



Hard Times in a Safe Haven: Protecting Venezuelan Migrants in Colombia

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Principal Findings

What's new? Close to 2.5 million Venezuelans are living in Colombia, having fled their home country's economic collapse and political crisis. While Bogotá has generously offered residency rights, many migrants and refugees nevertheless face extreme hardship and have few resources to sustain themselves.

Why does it matter? Thriving armed and criminal groups in Colombia's cities and countryside have absorbed Venezuelans as cheap recruits, often deploying them for high-visibility crimes while exposing them to great physical danger. Xenophobia toward Venezuelans has risen sharply, surging during periods of unrest.

What should be done? The new Colombian government and donors should cooperate to improve protection of arriving migrants, including by diverting them from violent areas, and help them get access to the formal labour market. Rebuilding ties between Colombia and Venezuela will be vital to giving migrants an option to return safely home.

Executive Summary

Colombia has welcomed millions of Venezuelans fleeing their homeland, but many remain at risk in the country. Venezuelans have fanned out across the Americas, but by far the largest number, close to 2.5 million, have settled in Colombia, where governments sympathetic to the distress across the border and cool to leaders in Caracas have offered them residency and services. These policies stand out for their compassion but are not matched by sufficient economic or other support. Penniless migrants and refugees are vulnerable to sexual exploitation. Many have little choice but to rely on informal work and are vulnerable to recruitment into armed groups or street gangs. As the Venezuelans' role in criminal outfits has grown more prominent, xenophobia directed at them has also increased. To break this cycle, Colombian authorities should work with partners to offer better protections for Venezuelans and to strengthen legal economic opportunities. Colombian President Gustavo Petro's plan to restore dialogue with Caracas will be essential to ensuring that migrants can pass safely between the two countries.

Escaping a huge economic contraction, rising insecurity, collapsing public services and a political crackdown, over six million migrants and refugees from Venezuela have sought a new, safer life abroad over the past decade – with most leaving home since 2017. From these Venezuelans' perspective, Colombia boasts several attractions as a destination: it shares a porous 2,200km frontier with its neighbour, making it possible albeit dangerous to cross, even when official borders are closed; its governments have been highly critical of Caracas; and it has offered residency and access to public services to the newcomers. Moreover, until the onset of COVID-19, its economy was enjoying steady growth, with thriving labour markets in its big cities.

But in other ways Colombia is one of the least suitable Latin American countries to receive a mass migrant exodus. Over decades, various fronts of a vicious, multi-pronged internal war caused the country to suffer some of the world's highest rates of forced displacement – and drove out millions of migrants and refugees. Colombia has had no previous experience of offering shelter and respite to so many migrants, and its lack of know-how and capacity is conspicuous. The country's cash-based informal economy accounts for close to half of all jobs and is characterised by paltry, erratic pay – particularly for Venezuelans, who, for lack of formal alternatives, often accept wages considerably lower than what locals receive.

In poor rural areas, both close to the border with Venezuela and in remote corners elsewhere, the most easily available employment is often to be found in illicit business and among armed and criminal groups. Despite the 2016 agreement with the guerrilla Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC), which brought an end to the country's largest insurgency and mapped out a route to lasting peace, splinter groups (known as "dissident" factions) and other armed bands continue to coerce communities and perpetrate acts of violence throughout large parts of the country. Migrants have been immersed in conflict zones with no understanding of the unwritten rules for survival. Coca production and illegal mining have become major sources of work for Venezuelans; human trafficking and sexual exploitation plague border towns (and big cities as well), with women and minors in special danger. Gender-based violence

is particularly common at informal border crossings under criminal control, where the means of protecting victims are generally absent.

Struggling with high unemployment, bouts of social unrest and, since 2020, the effects of COVID-19, Colombia's big cities have likewise proven inhospitable. Tens of thousands of Venezuelans ended up walking back to the border in the first months of the pandemic after the state prohibited their work as street vendors, causing many to be evicted from cramped lodgings. Just as armed groups in the countryside lure Venezuelan recruits with one-off payments, food and shelter, urban gangs have targeted desperate migrants, many of them sleeping rough (an estimated 16 per cent of homeless people in Colombia are now Venezuelan). Employed by gangs as part of their growing work force, migrants offer cheap labour as street fighters, drug dealers and hit men. Although working under the orders of illicit Colombian groups, the high-visibility crimes perpetrated by migrants have fuelled xenophobia toward Venezuelans. Migrants who have been exploited for their vulnerability and poverty are regularly vilified by members of the public and politicians as the cause of low wages, insecurity and public disorder.

Preventing recruitment of migrants and refugees by armed and criminal groups is essential both to the safety of Venezuelans and the broader cause of peace and security in Colombia. Crucial steps toward this end should include strengthening migrant reception services close to the border or in big cities; improving support for all newcomers seeking safe passage to their destination; and making migrants aware of the perils of involvement with organised crime. More safe houses for sexually exploited and trafficked women and children along the border are also an acute need. But Colombia cannot do all these things by itself. Foreign partners and international bodies working on migration, conflict, gender and humanitarian emergencies should help the cash-strapped Colombian state foot the bill.

In certain areas, however, the incoming government in Bogotá will have to assume primary responsibility. Where Venezuelans have found themselves embroiled in violence, they should be given the right to be registered as victims of Colombia's conflict, which by law entitles them to reparation payments and special judicial attention. The Colombian state should also strive to iron out the difficulties Venezuelan migrants encounter in trying to join the formal economy by taking additional steps to recognise their educational qualifications and providing vocational training where necessary. Stricter law enforcement to ensure Venezuelan employees are not exploited or underpaid in their work, thereby undercutting protections for Colombians, could help relieve the labour market frictions that the migration wave has created.

President Petro's goal of patching up severed ties between the Colombian and Venezuelan governments is also long overdue. Communication channels between border provinces enabled pedestrian traffic to resume through the main formal crossings in late 2021. But the incoming Colombian government has made clear it wishes to restore full diplomatic and consular relations, while Petro himself has stressed the need for the two states to work together in improving security and boosting formal trade along the border. A fragile stabilisation of Venezuela's economy, driven in large part by use of the U.S. dollar as legal tender in the country, has raised the prospect that more migrants can go back to their home country voluntarily. Making sure there

is safe passage in both directions will require far more cooperation between the two states, as well as support from international agencies.

Colombia's offer of a safe haven for Venezuelans is both a grand gesture of solidarity and a promise the country has been hard pressed to meet. Stronger protection upon migrants' arrival, clear routes to the formal labour market, restored bilateral ties and a safe way to return home if desired are vital to protecting migrants from the lures and dangers of crime and exploitation, with all the ill effects that those may bring.

Bogotá/Washington/Brussels, 9 August 2022

Hard Times in a Safe Haven: Protecting Venezuelan Migrants in Colombia

I. Introduction

Over the past quarter-century, migration out of Venezuela has come in three successive stages, prompted by political tumult, economic and social unrest, and a deep humanitarian crisis.¹ The first wave included affluent Venezuelans in possession of passports and sufficient funds to book a flight, many of them leaving during President Hugo Chávez's rule (1999–2013). During the second wave, between 2016 and 2017, many middle-income families departed, primarily to other South American countries. Finally, since 2018, people lacking resources to travel and often without passports have headed out on foot, becoming known as *los caminantes* (the walkers). As time passed, worsening conditions – including hunger, extreme poverty, a failing health system and widespread violence – have accelerated the exodus. Around one fifth of Venezuela's population of 30 million has moved abroad over the past decade, with most of this migration occurring since 2017.

Of the six million Venezuelans who have left their country since 2013, nearly 2.5 million live in Colombia, which shares a 2,200km border with Venezuela, and which has in many respects presented itself as a welcoming neighbour.² Successive governments have sought to assure incoming migrants and refugees of their rights to stay, work and enjoy access to social services.³ Leaders in Bogotá have won plaudits from foreign officials and international humanitarian bodies for their efforts to provide newly arrived Venezuelans with a degree of protection, including through special residency permits and close working arrangements with UN agencies and donors to handle the migrant inflow.

¹ Bram Ebus, "Under a Merciless Sun: Venezuelans Stranded across the Colombian Border", Crisis Group Commentary, 25 February 2020. In Latin America and the Caribbean, according to surveys done by the International Organization for Migration (IOM), about 34 per cent of the female migrants travelled by themselves. In Colombia, about half of the Venezuelan migrant population are women. Frequently, men depart first, with their wives and children following later. "Displacement Tracking Matrix", IOM, July 2020.

² About 295,000 undocumented Venezuelans are in Colombia. "Distribución de Venezolanos en Colombia – Corte 28 de Febrero de 2022", Migración Colombia, 19 July 2022; Plataforma de Coordinación para Refugiados y Migrantes de Venezuela (R4V), January 2022. Crisis Group telephone interview, Bogotá city official, 29 March 2022.

³ For brevity's sake, this report will refer to migrants, refugees and returnees as "migrants". While the term has no definition under international law, the IOM defines a migrant as a person who "moves away from his or her place of usual residence, whether within a country or across an international border, temporarily or permanently, and for a variety of reasons". "Who is a Migrant", IOM, undated. For purposes of this report, the term includes both refugees (whom the UN Refugee Convention of 1951 defines as "someone who is unable or unwilling to return to their country of origin owing to a well-founded fear of being persecuted for reasons of race, religion, nationality, membership of a particular social group or political opinion") and returnees (here, Colombians who settled in Venezuela, mainly escaping the internal conflict in Colombia, but who have decided to return to their homeland).

But laudable as these efforts have been, Colombia has struggled to provide Venezuelan migrants with the support they need, a problem with both humanitarian and security implications. Many migrants suffer extreme economic hardship and violent intimidation in a country still troubled by armed and criminal outfits, and with its own long history of forced displacement.⁴ For many Colombians, the visible face of Venezuela's humanitarian emergency consists of the migrants scraping by in the country's cities, where organised crime often has more absorptive capacity than formal businesses or state employment schemes. But many migrants also end up in rural and conflict-affected regions. Although the largest insurgency in the country, the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC), handed over its weapons following the 2016 peace accord, an array of armed groups continues to plague rural areas. Migrants can now be found in the most remote corners of Colombia, working in rackets that help fund these groups and their activities, including illegal gold mining, fuel smuggling and coca growing.

A rupture in diplomatic relations between Colombia and Venezuela in February 2019 only deepened the difficulties faced by migrants. Whether seeking to cross a frequently closed formal border, return safely to family in their homeland, obtain official documents or receive basic consular services, migrants have found their efforts thwarted by the refusal of President Iván Duque's government in Bogotá to entertain any sort of relationship with President Nicolás Maduro.

But major changes are afoot in Colombia and the question is what happens now. President Gustavo Petro's victory at the polls in June and his formal inauguration on 7 August made him Colombia's first left-wing president in recent history, auguring a dramatic switch in policy direction for Bogotá on many key issues, including relations with Caracas. Despite his historical differences with the Maduro government, Petro spoke with the Venezuelan president days after his election and declared that borders between the two countries would be fully reopened; he also made clear throughout his campaign that he would restore ties with Venezuela.⁵ Petro is also expected to renew efforts to negotiate with Colombia's current largest guerrilla group, the National Liberation Army (ELN), which has a presence on both sides of the border, and has flourished deeper inside Venezuela in recent years.⁶

As the political transition proceeds in Bogotá, this report examines the challenges faced by Venezuelan migrants who have sought safe harbour in Colombia, including the risk of being recruited into criminal and armed groups, and how their vulnerability in this regard has affected public perceptions of them. Focusing on the second and

⁴ Over eight million people are registered as victims of forced displacement in Colombia. Colombia's Victims Unit, April 2022. The number of Colombians who fled to Venezuela due to decades of conflict is unknown. About five million Colombians lived in Venezuela in 2015, making up some 15 per cent of the population. This total included refugees, but also Colombians who had migrated to Venezuela in search of employment opportunities. See Yhoger Contreras, "Colombians flee homes in Venezuela amid border crackdown", Associated Press, 25 August 2015.

⁵ "Gustavo Petro concede a Noticias Caracol su primera entrevista tras ser elegido presidente", Noticias Caracol, 22 June 2022. Regarding Petro's differences with Maduro, see "Dura arremetida de Petro al gobierno de Nicolás Maduro", *El Tiempo*, 31 January 2020.

