

Venezuela asylum numbers already higher than last year: UNHCR

Some 117,000 Venezuelans have claimed asylum already this year – more than for the whole of 2017 – the UN refugee agency ([UNHCR](#)) said on Tuesday, after welcoming a decision by the Brazilian Supreme Federal Court to reverse the closure of the country's border with its northern neighbour.

“UNHCR welcomes last night's decision of the Court to overturn a decision by a Federal Judge in Roraima border state, to suspend admission of Venezuelans to the country and close the border,” said the agency's spokesperson William Spindler.

In Geneva, Mr. Spindler added that hundreds of Venezuelans cross into Brazil's northern Roraima state near the small border city of Pacaraima every day, in search of safety.

The route was blocked temporarily on Monday, when the frontier was closed in line with the initial decision by a federal judge in Roraima. Hours later it was overturned by Brazil's higher federal court.

More than 200 Venezuelans were unable to finalize their immigration registration during the brief closure on Monday, but they were not deported or pushed back over the border, according to the UN agency.

Today, Brazil is home to more than 32,700 Venezuelan asylum seekers; another 25,000 are legally permitted to stay in the country, as they have work or residency permits, or similar.

“The total number of Venezuelan asylum seekers this year – this is asylum claims everywhere – is 117,000 ... and this figure surpasses the total number of claims made last year,” Spindler told journalists in Geneva.

The development comes amid reports of widespread food and medicine shortages, skyrocketing inflation, political unrest and violence in Venezuela.



UNHCR/Reynesson Damasceno

Venezuelans wait outside the Federal Police office in the Brazilian border city of Pacaraima. In August 2018, Brazilian Federal courts temporarily halted, then resumed, admission of Venezuelans seeking asylum or special permits to stay in the country.

Just last month, the UN human rights office ([OHCHR](#)) published [a report](#) highlighting the Venezuelan Government's continuing failure to hold perpetrators of "serious human rights violations" accountable, including "killings, the use of excessive force against demonstrators, arbitrary detentions, ill-treatment and torture".

Noting "tensions" at the frontier between Roraima residents and the newcomers, the UNHCR spokesperson said that the agency would continue to support efforts to meet the needs of those arriving in Brazil.

Until now, the authorities have traditionally welcomed anyone in need of protection and provided them access to basic rights and services, Spindler said, adding that movement between borders in Latin America is often very fluid.

"There were some tensions between the local people and Venezuelans," he said. "We understand that there has been a large influx in Roraima and that's why we are helping the authorities to cope with the situation."

To date, UNHCR has helped more than 800 Venezuelans relocate to other areas in Brazil in order to alleviate the strain on the state, which has seen the greatest influx of people seeking shelter.

The UN agency says that most of those abandoning Venezuela for Brazil – and neighbouring Colombia – need urgent assistance with documentation, shelter, food and health care, which it seeks to provide by working with the authorities and partner organizations.

Among those helped by UNHCR are [a growing number of indigenous people](#) left vulnerable by food shortages.

They include the family of 33-year-old Warao community leader, Eligio Tejerina, whose youngest child died after falling sick with pneumonia.

“Since they were out of medicine, she could not receive proper treatment,” the 33-year-old Warao community leader said.

His surviving five children were already weakened and distressed by hunger. No longer able to find food in the local market, their only option was to leave, Tejerina explained.

“We decided to come to Brazil because our children were starving,” he said. “They used to cry from hunger. They were having only one meal a day, at night. Just a little portion.”