia, and parliaments.

‘Tests’ of cooperation

Mr. Guterres listed some current and growing major “tests” for international cooperation: climate change, migration, growing populism and nationalism, and emerging new technologies often described as the “Fourth Industrial Revolution”.

“It’s time to show people that multilateralism can deliver,” he stated, highlighting the need to understand “why large sectors of the population in different parts of the world today feel abandoned”.

Citing the many recent “good news” that prove the benefits of multilateralism and the UN – such as the recent peace deals in the [Central African Republic](#) and [Yemen](#), the massive amounts of humanitarian aid delivered in 2018, UN reform, and recent global agreements on [climate action](#) and [migration](#) – he appealed to the parliamentarians in the room: “We need to show that politics is a noble undertaking and not merely the pursuit of power. And we need to demonstrate that our ideas, policies and programs aim at solving their problems.”

Increasing collective ambition for 2019

With the aim of achieving “even more in 2019,” the UN Secretary-General said he will be convening a Climate Summit in September “to mobilize action, partnerships, financing and, above all, ambition”.

Regarding new technologies, the High-level Panel on Digital Cooperation is expected to report in the months ahead on how best to harness the benefits of new technologies and artificial intelligence while safeguarding against the

risks.

In meeting the Sustainable Development Goals, safe and orderly migration, and women empowerment, he highlighted the “critical role” played by parliaments in defining good governance, ensuring oversight, building partnerships and allocating funding.

As a strategy and global plan of action is in the works for the prevention of genocides, the UN is also continuing to work to “prevent, mediate and resolve conflicts” and “tackle the rise of hate speech, xenophobia and the poisonous views that are penetrating political debates”.

“In all of these endeavours, I ask for your support, as the legislative branches of your governments, as political leaders in your countries, and as partners in advancing these common global goals,” concluded Mr. Guterres.