⁶ "Negociar la paz con el ELN, un desafío para el gobierno de Gustavo Petro", *El País*, 25 June 2022. On failed attempts to negotiate with the ELN, see Crisis Group Latin America Report N°68, *The Missing Peace: Colombia's New Government and Last Guerrillas*, 12 July 2018.

third migratory waves described above, the report explores the ways in which the Colombian state has sought to support migrants; the difficulties it has encountered in doing so, particularly during the pandemic; and the gaps in support and protection that the new government will need to fill. This report is based on interviews with about 90 state and local officials, migrants, civil society leaders, diplomats and aid workers between November 2019 and July 2022. Research was conducted through visits to Colombian regions including Bajo Cauca, the Pacific, north-eastern Antioquia, Arauca and Catatumbo, as well as the cities of Villavicencio, Medellín, Cúcuta and Bogotá.

II. A Mass Exodus and a Hard Landing

Prior to the Venezuelan migrant exodus of the past decade, Colombia had not experienced a major inflow of migrants or refugees. The Venezuelan crisis thus forced a largely unprepared country to adapt at speed. Colombia welcomed Venezuelan migrants, but their arrival aggravated existing social tensions and placed a new set of demands on the country's already taxed institutions.

A. Mass Migration's Drivers

Venezuela's economic collapse has been a primary engine driving recent waves of migration into Colombia. A massive contraction prompted by ill-considered state interventions, falling oil prices and corruption, and worsened by the imposition of U.S. financial and economic sanctions from 2017 onward, shaved 74 per cent off Venezuela's gross domestic product between 2014 and 2020.⁷ Recent studies have indicated that 95 per cent of Venezuelans remaining in their country live in poverty and 77 per cent in extreme poverty following this nosedive, which caused the monthly minimum wage to decline to a few dollars by early 2022, although it has risen since.⁸ Dollarisation of Venezuela's economy has afforded a modicum of stability by tempering hyperinflation, but salaries for public-sector employees remain very low and economic conditions are still forbiddingly tough for most people.⁹

The country's economic straits are linked to its political crisis, which has also escalated under the government of President Maduro. Following his election in 2013, economic collapse, rising insecurity, and shortages of food and medicines created the backdrop for an opposition victory in the 2015 legislative contests. Two years later, the government stripped the opposition-held National Assembly of its powers. Amid intensifying political conflict and an authoritarian clampdown by the government, the opposition boycotted the 2018 presidential polls, which Maduro won. Arguing that the vote was fraudulent and unfair, the speaker of the National Assembly, Juan Guaidó, asserted his claim to be "interim president" in early 2019 and won recognition from over 50 countries, including the U.S. Subsequent attempts by elements of the opposition to unseat Maduro, including a civil-military uprising and a mercenary invasion, failed to achieve their goal, enabling the president to consolidate his hold on power.¹⁰

⁷ "Encuesta Nacional de Condiciones de Vida 2021", Universidad Católica Andrés Bello, 2021.

⁸ In March, President Maduro announced an eighteen-fold increase in the minimum wage, which now stands at \$28 a month. "Salario mínimo Venezuela sólo cubre 5 % de alimentos, según ente independiente", Swissinfo, 20 June 2022.

⁹ "Encuesta Nacional de Condiciones de Vida 2021", op. cit.; "Extreme poverty in Venezuela rises to 76.6% – study", Reuters, 29 September 2021. Many Venezuelans have quit their jobs, and those who have stayed in the country, including highly educated professionals, have resorted to informal means of earning a living, including illegal gold mining in southern states or smuggling goods across the borders with Brazil and Colombia. Crisis Group Latin America Report N°73, *Gold and Grief in Venezuela's Violent South*, 28 February 2019.

¹⁰ See Crisis Group Latin America Reports N°s 75, *A Glimmer of Light in Venezuela's Gloom*, 15 July 2019; and 85, *Venezuela: What Lies Ahead after Election Clinches Maduro's Clean Sweep*, 21 December 2020.

Increasing repression has also been a hallmark of the Maduro administration. While repression and widespread abuse are not the main causes of migration, they are among the reasons migrants cite for leaving the country.¹¹ The UN Independent International Fact-Finding Mission on Venezuela has condemned state authorities for a wide variety of human rights violations, including arbitrary arrests and disappearances by security forces, and stated that instead of protecting rights and freedoms, judicial authorities have facilitated impunity.¹² In November 2021, the International Criminal Court announced a formal investigation into possible crimes against humanity in Venezuela allegedly committed by security forces.¹³

One further cause pushing Venezuelans to leave their country has only surfaced in the last year or so. Since early 2021, flare-ups of fighting between FARC “dissident” factions (ie, splinters of the disbanded organisation) and the Venezuelan army in the border state of Apure has forced Venezuelans to flee across the border.¹⁴ Of the at least 6,000 uprooted people who crossed into Colombia in early 2021, several hundred were displaced from Apure state to the departments of Arauca and Vichada in Colombia, including over a dozen families of the Jivi ethnic tribe.¹⁵

Even though Colombia is right next door, crossing the border is a perilous endeavour. Due to border closures or their lack of travel documents, many Venezuelans have no alternative but to walk over informal tracks (*trochas*) controlled by armed groups and gangs that charge fees for passage and are frequently violent.¹⁶ An estimated 63 per cent of families entering Colombia did so over irregular border crossings.¹⁷ Corrupt police officers may also benefit by collecting extortion fees of roughly 5,000 Colombian pesos (\$1.25) from motorcyclists transporting food products, such as eggs, across the border from Colombia to Venezuela. Venezuelans have also reported abuses by Colombian migration officials, including throwing water at sleeping mi-

¹¹ “La Crisis de Migrantes y Refugiados Venezolanos”, OAS, June 2021; “¿Qué se sabe sobre la migración venezolana reciente?”, Observatorio Venezolano de Migración, 2021.

¹² “Report of the independent international fact-finding mission on the Bolivarian Republic of Venezuela”, UN Human Rights Council, September 2020; “Report of the independent international fact-finding mission on the Bolivarian Republic of Venezuela”, UN Human Rights Council, 16 September 2021.

¹³ Mariano de Alba, “Venezuela: International Criminal Court Probe Puts Maduro in a Quandary”, Crisis Group Commentary, 12 November 2021.

¹⁴ Following the 2016 peace deal with the government, several splinter groups of the guerrilla still using the name FARC are active in Colombia. See Crisis Group Latin America Report N°92, *A Fight by Other Means: Keeping the Peace with Colombia’s FARC*, 30 November 2021.

¹⁵ Crisis Group telephone interview, humanitarian aid official, April 2022. See also “Ya son más de 6.000 los refugiados venezolanos en Arauquita”, *El Tiempo*, 2 April 2021. In the years prior to the uptick in fighting in Apure, Venezuelans had already been displaced across the border due to conflict in the southern mining districts of Amazonas and Bolívar states. See Crisis Group Report, *Gold and Grief in Venezuela’s Violent South*, op. cit.

¹⁶ Crisis Group interview, Venezuelan migrant, Villa del Rosario, 27 November 2021.

¹⁷ “Colombia: Evaluación de Seguridad Alimentaria en Emergencias (ESAE) para Población Migrante de Venezuela y Hogares de Acogida en Departamentos Fronterizos”, World Food Programme, February 2020.

grants, sometimes beating people who need to spend the night outside near their offices, and destroying valid identity documents.¹⁸

B. *Permits to Stay*

In 2017, as migration from Venezuela surged, President Juan Manuel Santos' government created the Permiso Especial de Permanencia, or special residency permit, to enable incoming Venezuelans to stay legally in Colombia. Colombian solidarity with Venezuelan migrants reflected an expression of sympathy with their flight from an increasingly authoritarian government, as well as a pragmatic understanding that migrants could not be stopped from coming across a long, porous border. The permit granted registered migrants two years of residency, access to social services and a work permit.¹⁹ Appointment of a border czar working in the presidential offices helped streamline coordination among ministries and state agencies handling the migrant flow and cut red tape, enabling around 660,000 Venezuelans to obtain residency permits within three years.²⁰ Even so, ranging from 2017 to 2021, between 41 per cent and 57 per cent of Venezuelans in Colombia still had no formal legal authority to stay because of administrative hurdles and the lack of capacity to process permit requests.²¹

In response to increasing migrant numbers, President Duque's government developed new legislation, enacted in May 2021, that granted Venezuelans temporary protection status (known as the Estatuto Temporal de Protección para Migrantes Venezolanos).²² Widely praised abroad for its generous provisions, the statute affords Venezuelan migrants who obtain a permit ten-year residency and allows them access to public education, health care and the job market. By February 2022, about 2.4 million Venezuelans, or 96 per cent of the migrant population, had applied for a protection permit, with Colombian migration authorities having approved nearly 1.4 million by July 2022.²³ Still, not all Venezuelan migrants are eligible to apply. Those who cannot prove their date of entry or provide valid identification documents are subject to deportation, spawning a black market in "service providers" who offer to fix paper-

¹⁸ Crisis Group interview, Venezuelan migrant, Villa del Rosario, 27 November 2021. Abuses by border officials have been previously documented and described by Colombian media and Crisis Group. See "El drama de las violaciones en la frontera con Venezuela", *Semana*, 12 March 2020; and Crisis Group Latin America Report N°84, *Disorder on the Border: Keeping the Peace between Colombia and Venezuela*, 14 December 2020.

¹⁹ Stephanie López Villamil and Helen Dempster, "Why Colombia Granted Full Rights to Its 1.7 Million Venezuelans, and What Comes Next", Center for Global Development, 26 January 2021.

²⁰ Crisis Group interview, migration expert, Bogotá, 1 March 2022.

²¹ "Migration from Venezuela: Opportunities for Latin America and the Caribbean", International Labour Organization, 2021; "Socioeconomic Integration of Venezuelan Migrants and Refugees", IOM, July 2021.

²² Ronal Rodríguez, "Lo que sigue para el Estatuto temporal de protección para migrantes venezolanos", *El Espectador*, 22 February 2021.

²³ "Distribución de Venezolanos en Colombia – Corte 28 de Febrero de 2022", op. cit.; "Migración Colombia entrega balance de la implementación del estatuto temporal de protección", press release, Migración Colombia, 19 July 2022.

work.²⁴ Venezuelans living in rural areas and lacking funds for travel often find it difficult to reach towns where the permits are handed out.²⁵

C. *For Many, a Precarious Home in the City*

Conditions remain challenging for many migrants and refugees upon arrival in Colombia. Whereas food, fuel and medicine are generally not scarce, finding work in Colombia's formal economy and the means to purchase goods can be an ordeal. By the end of 2021, 48 per cent of workers were employed in the informal economy, a rate that rose to 70 per cent in the town of Cúcuta, the largest Colombian city close to the border with Venezuela, and home to nearly 170,000 Venezuelan migrants.²⁶ An estimated 90 per cent of Venezuelans working in Colombia are employed in the informal economy, where pay tends to be lower and more erratic.²⁷

Venezuelan migrants have mainly settled in Colombia's big cities. Some 495,000 Venezuelans are registered in the capital Bogotá, while another 191,000 are located in Medellín, Colombia's second biggest city. After that come the border city Cúcuta, Cali, Colombia's third largest conurbation, located in the south west, and the Caribbean port of Barranquilla.²⁸

Cities present specific challenges for many migrants. Those who have been unable to get their hands on a legal stay permit or lack a stable income face difficulties in obtaining apartment leases. For this reason, many poorer Venezuelans end up in informal accommodation or pay-per-day rooms, called *pagadarios*, a predominantly urban phenomenon. Conditions in these facilities are commonly described by their inhabitants as miserable and inhumane.²⁹ Entire families cluster together in tiny rooms and share mattresses. "The state does not provide economic guarantees and migrants look for their own solutions", a state official said of these housing conditions.³⁰

To pay for these *pagadarios*, many Venezuelans join the informal street economy, selling products such as cigarettes, rubbish bags and sweets. What is earned during the day is spent after work on food and nightly accommodation. Experts who work closely with migrants warn that the owners of temporary accommodation sometimes entice tenants into taking part in criminal activities, or ask for sexual favours, as a means of paying the rent.³¹

²⁴ Crisis Group interview, social worker, Cúcuta, December 2022. Migrants who entered before 31 January 2021 can apply for protection status under the 2021 statute. Migration experts highlight the importance of scheduling a new round of applications for the status that includes a more recent date of entry. Crisis Group interview, senior official international agency, Bogotá, 19 July 2022.

²⁵ Crisis Group interview, humanitarian agency representatives, Bogotá, 10 February 2022.

²⁶ "Distribución de Venezolanos en Colombia – Corte 28 de Febrero de 2022", op. cit.; "Informalidad cedió en las 13 principales ciudades del país", *Portafolio*, 10 November 2021; "Migration from Venezuela: Opportunities for Latin America and the Caribbean", op. cit.

²⁷ "¿En qué trabajan los migrantes venezolanos en Colombia, por lo general?", *El Tiempo*, 9 November 2021.

²⁸ Crisis Group telephone interview, Bogotá city official, 29 March 2022. See also "Distribución de Venezolanos en Colombia – Corte 28 de Febrero de 2022", op. cit.; and R4V, op. cit.

²⁹ Crisis Group interviews, migrants, refugees and civil society representatives, 2020-2022.

³⁰ Crisis Group interview, state official, Villa del Rosario, 1 December 2021.

³¹ Crisis Group interviews, migration and human rights experts, January and February 2022.

Venezuelans are also vulnerable to being kicked out when unable to pay. Mass eviction became an acute problem in Colombia during the first COVID-19 lockdown from March 2020, when social distancing rules prohibited street vendors from working outside, in effect denying many migrants their only source of income. Lockdowns forced tens of thousands of Venezuelans to walk back to their native land, where they could at least find a place to stay with family or friends after losing their livelihoods and being turned out into the street by landlords, despite a ban on dislodging tenants during the pandemic's early stages.³² Due to their precarious employment conditions and poverty, some 31 per cent of Venezuelan families indicated in a recent survey that they risked eviction because they could not pay rent and utilities, while about a quarter of refugee and migrant households in Colombia face food insecurity and consume poor-quality water.³³

D. *Labour Market Difficulties*

Most of the Venezuelans in Colombia yearn for stable, paid employment.³⁴ But their chances of gaining work are limited, and the opportunities on offer are often far from desirable. At least 24 per cent of Venezuelan refugees and migrants in Colombia are unemployed, according to the state statistical institute.³⁵ For those who have work, conditions are often harsh. About 41 per cent of the Venezuelans in Colombia work more than 48 hours a week – above the legal limit on working hours – and often make considerably less money than their Colombian peers. In the construction industry, for example, a Colombian employee can earn up to 70,000 Colombian pesos (\$17.5) a day, while a Venezuelan is paid about 30,000 pesos (\$7.5), even if he is similarly skilled.³⁶

Low pay affects Venezuelan women even more acutely than men, with earnings 26.5 per cent less than those of a Venezuelan man, according to a 2019 survey.³⁷ Venezuelan women are frequently the primary breadwinners for their households; as

³² Crisis Group Latin America Briefing N°24, *Broken Ties, Frozen Borders: Colombia and Venezuela Face COVID-19*, 15 April 2020.

³³ "Refugee and Migrant Response Plan for Venezuela 2022", Inter-Agency Coordination Platform for Refugees and Migrants from Venezuela, 2021. By July 2021, according to the World Food Programme, 1.1 million Venezuelans in Colombia – representing 64 per cent of migrants in the country – were food-insecure, and 14 per cent were malnourished. "Food Security Update Venezuelan Migrants in Colombia, Ecuador and Peru", World Food Programme, August 2021. Another survey found that some 77 per cent of refugee and migrant households in June 2021 reported that they lacked access to health care; 85 per cent of the households said their priority was obtaining food, while about 59 per cent of households skip at least one meal a day. "Evaluación Conjunta de Necesidades", Inter-Agency Coordination Platform for Refugees and Migrants from Venezuela, June 2021.

³⁴ "Migration from Venezuela: Opportunities for Latin America and the Caribbean", op. cit.

³⁵ "Mercado Laboral", DANE, December 2021; "Bogotá es la ciudad con más migrantes venezolanos desempleados: Dane", Proyecto Migración Venezuela, 30 June 2021; Jairo Chacón, "¿Dónde viven y en qué trabajan los venezolanos en Colombia?", Voice of America, 9 February 2022.

³⁶ Crisis Group interview, mining sector representative, north-eastern Antioquia, 11 November 2020.

³⁷ "¿Cuál era la brecha de género de migrantes en el mercado laboral antes de la pandemia?", Proyecto Migración Venezuela, 2021. A higher percentage of migrant women, compared to migrant men, work in the informal economy. "Dinámicas laborales de las mujeres migrantes venezolanas en Colombia", UN High Commissioner for Refugees, 2020.

a result, they are especially vulnerable to being exploited in order to support their children. In the border city of Cúcuta, some restaurants pay Venezuelan women half what they would pay Colombian citizens.³⁸

Legal stay permits, including residency visas and temporary protection status, are no guarantee that Venezuelans can gain access to legal employment or avoid discrimination. In Bogotá, some stores state in their vacancy notices that Venezuelans should not apply.

When Venezuelans do get work, but at lower pay rates, they can find themselves at odds with the Colombian work force. Colombian workers who lose their jobs or face difficulties looking for new employment because of competition with Venezuelan migrants experience acute frustration.³⁹ Even among migrants, excessively low pay can generate grudges. Women who clean houses but refuse to accept less than a Colombian domestic worker (who, although by law they should receive around 70,000 Colombian pesos per day, often get paid 25,000 to 30,000, or \$6.25 to \$7.5) can be sacked in favour of other migrants earning 10,000 to 15,000 pesos (\$2.5 to \$3.75).⁴⁰

Competition and resentment between Venezuelan and Colombian workers extend beyond the legal labour market to the illicit economy. ELN guerrillas reportedly intervened in 2018 after locals in the hamlet of El Tarra sought to drive away Venezuelan coca leaf pickers and sex workers because of their alleged deleterious effect on wages. According to these reports, the ELN ordered farm and brothel owners to pay Venezuelans and Colombians equally to quell local tensions. Most coca leaf pickers in the area are now Venezuelan.⁴¹

E. Access to Health Care

The quest for health care is one of the main causes of migration from Venezuela, where the national public health system has broken down and many hospitals lack clean water and essential medication. Expensive medicines can be obtained privately, but the prices (generally set in U.S. dollars) are unaffordable for most people. Many health care workers have also migrated, causing shortages of essential medical staff.⁴² Because migrants have the right to emergency treatment in Colombia irrespective of immigration status, women cross the border in search of prenatal checkups. Babies of

³⁸ Crisis Group interview, social worker, Cúcuta, 27 November 2021.

³⁹ Economists say there is no conclusive evidence of unemployment increasing as a result of Venezuelan migration, although migrants may well have boosted the relative size of the informal economy. “Venezolanos no les están quitando el trabajo a colombianos como dice Claudia López”, *Semana*, 11 March 2021.

⁴⁰ Crisis Group focus groups, migrants and returnees, Cúcuta, 4 December 2021.

⁴¹ Crisis Group interview, security expert, Cúcuta, 26 November 2021.

⁴² “World Report 2021: Venezuela”, Human Rights Watch, 2022; William Rhodes and Cristina Valencia, “Venezuela’s healthcare crisis needs emergency attention”, *Financial Times*, 8 February 2019; Crisis Group Report, *Disorder on the Border*, op. cit.; and Ebus, “Under a Merciless Sun”, op. cit. Venezuelans were granted access to COVID-19 vaccines in 2021. Prior to this decision, in December 2020 President Duque responded when asked whether undocumented Venezuelan migrants would receive a jab: “Of course not. We could have calls to stampede the border”. See “Venezolanos que no tengan doble nacionalidad ni estén regularizados no tendrán vacuna COVID: Duque”, *Blu Radio*, 21 December 2020; and “Independiente de su estatus migratorio, todos pueden vacunarse”, press release, Ministry of Health and Social Protection, 29 October 2021.

Venezuelan parents born in Colombia since 19 August 2015 are now granted Colombian citizenship, a measure in force until 2023. About 66,000 babies and children have benefited.⁴³

But the struggling Colombian health care system is limited in what it can deliver. Colombians themselves find it hard to gain access to decent health care, while for Venezuelans matters are even worse.⁴⁴ The state is responsible for paying hospitals for any costs related to emergency care for migrants. Since the payouts can be very slow, hospitals feel little inclination to attend to undocumented Venezuelans, and when they do, prefer to charge them directly. During the early days of the COVID-19 pandemic, irrespective of whether they had residency permits or not, Venezuelans with the virus could not get medical care or were retained in hospitals by private security until reaching agreement on payment.⁴⁵ One human rights defender in Bogotá referred to a case in which women prostituted themselves near a hospital until they could pay their medical bills.⁴⁶ Venezuelans without legal residency can also be denied the right to medical attention if the hospital deems their cases not to be emergencies; undocumented citizens with chronic diseases, cancer or in need of antiretroviral drugs are often excluded from free treatment.⁴⁷

For those Venezuelans with formal residency, the problems faced in gaining access to health care are typical of the travails of many Colombians. The Colombian government hopes to affiliate 945,000 Venezuelans to the public health system, but by December 2021 only 427,000 had health insurance.⁴⁸ Migrants with residency papers can acquire a public health insurance policy for low-income households, but members of a focus group complained that the doctors they were allocated make prescriptions without a proper consultation (they noted painkillers in particular), while some have stopped visiting Colombian hospitals after receiving inadequate attention.⁴⁹

⁴³ “Ellos ya son colombianos”, UNHCR, 23 December 2021. Some Venezuelan hospitals do not have the tools to deliver clean caesarean-style deliveries and charge patients in dollars for medical supplies that should be free. See Ebus, “Under a Merciless Sun”, op. cit.

⁴⁴ More than eight million people in Colombia live more than an hour away from the nearest health centre and about 2.2 million face barriers to getting any health-care services. See “Resumen Panorama de Necesidades Humanitarias 2022 Colombia”, UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs, February 2022.

⁴⁵ Jhoandry Suárez, “Migrantes venezolanas entre las trabas de un sistema y la solidaridad para parir en Colombia (I)”, *Efecto Cocuyo*, 5 February 2022; “Desigualdades en salud de la población migrante y refugiada venezolana en Colombia”, Profamilia, 2020.

⁴⁶ Crisis Group interviews, human rights lawyers, Bogotá, 12 February 2021.

⁴⁷ Crisis Group telephone interviews, migration experts, 17 November 2020. Emergency services should also be given to survivors of gender-based violence. For more information, see “Unprotected: Gender-based Violence against Venezuelan Refugee Women in Colombia and Peru”, Amnesty International, July 2022.

⁴⁸ “Minsalud logra afiliar 21.476 migrantes en una semana”, press release, Ministry of Health and Social Protection, 9 February 2022.

⁴⁹ Crisis Group focus groups, migrants and returnees, Cúcuta, 4 December 2021.

III. The Lure of Crime

Venezuelans are vulnerable to armed group recruitment and face extraordinary risks on Colombian territory. They are often unprotected thanks to their undocumented status, unfamiliar with Colombian legislation and the rights it affords, and ignorant of unwritten rules in conflict zones such as curfews and codes of conduct imposed by armed groups.⁵⁰ In Bogotá's rougher areas and other urban centres, penniless migrants become caught up in gang violence, contract killing and drug trafficking, among other things.⁵¹ Outside the cities they are drawn into coca cultivation, illegal mining and other illicit activity.

A. Venezuelans and Colombian Armed Groups

Despite the 2016 peace accord with the FARC, armed conflict continues to impinge on the lives of millions of Colombians and in some areas has worsened in recent years.⁵² According to Colombia's transitional justice system, 2021 turned out to be the most violent year since the peace agreement was signed, with competition intensifying among rival armed bands over illicit economies and trafficking routes that require control over land and communities.⁵³

Unlike the Colombians who have experienced recurrent waves of fighting, sometimes over decades, the Venezuelans who find themselves in rural areas do not know the de facto rules of the road in zones disputed by armed groups.⁵⁴ They consequently face risks that range from detonating landmines on rural tracks and braving cross-fire in border areas to breaking nightly curfews imposed by armed groups.⁵⁵ Women, children, undocumented migrants and refugees can face grave peril in these settings. Two Venezuelan boys were killed by FARC dissidents in the border town of Tibú in October 2021 after being suspected of shoplifting. Their bodies, found on a village road, bore signs with "thief" written on them.⁵⁶ In the Colombian province of Cauca, hundreds of Venezuelans were coerced into leaving a coca-growing region late in 2020 after a pamphlet signed by the ELN ordered them out. "A share of the migrant popu-

⁵⁰ Crisis Group interviews, aid agency representatives, Bogotá, 10 February 2022.

⁵¹ "Graves violaciones de derechos humanos a población proveniente de Venezuela en Colombia", CODHES, October 2020.

⁵² Crisis Group Commentary, "Tackling Colombia's Next Generation in Arms", 27 January 2022. About 5.8 million people live in areas controlled by armed groups. See "Resumen Panorama de Necesidades Humanitarias 2022 Colombia", OCHA, February 2022.

⁵³ "En 2021 el conflicto armado se reactivó en 12 zonas del país", press release, Special Peace Jurisdiction, 2022. The International Committee of the Red Cross identifies five "non-international armed conflicts" in Colombia. "Armed Conflict in Colombia: A Pain That Doesn't Go Away", International Committee of the Red Cross, 17 March 2021.

⁵⁴ Non-state armed groups set strict rules in areas where they operate with the aim of exercising strict social and territorial control. Examples of such rules are curfews, mobility restrictions, closing times for shops and no-go zones. The groups mete out violent punishments for breaking these rules.

⁵⁵ Crisis Group interviews, representatives international aid agency, 10 February 2022.

⁵⁶ Joe Parkin Daniels, "Killing of two boys for alleged shoplifting shocks Colombia", *The Guardian*, 13 October 2021.

lation is a victim of the armed conflict in Colombia”, said one young Venezuelan migrant working on a coca plantation.⁵⁷

Lacking resources and often without a residency permit or temporary protection status in Colombia, Venezuelan migrants have also become prime targets for armed group recruitment – often more so than poor young Colombians. Forced recruitment of both Colombian nationals and Venezuelan migrants has been on the increase since 2017 and rose notably after the COVID-19 pandemic started.⁵⁸ Armed groups’ thirst for territorial expansion and increased revenues has driven the quest to absorb more personnel. “Men and numbers give military power”, one state official observed.⁵⁹

With no place to stay, and little money to pay for food and accommodation, Venezuelans en route are easy prey as they walk from town to town.⁶⁰ The ELN, for example, is reported to have a makeshift lodge in the border department of Arauca where migrants can get clean clothing, rest and something to eat for a few days while being enticed to join the group.⁶¹ Armed groups “show they are different to the government, which does not lend a hand”, an expert in child recruitment said. Even though guerrilla outfits such as the ELN do not pay their soldiers a salary, fake offers are made to recruit Venezuelans, or gifts are distributed such as cell phones or even motorbikes. In Arauca, one of its traditional bastions, the guerrilla group allegedly pays one-off signup fees of between 200,000 and 500,000 Colombian pesos (\$50 to \$125).

Recruitment of migrants, sometimes by force, occurs both along the border and in areas throughout the country. Venezuelans who work for armed groups are found in regions far from the customary migration routes, for example in the Chocó department on Colombia’s Pacific coast.⁶² Migrants are lured with gifts or recruited under threat, particularly in conflict-ridden provinces such as Nariño, Norte de Santander, Arauca, Cauca and Putumayo.⁶³ Cases of online recruitment have also come to light. Youngsters in Venezuela have been tricked by job offers on social media and invited to the cities of Arauca and Cúcuta, whence they were subsequently taken to rural areas by an unidentified armed group.⁶⁴

Once in these groups, Venezuelans find escaping a perilous enterprise. Venezuelans who manage to desert lack information about their rights, where they can go and the risks they face. One 24-year-old Venezuelan, interviewed by Crisis Group in a police cell, was recruited at gunpoint in Bajo Cauca by the Caparros, a criminal outfit

⁵⁷ Crisis Group telephone interview, Venezuelan migrant, 9 November 2021.

⁵⁸ Crisis Group interviews, international cooperation representatives, Cúcuta, 26 November 2021; experts on child recruitment, Bogotá, 12 January 2022.

⁵⁹ Crisis Group interview, senior local state official, north-eastern Antioquia, 12 November 2020.

⁶⁰ A senior military representative connected the presence of armed groups in certain areas partly to migration. “Here we have a presence of groups and a lack of presence of the state. These [non-state armed] groups have taken roots due to migration, poverty, extortion and the low level of state investment”. Crisis Group interview, senior military official, Arauca, March 2022.

⁶¹ Crisis Group interviews, experts on child recruitment, Bogotá, 12 January 2022.

⁶² A Venezuelan belonging to the Gulf Clan post-paramilitary group was caught and wounded in a law enforcement operation near Bojayá, Chocó. Crisis Group interview, international agency representative, Chocó, October 2021.

⁶³ Crisis Group interviews, experts on child recruitment, Bogotá, 12 January 2022; senior UN official, Bogotá, 15 February 2021.

⁶⁴ Crisis Group interviews, experts on child recruitment, Bogotá, 12 January 2022.

that sprung from former paramilitary forces. The group promised him monthly pay of 800,000 Colombian pesos (\$200) and a permit to visit his family after eight months. He received a haircut, shave, uniform and M79 grenade launcher and was immediately sent into a conflict area without any training. Induction into the Caparros proved hellish. Over seven months, he endured humiliation and regular beatings. He did not receive the promised payment and lived through skirmishes in which he lost a Venezuelan friend. “It was either continuing or dying”, he said. “I decided to continue, to find a way out”. After deserting, he helped the army to find hidden weapons but was subsequently arrested himself for firearm possession and has since spent 21 months in jail.⁶⁵

The indifference of state and security officials toward the particular needs of Venezuelans embroiled in Colombia’s armed conflicts is a recurrent concern. Migration experts told Crisis Group that it is common for law enforcement agencies to prosecute both Venezuelans and Colombians on the basis of ordinary criminal law for belonging to armed groups, even if they desert after being forcibly recruited. Desertion thus spells double jeopardy for migrants, who also face violent repercussions if armed groups believe they are sharing information with the authorities.⁶⁶

The costs of reporting crimes frequently outweigh the benefits. In 2019, a 14-year-old Venezuelan girl who escaped in Norte de Santander after being recruited by the Popular Liberation Army, an armed group dedicated largely to drug trafficking, was handed by judicial authorities to a foster home in the same department run by the Colombian Institute of Family Welfare. Armed men subsequently found her and killed her.⁶⁷

Some armed group members complain about rapid growth through the absorption of Venezuelans, though such grumbling is not the norm. One ELN militant griped that migrants had been used to collect extortion fees or intimidate locals without first being provided with proper education and ideological training. In his view, the migrants’ presence explained why locals in certain regions under ELN control were displaying much more aversion to the group than before. “They are not making a good entry into communities and are using very top-down approaches”, he said.⁶⁸ But in general the armed groups see value in recruiting Venezuelans. “It’s better to work with any immigrant. It’s cheaper, they do what’s required and they don’t get as much jail time as [a Colombian]”, said a Colombian gang leader in Bogotá.⁶⁹

⁶⁵ Crisis Group interview, detained Venezuelan refugee, Bajo Cauca, 14 June 2021.

⁶⁶ Crisis Group interviews, international cooperation representatives, Cúcuta, 26 November 2021.

⁶⁷ “Adolescente asesinada en Ábrego sería buscada por un grupo armado”, *La Opinión*, 12 May 2019.

⁶⁸ Crisis Group interview, ELN militant, February 2021. The position of migrants and refugees within armed groups differs. Venezuelans have been able to reach the rank of local commander in a FARC dissident faction in Nariño, but have been used as disposable fighters by another dissident faction in Arauca. Crisis Group interview, international monitoring official, Cauca, September 2021; telephone interview, security expert, May 2022.

⁶⁹ Crisis Group interview, gang leader, Bogotá, May 2022.

B. Criminal Groups and Urban Gangs

Venezuelans are easily assimilated into Colombian gangs due to their vulnerable position and immediate need to survive in competitive urban environments. The nature and extent of criminal involvement by recruited Venezuelans varies. Certain organised crime groups such as those in Norte de Santander generally block them from acquiring status or ascending the ranks. Some migrants are drawn into specific tasks, such as carrying drugs during their journeys. Venezuelans are reportedly given discounts on the price of informal transport over the border into Arauca department if they bring packages with unknown contents.⁷⁰ In Norte de Santander, some migrants are forced to carry packages containing drugs as gang members accompany them to check up on their cargo.⁷¹

In large cities, criminal groups target Venezuelans who are homeless and living on the street, many of them young men.⁷² “A gang gives work to a Venezuelan, gives him shelter and food”, a Venezuelan drug trafficker explained.⁷³ The temporary accommodation used by Venezuelans in Bogotá, or *pagadarios* (discussed above), are one gateway to recruitment. Indebted migrants are induced to consume drugs, creating a dependency relationship with criminal groups. Fake charities offer shelter but reportedly insert migrants in networks of sexual exploitation and micro-trafficking.⁷⁴

The chief of an enterprise of contract killers (known as *sicarios*) in Colombia explained that he now mainly works with Venezuelans due to the lower costs. “A Colombian asks for 10 million pesos (\$2,500) to kill someone; a Venezuelan does it for two or three million (\$500-750)”.⁷⁵ According to a Venezuelan member of one criminal group, recruits start by carrying out a murder, for which they are paid between 1,000,000 to 5,000,000 Colombian pesos (\$250 to \$1,250). Depending on the victim’s profile, the killer may or may not briefly go back to Venezuela to avoid a police investigation. After between five and ten such hits, a *sicario* can be killed to prevent him or her from acquiring power or status within the group.⁷⁶ Trust issues with recruited migrants are usually resolved with violence. “They are killed at once”, the leader of the enterprise of contract killers explained. “You get them out of the way. ... They are disposable. [Venezuelans] can be removed and they can be replaced”.⁷⁷

⁷⁰ Crisis Group interviews, human rights lawyers, Bogotá, 12 February 2021.

⁷¹ Crisis Group interview, state official, Cúcuta, 25 November 2021.

⁷² Around 16 per cent of people sleeping rough in Colombia are reported to be Venezuelan, while more than 1,200 Venezuelans live on the streets of border town Cúcuta. Luis Miguel Rodríguez, “DANE: El 16% de los indigentes en Colombia son venezolanos”, *El Impulso*, 13 January 2022.

⁷³ Crisis Group interview, February 2021.

⁷⁴ Crisis Group interviews, social worker, Bogotá, 7 February 2022; Venezuelan migrants, Villa del Rosario, November 2021; and Bogotá, March 2022.

⁷⁵ Crisis Group interview, chief of enterprise of contract killers, May 2022.

⁷⁶ Crisis Group interview, Venezuelan organised crime member, February 2021. Venezuelans are often given a bat or knife with which to extort, threaten and steal, but a low-ranking migrant is rarely trusted with a gun when it comes to street operations. Crisis Group interview, security expert, Cúcuta, 26 November 2021. Venezuelans with weapons experience, often acquired from militia training at home, are now also recruited. Crisis Group interview, security expert, Cúcuta, 26 November 2021.

⁷⁷ Crisis Group interview, chief of enterprise of contract killers, May 2022.

Colombian gangs also hire Venezuelans as dealers and street fighters.⁷⁸ Smaller Colombian gangs use Venezuelans as lookouts or to sell drugs in Cúcuta.⁷⁹ In Bogotá, Venezuelans have not replaced Colombian street dealers, often called *jibaros*, so much as enabled the latter to gain turf and boost revenues by deploying a larger work force.⁸⁰ Local gangs in Bogotá, especially around Corabastos, Colombia's biggest marketplace for fresh produce – and a hotbed for drug trafficking, sexual exploitation and gun running – recruit Venezuelans as foot soldiers in their urban gang wars.⁸¹ Venezuelans hawking drugs on street corners often get killed by competing gangs, end up in shootouts for neighbourhood control or are killed in internal struggles.⁸² Most of the murders of Venezuelans in Bogotá have taken place in this part of the capital.⁸³

A social worker explained that Bogotá's gangs use migrants and refugees as “cannon fodder” – a trend that is reflected in the rising number of Venezuelans killed in the capital.⁸⁴ The number murdered each year has jumped from one in 2016, to 72 in 2019 and 109 in 2021 – meaning the proportion of murder victims that is Venezuelan is higher than the percentage of Venezuelans in the city's population (see graph 1 in Appendix B).⁸⁵ “They are pawns that gangs use to have more power and displace the competition”, a state official said.⁸⁶

Reports and rumours regarding the expansion of large Venezuelan criminal groups into Colombia and beyond have proliferated in recent years. But evidence from insiders and eyewitnesses suggests that the presence in Colombia of Venezuelan criminal groups is less prominent than often claimed.⁸⁷ “No Venezuelan gang comes to Colombia to build an empire here”, a Venezuelan organised crime member said. According to a state official, if Venezuelan gangs tried to move into the territory occupied by Colombian organised crime, a turf war would most likely erupt. Most of the major crime groups competing for control in Bogotá, especially in the districts of

⁷⁸ Crisis Group interviews, international cooperation representatives, Cúcuta, 26 November 2021.

⁷⁹ In Cúcuta, small crime groups pay quotas to receive permission to operate from larger structures, such as the Gulf Clan, ELN or the Popular Liberation Army. Crisis Group interviews, international cooperation representatives, Cúcuta, 26 November 2021.

⁸⁰ Crisis Group interview, state official, 10 February 2022.

⁸¹ A local, who worked in the marketplace and now runs an aid group, said women are sexually exploited in the back of trucks in and around the marketplace. “They raffle a bottle of whiskey and add a girl”. Crisis Group interview, local resident and social worker, March 2022.

⁸² Crisis Group interview, state official, Bogotá, 10 February 2022.

⁸³ “Plan de acción para la verificación y seguimiento al cumplimiento de la sentencia T-386 de 2021”, Bogotá Mayor's Office, 2022. In May, two bodies of tortured Venezuelans were found in garbage bags in Kennedy. Diana Giraldo, “Hallan dos cuerpos en bolsas en Kennedy, ya van 13 en Bogotá”, Noticias Canal1, 11 May 2022.

⁸⁴ Crisis Group interview, social worker, Bogotá, 7 February 2022.

⁸⁵ “Plan de acción para la verificación y seguimiento al cumplimiento de la sentencia T-386 de 2021”, op. cit. While representing an estimated 5 per cent of the population of Bogotá in 2021, Venezuelan migrants made up 9.7 per cent of the city's murder victims. Other major cities, such as Medellín, saw significant upticks in lethal violence against Venezuelans. See “Graves violaciones de los derechos humanos a población proveniente de Venezuela, en Colombia”, Consultoría para los Derechos Humanos y el Desplazamiento, May 2021.

⁸⁶ Crisis Group interview, state official, 10 February 2022.

⁸⁷ “La guerra de las bandas delincuenciales venezolanas en Colombia”, *Semana*, 6 August 2020; “La banda delincriminal venezolana cuyas redes azotan Colombia”, *El Espectador*, 16 September 2021; “Así operan tres bandas venezolanas que se disputan crimen en Colombia”, *El Tiempo*, 5 July 2020.

Kennedy and Bosa, are not Venezuelan in origin, although these groups do recruit migrants.⁸⁸

Even so, smaller criminal startups founded by Venezuelan migrants are active in certain urban areas.⁸⁹ A group of Venezuelans called Los Maracuchos operates in María Paz, in the Bogotá's Kennedy district, where it is known for its extremely violent behaviour and involvement in street robberies.⁹⁰ A gang leader in Bogotá complained about Venezuelans trying to make a move. "They are a plague and they are bad", he said.⁹¹

Large Venezuela-based crime syndicates, called *megabandas*, have expanded in recent years and forged supply chain relations across the border. The Tren de Aragua is one of the most notorious *megabandas* and its influence is said to extend across Latin America, but some reports of its presence in Colombia might be based on the work of impostors.⁹² "There are many who say they are the Tren de Aragua, but they are not, they use the name to intimidate people", a Venezuelan criminal operative said.⁹³

Still, the group does have some operations in Colombia. For example, Crisis Group was able to confirm the presence of the Tren de Aragua in the Villa de Rosario municipality, on the border with Venezuela, where the group started working in 2018.⁹⁴ During the pandemic, the Tren de Aragua continued to operate in the department of Norte de Santander with the approval of larger Colombian armed groups, above all the Gulf Clan, with whom it collaborates, but it has faced armed resistance from the ELN. The Tren de Aragua traffics drugs and humans, and extorts migrants wishing to cross the border illegally. National media and law enforcement officials argue that the Tren de Aragua has taken over drug sales in large parts of Bogotá and allege they are responsible for a series of brutal killings.⁹⁵ Even so, various sources in the state and in organised crime concur that the Tren de Aragua's presence in the capital and other major cities goes no further than small cells working alongside local illegal outfits.⁹⁶

⁸⁸ Crisis Group interviews, state official, Bogotá, February-March 2022.

⁸⁹ Similar allegations circulate in Cali, where Venezuelan crime groups have tried to make a name for themselves. Crisis Group interviews, humanitarian officials, Cali, September 2021.

⁹⁰ Crisis Group interview, resident and social worker in Kennedy, Bogotá, March 2022. The name Los Maracuchos may mean that the gang's members used to live in Maracaibo, capital of Venezuela's Zulia state. Crisis Group interviews, community activists, state officials, Bogotá, June and July 2022.

⁹¹ Crisis Group interview, gang leader, Bogotá, May 2022.

⁹² Colombian media report that Venezuelan crime syndicates operate in seven large cities in Colombia and several countries in the hemisphere. See "La guerra de las bandas delincuenciales venezolanas en Colombia", *Semana*, 6 August 2020; and "Así operan tres bandas venezolanas que se disputan crimen en Colombia", *El Tiempo*, 5 July 2020.

⁹³ Crisis Group interview, Venezuelan organised crime member, February 2021.

⁹⁴ Crisis Group interviews, Venezuelan organised crime member, February 2021; state official, Villa del Rosario, 1 December 2021. The Tren de Aragua never managed to get a firm foothold in Cúcuta and was pushed out in mid-2020.

⁹⁵ Jonathan Alexander Toro Romero, "La disputa del Tren de Aragua por el control de la droga en Bogotá", *El Tiempo*, 17 July 2022.

⁹⁶ Crisis Group interviews, Venezuelan organised crime member, February 2021; international cooperation representatives, Cúcuta, 26 November 2021; state official, Bogotá, March 2022; gang leader, Bogotá, May 2022. The Tren de Aragua is led by Venezuelans in Venezuela, but has Colom-

C. *Coca Cultivation*

A large number of Venezuelans find their way – whether of their own free will or under coercion – to rural areas remote from the standard migration routes. Hoping to avoid tough competition for informal employment in urban settings, particularly during the pandemic-related lockdowns, they are often following invitations from family members or acquaintances.⁹⁷ The opportunities they find are frequently illicit, and include work on coca plantations and logging in environmentally protected areas.⁹⁸ “Venturing to a city to look for work is impossible in Colombia because there are two million Venezuelans”, said a young migrant by way of explanation for his job at a coca plantation. He eventually used his earnings to move on to Chile.⁹⁹

Illicit activities in Colombia’s remote rural areas offer dirt-poor migrants a chance to make ends meet. Work on the coca plantations provides quick pay and often includes food and board, which to some doubtless seems preferable to the back-breaking chores for little money in nearby African oil palm plantations, where work can include clearing overgrowth or carrying heavy palm fruit onto carts.¹⁰⁰ Still, conditions are also harsh on the coca plantations, even when these offer a place to sleep and daily meals. “In Venezuela I never thought of a farm in such a deplorable state. There’s no electricity, a very thin mattress that feels like a table. Conditions are worse than in Venezuela. The only difference is that in Venezuela we have nothing to eat, but in Colombia we do”, the migrant coca leaf picker said.¹⁰¹

Typically, a coca leaf picker can earn between 30,000 to 50,000 Colombian pesos (\$7.5 to \$12.5) for a day’s work. A fast worker paid per quantity of coca leaves can earn over 100,000 pesos (\$25).¹⁰² Many migrants reach the coca plantations on their own initiative, but some leaf pickers are also recruited in Venezuela, in cities in Colombia and at informal border crossings. Some schools close to the border in Zulia state, Venezuela, have been abandoned during harvest periods as both students and teachers left for coca plantations on the other side of the border.¹⁰³

Armed groups display contrasting attitudes to Venezuelans in coca plantations. ELN guerrillas forced crop owners and farmers to pay migrants properly in the southern part of Bolívar state. “If any person here is owed money on a farm, do not hesitate to contact us”, the guerrillas would tell migrant workers.¹⁰⁴ But in another coca growing

bian leaders in Cúcuta. The Tren de Aragua needs permission from the Gulf Clan to conduct activities in the interior of the Norte de Santander department and pays commissions to this group to operate on the Colombian side of the border. Crisis Group interview, Venezuelan migrant, Villa del Rosario, 27 November 2021.

⁹⁷ Crisis Group interview, health worker, north-eastern Antioquia, 12 November 2020.

⁹⁸ Crisis Group interviews, law enforcement officials, Meta, May 2021.

⁹⁹ Crisis Group telephone interview, Venezuelan migrant, 9 November 2021.

¹⁰⁰ Crisis Group interview, humanitarian aid worker, Norte de Santander, 2 December 2021.

¹⁰¹ Crisis Group telephone interview, Venezuelan migrant, 9 November 2021.

¹⁰² Crisis Group focus groups, migrants and returnees, Cúcuta, 4 December 2021. Crisis Group interview, international cooperation representatives, Cúcuta, 26 November 2021. One source said a day’s work is remunerated at 30,000 to 40,000 pesos as well as three meals and accommodation.

¹⁰³ Crisis Group telephone interviews, Venezuelan academic and NGO representative in Zulia state, 21 March 2022.

¹⁰⁴ Crisis Group focus groups, migrants and returnees, Cúcuta, 4 December 2021; Crisis Group telephone interview, Venezuelan migrant, 9 November 2021.

area, Venezuelan pickers who did not like their work and opted to leave the plantations without asking permission were killed, allegedly by local armed actors who mistrusted the migrants and thought they would share information with the authorities.¹⁰⁵

D. Gold Mining and Trafficking

Venezuelans with or without prior experience have also landed jobs in gold mining in Colombia, where illegal mines are often financed by drug money.¹⁰⁶ Migrants tend to reach remote mining areas on the basis of hearsay or invitations from fellow Venezuelans who previously worked in the mines. To gain work in a particular mine, a migrant mostly requires a personal introduction.¹⁰⁷ Women are also frequently employed recycling mine waste that still contains concentrations of gold.¹⁰⁸

The pay for migrants who work in the gold mines tends to vary. Some Venezuelans working in a region controlled by paramilitary groups said they are paid about 40 per cent less than Colombians if they lack formal residency, but at equal rates to Colombians if they have valid papers.¹⁰⁹ In another area, controlled by the ELN, a woman who had trouble finding a job in Bogotá and proceeded to work in the sex industry in Antioquia told Crisis Group that she now earns a few hundred U.S. dollars a month in an illegal gold mine. She brought her sons over from Venezuela so they could also work in the mines.¹¹⁰

Further down the supply chain, migrants are also involved in trafficking gold from illegal Venezuelan mines into Colombia. They are used as cross-border smugglers and are called *pulmones*, or lungs.¹¹¹ Many smugglers carrying small amounts can end up accumulating significant quantities of gold for wholesale buyers on the Colombian side of the border, which is called “smurfing”.¹¹² “All this is squared with migration and police authorities”, said a Venezuelan crime syndicate member.¹¹³

Cúcuta is a hub for gold smuggling and other contraband. A gram of gold without paperwork fetches close to \$50, enabling large amounts of the metal to be gathered and sold quickly. Most pawn shops that work in this market buy *oro de mina*, meaning unprocessed gold extracted straight from the Venezuelan mines.¹¹⁴ Buyers tend to bring gold from Cúcuta to cities such as Bogotá, Cali or Medellín, where the gold is smelted and exported with the help of false documents.¹¹⁵

¹⁰⁵ Crisis Group interview, Venezuelan organised crime member, February 2021.

¹⁰⁶ “Organized Crime and Illegally Mined Gold in Latin America”, The Global Initiative Against Transnational Organized Crime, April 2016.

¹⁰⁷ Crisis Group interview, community leader, north-eastern Antioquia, 12 November 2020.

¹⁰⁸ Crisis Group interview, gold mine operator, north-eastern Antioquia, 11 November 2020.

¹⁰⁹ Crisis Group interviews, Venezuelan migrants, north-eastern Antioquia, 12 November 2020. Mines often look for day labourers for myriad tasks and truck in up to fifteen Venezuelans.

¹¹⁰ Crisis Group interview, Venezuelan migrant and miner, north-eastern Antioquia, 7 February 2021.

¹¹¹ Crisis Group interviews, law enforcement officials, Norte de Santander, December 2021.

¹¹² “Venezuela, the smugglers’ paradise”, InfoAmazonia, 23 July 2019.

¹¹³ Crisis Group interview, Venezuelan organised crime member, February 2021.

¹¹⁴ Crisis Group interviews, gold merchants, Cúcuta, November 2021.

¹¹⁵ Crisis Group interview, Venezuelan organised crime member, February 2021; “Venezuela: The Smugglers’ Paradise”, op. cit.

IV. Human Trafficking and Sexual Exploitation

Migrants and refugees have become a major focus for organised crime networks, and young women in particular, including minors, are victims of human trafficking and sexual exploitation.¹¹⁶ Criminal groups may recruit women and minors by offering them jobs in restaurants or hotels before forcing them into sexual exploitation and retaining their passports, often saying they will divulge compromising pictures to family members to secure compliance. They may also threaten to kidnap women's children. Under pressure, victims may eventually become recruiters themselves, trying to lure in other women.

Recruitment occurs in Venezuela, on the border, and in Colombia's interior.¹¹⁷ Alongside the Simón Bolívar bridge (which is traditionally the busiest border crossing), in an area called La Parada, some Venezuelan women are forced into sex work after arriving in Colombia, often winding up in clandestine brothels where they are exploited and abused. One of the criminal groups active in La Parada, the Venezuelan Tren de Aragua, allegedly recruits and sells women to other illegal outfits.¹¹⁸ One migrant mentioned a house inhabited by about 25 women, including five minors, who had been marked behind their ears to prove "ownership".¹¹⁹ To prevent the women from escaping, the criminals threaten them with violence.

Sexually exploited women in border areas are often tricked or forced into going to rural areas where they are put at the service of members of armed groups. A driver who frequently takes Venezuelan women and girls to Catatumbo, a coca-growing epicentre, explained that the women hope to work a weekend and earn good money, but brothel owners sometimes coerce them into staying for as long as a month. Local armed groups approved these arrangements after negotiating with brothel owners.¹²⁰ Young women and girls – sometimes underage – are also escorted to rural areas to be wed in servile marriages to coca growers, with some men ostensibly "buying" them from armed groups or human traffickers. Women and girls are abused and beaten if they are caught attempting to escape. Local authorities allegedly do not act even when they harbour suspicions about landowners engaging in child marriage.¹²¹

There are also reports of armed group members harassing, sexually abusing and murdering migrant women.¹²² In Antioquia, female sex workers explained how one

¹¹⁶ Women have been forced to take more risks and have shouldered greater burdens as a result of the crisis in Venezuela, which increased pressure on them to care and provide for their families. The pandemic also increased responsibilities for women as caregivers while their incomes fell. For more information, see "Una emergencia desigual: Análisis Rápido de Género sobre la Crisis de Refugiados y Migrantes en Colombia, Ecuador, Perú y Venezuela", CARE, June 2020.

¹¹⁷ Crisis Group interview, security expert, Cúcuta, 26 November 2021. Colombian networks do not necessarily work with counterparts in Venezuela. A source argues there is no need because so many vulnerable migrant women are coming across the border of their own accord. Crisis Group interview, criminal lawyer, Medellín, 10 November 2020.

¹¹⁸ Crisis Group interview, Venezuelan migrant, Villa del Rosario, 27 November 2021; Crisis Group telephone interview, Venezuelan crime expert, June 2022.

¹¹⁹ Crisis Group interview, Venezuelan migrant, Villa del Rosario, 27 November 2021.

¹²⁰ Crisis Group interview, chauffeur, Norte de Santander, November 2021.

¹²¹ Crisis Group interview, security expert, Cúcuta, 26 November 2021.

¹²² Crisis Group interviews, sex workers, 12 November 2020.

of their friends was killed and buried in a hamlet after armed groups discovered she was carrying HIV.¹²³ Armed groups are also known to expel sex workers from the area they control if they test positive for sexually transmitted diseases.¹²⁴

Some migrant women are also recruited for webcam work; although considered safer due to the absence of physical contact, advocates note that it also is exploitative and can incur serious risks for those involved. Through force or deception, young women, including minors, end up being compelled to meet and sleep with clients, with Medellín's tourist areas notorious as hubs of sexual exploitation. Again, one method of strongarming girls and women into complying is the threat of sending compromising videos and pictures to family members, who have been located on social media. Some of the girls and women have their identity documents retained and need to work 24-hour shifts.¹²⁵

To the extent that the foregoing activities involve human trafficking, Colombia has certain legal mechanisms to protect survivors. It has ratified the UN Convention against Transnational Organized Crime, which includes an anti-trafficking protocol. In a landmark October 2021 ruling, Colombia's Constitutional Court ordered the state to create new regulations for the identification and protection of trafficking victims, and highlighted the vulnerable position of migrant women and the need for special protection.¹²⁶

Impunity for these crimes, however, remains the norm. Out of 908 reported cases of human trafficking between 2011 and 2016, only 52 ended in convictions, while state authorities have so far shown little inclination or capacity to protect vulnerable women and girls from being trafficked and exploited.¹²⁷ Despite the fact that sex work is legal in Colombia, officials reportedly often discriminate against Venezuelans engaged in prostitution and violate their rights rather than treating them as potential victims of exploitation.¹²⁸

In some cases, state and law enforcement officials have been found complicit in sexual exploitation of trafficking victims.¹²⁹ A lawyer explained that police officers have collaborated with human traffickers, pointing to cases where they sent Venezuelan women and children back to their captors, often family members of the victims.¹³⁰ Four police officials working in Cúcuta were arrested in 2019 for participating in a

¹²³ Ibid.

¹²⁴ Crisis Group interviews, sex workers, 12 November 2020; aid workers, 2021. Local doctors are sometimes forced to share test results with armed groups.

¹²⁵ Crisis Group interview, criminal lawyer, Medellín, 10 November 2020.

¹²⁶ Julia Zulver and Ana Margarita González, "La justicia protege a Yolanda, migrante venezolana víctima de la trata en Colombia", *Open Democracy*, 28 January 2022.

¹²⁷ "La trata de personas en Colombia – Principales fallas en el sistema de protección", Women's Link, March 2021.

¹²⁸ Crisis Group telephone interview, women's rights experts, 17 November 2020. Women are being criminalised instead of the clients and exploiters. Crime groups sometimes directly extort sex workers, for example in Parque de Berrío, in the centre of Medellín. Crisis Group telephone interview, NGO investigator, 17 November 2020

¹²⁹ "Golpe al 'negocio' de explotación sexual de niñas en Cúcuta", *La Opinión*, 21 June 2022.

¹³⁰ Crisis Group interviews, criminal lawyer, 10 November 2020, Medellín; Venezuelan migrant, Villa del Rosario, 27 November 2021; telephone interview, social worker, 9 November 2021.

human trafficking network.¹³¹ A social worker in Bogotá cited another case involving police officers who allegedly returned a Venezuelan woman to her pimp after she had escaped his clutches. “They put her in a patrol car and brought her back to the brothel. This was done by the same police officials who patrol the area”.¹³²

¹³¹ Audrey Carrillo, “Capturados cuatro policías en Cúcuta por trata de personas”, W Radio, 22 August 2019.

¹³² Crisis Group telephone interview, social worker, 9 November 2021.

V. The Backlash against Venezuelans

Against the backdrop of waves of protest and surging political tensions, Venezuelans living in Colombia have been widely stigmatised for the involvement of some migrants in crime, and scapegoated for rising levels of poverty and unemployment.

A. Public Perceptions

Public perceptions of Venezuelan migrants in Colombia have grown notably more hostile in the past three years. Before May 2019, most Colombians believed that it was right to receive Venezuelan migrants, but a minority now holds this viewpoint, with only 40 per cent of Colombians saying they support residency rights for Venezuelan migrants.¹³³ Surveys showed that over 80 per cent held unfavourable opinions of the migrants by the start of the pandemic, although the percentage of detractors has fallen slightly since then.¹³⁴

Social media is frequently a platform for the vitriol directed toward Venezuelans, with migrants blamed for stirring up protests, making streets unsafe and competing for benefits from underfunded social programs.¹³⁵ When Colombian media outlets or government officials suggest that a Venezuelan has been involved in a prominent crime, the number of xenophobic posts on social media reportedly increases.¹³⁶ For example, such postings spiked when Bogotá's centre-left mayor, Claudia López, blamed migrants for episodes of criminal violence in the city, saying: "Whoever comes to work is welcome, but whoever comes to commit a crime should be deported immediately".¹³⁷ The day after López's remarks, anti-migrant messages increased by 83 per cent according to one tracker.¹³⁸ Hate messages toward migrants also proliferated when the protection statute for Venezuelans was announced in February 2021, with false information spread via social media about migrants becoming eligible to vote in Colombia.¹³⁹

Daily face-to-face contact with migrants tends to reduce xenophobia, but opportunities for those interactions diminished during the pandemic and its associated lockdowns, which in Colombia tended to be strict and long.¹⁴⁰ Some local academics suggested that the lockdowns increased the extent to which Colombians formed

¹³³ Invamer, July 2022.

¹³⁴ "Percepción de la integración de los migrantes en Colombia en tiempos de coronavirus – Boletín 10", Proyecto Migración Venezuela, 2020. Crisis Group telephone interview, migration expert and academic, 16 December 2021.

¹³⁵ "Xenofobia hacia personas venezolanas manifestaciones en cinco ciudades colombianas", Friedrich Ebert Stiftung, January 2021.

¹³⁶ Crisis Group telephone interview, migration expert and academic, 16 December 2021.

¹³⁷ "Xenofobia hacia personas venezolanas manifestaciones en cinco ciudades colombianas", op. cit.

¹³⁸ Milagros Palomares, "Xenofobia aumentó 83% tras declaraciones de Claudia López", Proyecto Migración Venezuela, 30 October 2020.

¹³⁹ "Boletín Mensual Barómetro de Xenofobia en Colombia #15", Barómetro de Xenofobia, 2021.

¹⁴⁰ Colombia shut down all border crossings on 14 March 2020, declared a state of emergency on 17 March and started a series of strict lockdowns on 20 March that ended on 1 September that year. Crisis Group telephone interview, migration expert and academic, 16 December 2021.

opinions about the activities of migrants primarily through negative messaging on social media.¹⁴¹

B. *Stigma and Vulnerability*

As discussed above, Venezuelan migrants are often drawn into the ranks of organised crime, which has exploited migrants' acute economic need to boost their profits. The precise extent of Venezuelans' contribution to crime rates is difficult to measure. Quantitative studies differ as to whether they now commit more crimes per head than Colombian nationals. Several studies indicate that Venezuelans are involved in fewer offences.¹⁴² Data shows that Venezuelans have lower arrest rates than Colombians when it comes to violent crime, but slightly higher rates relative to the population when minor infractions are considered.¹⁴³ That said, the proportion of convictions received by Venezuelans now slightly exceeds their share of the population in Colombia (see graph 2 in Appendix B). Meanwhile, 2,439 Venezuelans are in jail on criminal charges, representing about 2.5 per cent of a national headcount of prisoners that stands at 96,962. While this percentage is significantly lower than their share of the country's population, the number of Venezuelan inmates has risen much faster than the number of Colombian prisoners.¹⁴⁴

By contrast, data from Bogotá indicates that Venezuelans are arrested in the capital for high-visibility crimes such as burglary, theft and drug sales at far higher rates than their share of the population, and at a slightly higher rate for murder.¹⁴⁵ Migrants say the conspicuous role played by Venezuelans in carrying out street crime for Colombian groups leads the entire community to be stigmatised and treated with suspicion. Migrants, above all in the capital, report being subjected to regular abuse by police officers, who beat them and destroy their identity documents. These incidents are said to occur above all in the early morning hours and on Sundays, when Bogotá is quieter.¹⁴⁶

Bogotá mayor Claudia López has contributed to this stigmatisation, stating that “we have very violent Venezuelan immigrants here. ... They murder first and then they

¹⁴¹ Crisis Group telephone interview, migration expert and academic, 16 December 2021. “Migración, pandemia y xenofobia en Colombia, Perú y Chile: tres palabras que nunca debieron unirse”, *Dejusticia*, September 2021. For more on the importance of face-to-face interaction in reducing xenophobia toward Venezuelans (in this case, in Peru), see “Una oportunidad para todos: Los migrantes y refugiados venezolanos y el Desarrollo de Perú”, World Bank, 2019.

¹⁴² “Inmigrantes venezolanos, crimen y percepciones falsas: Un análisis de los datos en Colombia, Perú y Chile”, Brookings Institution, 14 September 2020; “Seguridad ciudadana y migración venezolana”, Fundación Ideas para la Paz, August 2019.

¹⁴³ In 2019, Venezuelans in Colombia represented 2.3 per cent of the arrests for violent crime, while making up 3.2 per cent of the total population. “Venezuelan Migration, Crime and Misperceptions”, Brookings Institution, September 2020.

¹⁴⁴ “Estadísticas”, Instituto Nacional Penitenciario y Carcelario, 2022.

¹⁴⁵ “Plan de acción para la verificación y seguimiento al cumplimiento de la sentencia T-386 de 2021”, op. cit., p. 8.

¹⁴⁶ Crisis Group telephone interview, NGO representative, 17 November 2020.

steal”.¹⁴⁷ She also made remarks in which she claimed that “Venezuelans mak[e] life difficult” for citizens in the capital city, which a chamber of the Constitutional Court ordered her to retract.¹⁴⁸

Whether Venezuelans are responsible for an increasing share of crime in Colombia or not, they are without doubt becoming exposed to higher levels of lethal violence as they are being used as disposable fighters by rural armed groups and recruited for high-exposure jobs in the urban underworld. A total of 1,933 Venezuelans were killed across the country between 2015 and 2020. The murder rate of Venezuelans has risen sharply and is now far in excess of that for Colombians – reaching close to twice the national average in 2021 (see graph 3 in Appendix B).¹⁴⁹

C. *Deportation*

Colombian authorities have turned increasingly to deportation in response to the difficulties in imprisoning undocumented migrants, as well as the problems in verifying the identity of detained suspects – the effect of severed diplomatic and consular relations between Colombia and Venezuela.¹⁵⁰ Colombian criminal outfits have even taken advantage of these deportation practices by recruiting Venezuelans, knowing that they are less likely to be put in jail. “The worst thing that can happen is that they send him back to his country again”, a gang leader who employs Venezuelans explained.¹⁵¹ From 2015 to 2021, Colombia deported over 4,000 Venezuelans (see graph 4 in Appendix B).¹⁵²

Senior officials have sought to justify waves of deportations by arguing that Venezuelans represented a threat to national security during nationwide protests in 2019 and 2021, as well as during the eruption of unrest in Bogotá in September 2020.¹⁵³ During the protests in 2019, authorities put 59 Venezuelans on an airplane heading to Puerto Inírida, on the Colombian side of the border in the Amazon, where locals blocked the airstrip to prevent the Venezuelans from being released in their vicinity.

¹⁴⁷ “They offer everything to Venezuelans. What guarantees are left for Colombians?” Claudia López, mayor of Bogotá”, *Caracas Chronicles*, 12 March 2021; “Primero asesinan y luego roban’: Claudia López sobre bandas de venezolanos”, *Forbes Colombia*, 11 March 2021.

¹⁴⁸ “Claudia López se retracta de sus declaraciones contra los migrantes venezolanos”, *Deutsche Welle*, 19 December 2021.

¹⁴⁹ “Situación de derechos humanos de la población refugiada y migrantes venezolana en Colombia”, CODHES, June 2021.

¹⁵⁰ Catalina Lobo-Guerrero, “Expulsiones: El lado oscuro de la política migratoria colombiana”, *Armando Info*, 7 November 2021.

¹⁵¹ Crisis Group interview, gang leader, Bogotá, May 2022.

¹⁵² Lobo-Guerrero, “El lado oscuro de la política migratoria colombiana”, *op. cit.* Crisis Group interview, academic, 16 December 2021. Before the deportations began, opportunistic Colombian criminals reportedly hid their identity cards when arrested and pretended to be Venezuelan in the hope of being released. Crisis Group interview, migration expert, Bogotá, 2 March 2022.

¹⁵³ Crisis Group interview, senior military officer, Bogotá, July 2021. See “Atención: primeras expulsiones de venezolanos por participar en desmanes en Cali”, *Semana*, 30 April 2021. In 2021, Venezuelans actually started to leave Colombia as a result of the protests and related hardships. See Valeria Guerrero Osorio, “Venezolanos estarían abandonando Colombia por paro y protestas”, *LaFM*, 24 June 2021. For more information about the protests, see Crisis Group Latin America Report N°90, *The Pandemic Strikes: Responding to Colombia’s Mass Protests*, 2 July 2021.

After the plane finally landed in nearby Puerto Carreño, in Colombia, the deportees were taken to the Venezuelan bank of the Orinoco river and dropped in a remote area frequented by armed groups, without ever being officially handed over to Venezuelan authorities.¹⁵⁴

Bogotá's messages about Venezuelan involvement in the 2021 protest wave were especially pointed. "The information that intelligence has indicates that there is a strong presence of Venezuelans at some roadblocks", said Defence Minister Diego Molano in May 2021, at the height of the national strike.¹⁵⁵ Government officials went so far as to spread claims that the Maduro government and drug traffickers had a role in organising protests.¹⁵⁶ (The Maduro government has denied involvement.¹⁵⁷) Subsequently, hundreds of Venezuelans were rounded up and deported, without substantial evidence being amassed against them.¹⁵⁸

¹⁵⁴ Lobo-Guerrero, "El lado oscuro de la política migratoria colombiana", op. cit.

¹⁵⁵ Laura Cristancho and Indira Córdoba, "Preocupa que declaraciones del ministro Molano originen expulsiones masivas", Proyecto Migración Venezuela, 7 May 2021.

¹⁵⁶ Then presidential adviser for national security, Rafael Guarín, tweeted that: "It is becoming increasingly clear that the escalation of vandalism, violence and crime with which the Colombian population is being attacked has not only the ELN and FARC dissidents behind it, but also the Maduro dictatorship and the Cartel de los Soles". See María Kamila Correa Escobar, "Detrás de la violencia está el régimen de Maduro y Cartel de los Soles: Gobierno", WRadio, 6 May 2021.

¹⁵⁷ "Venezuela rechaza acusaciones a Maduro sobre protestas en Colombia", *El Tiempo*, 7 May 2021.

¹⁵⁸ Lobo-Guerrero, "El lado oscuro de la política migratoria colombiana", op. cit. The UN Special Rapporteur on the human rights of migrants has expressed concern about the use of national security-related arguments to deport migrants and refugees. "Derechos humanos de los migrantes", UN General Assembly, 25 September 2018.

VI. Recommendations

Migrants and refugees who left Venezuela during the first years of the country's political conflict had high hopes for change in their home country and for a return in the near future. Despite signs of fragile economic stabilisation in Venezuela, a true recovery is likely to depend on political agreements between the Maduro government and the opposition, followed by the relaxation and lifting of U.S. sanctions – none of which appears to be in the offing. In all likelihood, a large number of Venezuelans in Colombia are there to stay. A recent survey by the Bogotá city government found that 88 per cent of migrants wished to remain in the country.¹⁵⁹ It will be incumbent on the new administration and its international partners to act accordingly.

A. Protection

Providing Venezuelan migrants with information and support they need to protect themselves as soon as possible after they arrive in Colombia can help prevent them from wandering into problems.

Right now, both are in short supply. For example, migrants and refugees who cross the Simón Bolívar bridge – east of Cúcuta – encounter criminal networks in the small town on the Colombian side. These groups try to extort, recruit or profit from the Venezuelans. By contrast, to gain access to Colombia's state services, migrants first need to reach Cúcuta and navigate a complicated bureaucratic system. Until they obtain legal stay permits, they are not allowed into buses that can take them to their destinations or next transit points, condemning them to walk across Colombia with all the attendant risks. The ones who reach Bogotá, sometimes after walking more than 500km, have little idea where to look for jobs, shelter or any sort of support, and are easy pickings for the grey market and organised crime. Illegal and informal businesses that involve sexual exploitation and micro-trafficking offer immediate economic relief, and these easily accessible but poorly paid jobs are attractive when there are no other options for making ends meet.¹⁶⁰

Authorities at every level of government should be equipped to receive Venezuelan migrants and steer them toward safe, productive activities. Resource constraints will pose challenges to this effort. After decades of conflict, Colombia has more than five million internally displaced people, and the addition of nearly 2.5 million Venezuelan migrants is taxing it yet further.¹⁶¹ Still, improved collaboration among the relevant state agencies should be possible and could improve matters significantly. In particular, migration and law enforcement authorities should cooperate better with municipal authorities, child protection services and the office of the human rights ombudsman. They should work with large cities to provide resources and personnel

¹⁵⁹ Crisis Group telephone interview, Bogotá official, 29 March 2022.

¹⁶⁰ Crisis Group telephone interview, NGO representative, 15 March 2022. People who apply for political asylum in Colombia need to wait for up to three or four years for a response. Meanwhile, they are not allowed to work in the country. Crisis Group telephone interview, migration lawyer, 15 March 2022.

¹⁶¹ For more information about internal displacement numbers, see "Global Report on Internal Displacement 2022", IDCM, 2022. "Distribución de Venezolanos en Colombia – Corte 28 de Febrero de 2022", *op. cit.*

for receiving migrants and refugees at known entry points. A prime objective of greater cooperation should be to ensure that arriving Venezuelans receive timely, clear, useful information about hotspots for trafficking, forced recruitment and sexual exploitation, as well as where to turn for help – including how to get government and UN programs and benefits.¹⁶²

Colombian authorities should also take greater steps to protect trafficking victims and survivors of sexual exploitation – as well as potential victims – along migratory routes. Protected environments are vital to prevent women from being exploited and trafficked, especially on the border; they should also afford women and children who have already become victims of trafficking and sexual exploitation an opportunity to escape from their abusers as well as medical and psychological support.¹⁶³ There are about two dozen safe houses in Bogotá, but in the main border city of Cúcuta, the lack of safe spaces for women and minors is pronounced.¹⁶⁴ Colombia's police should also designate a unit to investigate and prosecute human trafficking, which could work in close collaboration with judicial systems in other Latin American states, while pursuing internal investigations to tackle the alleged complicity of police officers in trafficking networks.

Another protective step that Colombian authorities can take would be to recognise those Venezuelan nationals who have become victims of Colombia's internal conflict as such for purposes of Colombia's 2011 Victims Law. That law stipulates that all people who suffer from violations of international humanitarian or human rights law amid Colombia's armed conflict are legally entitled to special rights, including reparations as well as certain social and economic benefits. But Venezuelans are excluded from the National Victims Unit's register and are not eligible for reparations payments even if they otherwise satisfy the law's requirements.¹⁶⁵ Although the Victims Law does not discriminate based on nationality or migratory status, as a practical matter the Unit for Comprehensive Care and Reparation for Victims does not carry out assessments of undocumented citizens. There are many other hurdles to overcome before Venezuelans can be recognised as conflict victims as well.¹⁶⁶

Colombia is not alone in facing the challenge of protecting and integrating Venezuelan migrants; all the Andean countries are struggling with it in the face of growing domestic intolerance and xenophobia. Left-leaning Chilean President Gabriel Boric declared at the Summit of the Americas in June that “no country can absorb [Vene-

¹⁶² “A Bus Ticket for Venezuelan Walkers in Colombia”, Human Rights Watch, 17 January 2022.

¹⁶³ Intimate partner violence is the most prevalent form of violence that Venezuelan refugee women face. See “Unprotected: Gender-based Violence against Venezuelan Refugee Women in Colombia and Peru”, *op. cit.*

¹⁶⁴ Crisis Group telephone interview, NGO representative, 15 March 2022.

¹⁶⁵ Crisis Group interview, experts on child recruitment, Bogotá, 12 January 2022. Lina Arroyave, “Las personas migrantes también son víctimas del conflicto armado”, *Dejusticia*, 4 October 2020.

¹⁶⁶ Local authorities often do not attend to undocumented migrants, are unfamiliar with protocols or discriminate against Venezuelans. State officials often do not take statements from undocumented migrants when they enter into contact to make a declaration. In addition, there is a lack of reliable statistics concerning Venezuelan victims of Colombia's conflict. Colombia's prosecution service should kickstart efforts to provide more reliable numbers of migrants affected by conflict, while the Victims Unit should add a category for Venezuelan nationals to their database. Crisis Group interviews, migration experts, February and April 2022.

zuelan migration] by itself”, insisting on the need for a regional response anchored in human rights.¹⁶⁷ The core components of such a response should include greater information sharing regarding migration flows, the presence of organised criminal groups and other security risks faced by migrants; cross-border initiatives to ensure safe passage with common rules as to valid documentation; and a broad agreement to recognise Venezuelans’ qualifications. This program should draw on backing from international donors and agencies, and should focus on helping protect Venezuelan migrants from the risks of violence and exploitation they encounter.

Attracting support could be difficult, however. Foreign assistance for Venezuelan migrants has previously paled in comparison to support for other humanitarian emergencies, and is likely to decline further in 2022 as donors shift budgets to the humanitarian crisis caused by the war in Ukraine. Meanwhile, aid packages reserved for Colombia are turning their focus to victims of the country’s worsening internal conflicts.¹⁶⁸

B. *Integration*

While migration can be beneficial for host countries, these benefits may be overshadowed by the challenges of absorbing a wave of new entrants into a labour market characterised by high levels of unemployment and informality and low levels of pay.¹⁶⁹ Since it is likely that many Venezuelans will not return to their homeland, developing routes to formal employment will be essential to ensure that migrants are not marooned in informal jobs or vulnerable to recruitment by criminal groups.

In spite of the state’s steps toward legalising the stay of migrants, providing them with access to health care, and beginning to validate diplomas earned in Venezuela, employers are still hesitant to formally hire or enter into contracts with Venezuelans. Additionally, many of the more predatory employers instead exploit their vulnerable status through informal arrangements. Meanwhile, the gut fear of many Colombians, especially those earning lower incomes, is that Venezuelans will steal their jobs. Government leaders sometime reinforce these anxieties.¹⁷⁰ The outgoing vice president, Marta Lucía Ramírez, stated in February that Colombia has taken in the “less wealthy and qualified sectors” of the Venezuelan diaspora and has not benefited from the skills and resources typical of the migrants reaching North America and Europe.¹⁷¹

In fact, Venezuelan migrants are not necessarily less qualified than Colombians, but they have struggled to get their qualifications recognised. About 69 per cent of

¹⁶⁷ “Boric pide ayuda regional por crisis migratoria de venezolanos en Chile”, *Vanguardia*, 6 June 2022.

¹⁶⁸ Crisis Group interviews, humanitarian NGO representatives, Bogotá, June 2022. In 2021, only 37 per cent of the \$708.1 million in funding requirements for the UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs’ humanitarian response plan were covered, which nevertheless was higher than in the previous two years. See “Global Humanitarian Overview 2022 – Venezuela”, OCHA, 2022.

¹⁶⁹ “How Immigrants Contribute to Developing Countries’ Economies”, OECD, 24 January 2018; “Desde el Desplazamiento hacia el Desarrollo”, Center for Global Development, October 2020.

¹⁷⁰ “Colombia convalidará títulos universitarios de migrantes venezolanos”, *El Nacional*, 19 November 2021.

¹⁷¹ Santiago Torrado, “La vicepresidenta dice que Colombia no puede ‘seguir asimilando’ migrantes venezolanos”, *El País*, 17 February 2022.

Venezuelans in Colombia possess at least a high school diploma, roughly 9 per cent higher than the rate for Colombia's population.¹⁷² Due to a lack of funds and government programs stalled by the COVID-19 pandemic, however, Colombia has been slow in moving ahead with efforts to integrate Venezuelans after granting legal stay permits. Like other regional states, it has lagged with respect to the recognition of educational credentials.¹⁷³ Only about 10 per cent of the Venezuelans in Chile, Colombia and Peru had their diplomas and credentials recognised by October 2020. By March 2022, about 22,000 Venezuelans in Colombia had completed the first steps to validate their university degrees.¹⁷⁴

With the support of multilateral bodies such as the UN Development Programme and World Bank, Colombia as well as other Latin American states should make the recognition of credentials quicker and cheaper, while also helping migrants and refugees gain access to courses and re-schooling, which are essential to bridge the gap between supply and demand in the labour market.

In addition, the state should put more effort into communicating the legal rights of migrants to the private sector. Even though stay permits allow Venezuelans to open bank accounts and access credit, bank employees often deny these because of distrust or a lack of knowledge.¹⁷⁵

As for the large population of migrants and refugees who do not possess valid migratory status, above all those living in remote rural areas, the risks of exploitation in the labour market are high. Barriers to obtaining status can be significant. Migration offices are located in larger cities that for Venezuelans, for example in the remote border region of Catatumbo, are too costly or far away to reach.¹⁷⁶ Mobile units carrying migration officials and training for municipal officials to work on migratory issues, such as handling applications for stay permits, could help improve access to formal work and social services for migrants in areas prone to conflict and crime.

At the same time, authorities should do what they can to overcome at least some of the concerns that Colombians have about competing with Venezuelans in the labour market. A stricter law enforcement approach to businesses that illegally exploit Venezuelans could help assure Colombians that migrants are not undermining employee protection laws, including those requiring payment of at least the official minimum wage. Steps to increase trade between the two countries could also enhance the perceived value of Venezuelans to the Colombian economy, enabling them to take commercial advantage of their connections across the border in ways that could create jobs for Colombians rather than take them away.

¹⁷² Nahomi Ruiz Moreno, "El 40,7% de los migrantes venezolanos trabaja más de 48 horas a la semana", Proyecto Migración Colombia, 9 November 2021.

¹⁷³ With help from the UN Development Programme, Colombia's government designed a plan to integrate migrants and refugees, but the pandemic prevented the state from carrying it out in full. Crisis Group interview, migration expert, Bogotá, 1 March 2022.

¹⁷⁴ "Socioeconomic Integration of Venezuelan Migrants and Refugees", op. cit.; tweet by Lucas Gómez, @Lgomez4, border czar, 10:01am, 1 March 2022.

¹⁷⁵ Crisis Group focus group, migrants and refugees, Ciudad Bolívar, February 2022. Crisis Group interview, migration expert, Bogotá, 1 March 2022.

¹⁷⁶ Crisis Group telephone interview, senior local state official, north-eastern Antioquia, 3 November 2020.

C. *Bilateral Diplomacy*

Diplomatic relations between Colombia and Venezuela have been frozen since 23 February 2019, when President Maduro cut ties with Bogotá after opposition leader Juan Guaidó spearheaded a Colombia-U.S.-backed plan to transport humanitarian aid across the border.¹⁷⁷ As a result, each country closed the other's embassies and consulates. The border closure forced tens of thousands of migrants, refugees and residents to take enormous risks at dangerous informal crossings under the control of armed and criminal groups.¹⁷⁸ Since the closing of embassies and consulates, the only consular services that Venezuelans have access to in Colombia have been provided by Guaidó's "interim government". Fewer than ten countries now recognise his claim to the presidency following the failure of the various schemes in 2019 and 2020 to unseat Maduro.¹⁷⁹

A marked deterioration in bilateral relations has been felt most acutely at the border, above all in worsening insecurity. At the same time, acrimonious or even severed relations between the countries need not impede functioning border ties. Maduro's predecessor as president, the late Hugo Chávez, and his Colombian counterpart Álvaro Uribe, president between 2002 and 2010, had a plainly adversarial relationship, but the two maintained open borders and commercial relations for several years before diplomatic frictions between 2007 and 2009 led to border closures.¹⁸⁰ Maduro and former Colombian President Juan Manuel Santos met in Ecuador in 2015 to discuss their border dispute at length. Yet there is as yet no official record of even as much as a telephone call between Maduro and Duque.¹⁸¹

Even so, conditions at the border for migrants and refugees, as well as daily traffic between the two countries, have started to improve. Since October 2021, the Venezuelan-Colombian border has been partially reopened again for pedestrians.¹⁸² Fluid

¹⁷⁷ "Crisis en Venezuela: Maduro rompe relaciones diplomáticas con Colombia y da 24 horas a sus diplomáticos para que abandonen el país", BBC, 23 February 2019.

¹⁷⁸ Crisis Group Report, *Disorder on the Border*, op. cit.

¹⁷⁹ The interim government's embassy in Colombia is led by Chargé d'Affaires Eduardo Battistini. It provides limited consular services, such as birth certificates and certification of university documents, but has no diplomatic headquarters, offering only online attention.

¹⁸⁰ In November 2007, Chávez announced a freeze in relations with Colombia after Uribe suspended his mediating role with the FARC. See "El Gobierno venezolano llama a consultas a su embajador en Colombia", 20 minutos, 27 November 2007; "Colombia termina negociaciones FARC-Chávez", VOA, 21 November 2007. In March 2008, Chávez withdrew all Venezuelan diplomats from Bogotá and ordered tanks deployed at the Colombian border after Colombia attacked a FARC guerrilla camp in Ecuador. See "Chavez sends tanks to Colombia border in dispute", Reuters, 2 March 2008. In 2009, Chávez froze diplomatic relations with Colombia after Bogotá declared that anti-tank weapons purchased by Venezuela had ended up in the hands of the FARC, ordered an end to bi-national trade with Colombia, threatened to close the border and increased the Venezuelan military presence there. See Arthur Brice, "Venezuela freezes relations with Colombia", CNN, 29 July 2009; "Promesa del Presidente Chávez de reducir a cero el comercio con Colombia amenaza la recuperación de Venezuela", *Portafolio*, 24 November 2009; "Chávez ordena al Ejército que se prepare para la guerra con Colombia", *El País*, 9 November 2009.

¹⁸¹ Crisis Group telephone interview, government official, May 2022.

¹⁸² The border was not only closed due to political tensions but also because of preventive measures related to the COVID-19 pandemic. "Venezuela to reopen border with Colombia after more than two years", France 24, 5 October 2021.

dialogue between senior officials in the neighbouring regions of Norte de Santander, in Colombia, and Táchira, in Venezuela, has ensured an increasing level of local co-operation regarding shared security threats and humanitarian relief for migrants.¹⁸³ In 2021, authorities in Táchira warned their Colombian counterparts that members of the Tren de Aragua had escaped from prison and were hiding in Colombia. The exchange of intelligence led to their arrest.¹⁸⁴

The incoming government in Bogotá, which took power on 7 August, appears determined to build on this fragile progress and restore ties between the two nations completely. President Petro, a left-leaning former urban guerrilla who has pledged to fight inequality and reduce Colombia's reliance on fossil fuels, has said he would re-establish diplomatic relations with Venezuela, "whatever the government".¹⁸⁵ Following his first telephone call with Maduro, days after his election victory, Petro declared that he would open the border fully and work toward improving human rights along the frontier, potentially signifying an end to the mistrust and mutual accusations of support for armed factions that have marred bilateral relations since 2019.¹⁸⁶ The government is also likely to be keen to expand trade following the collapse in formal commercial relations over the past decade, and to find ways to handle more humanely the arrival and return of migrants.

On the specific issue of migration, Petro has made explicit his goal of improving the well-being of Venezuelans. Building on the efforts of previous governments to offer Venezuelans temporary residency, his manifesto states that his government would support migrants' economic integration and educational programs, as well as "dignified conditions for return to their countries of origin".¹⁸⁷ He has also said he would promote dialogue with other Latin American states to support the integration of migrants and recognise their contribution to host societies.¹⁸⁸ Despite the new government's concern for migrants' needs, political refugees from Venezuela in Colombia have voiced concern about whether renewed bilateral relations will compromise their safety by enabling extradition back to Venezuela.¹⁸⁹

D. *Resolving the Venezuelan Crisis*

Venezuela's economic, political, humanitarian and security woes have driven the migrant exodus. But while fixing some of these underlying causes could create the conditions for more migrants to return, a solution to Venezuela's political crisis that could spark a steady economic recovery nevertheless appears far from imminent. Tentative

¹⁸³ Crisis Group interview, Norte de Santander state officials, 13 May 2022.

¹⁸⁴ Ibid.

¹⁸⁵ "Restablecer relaciones con Venezuela y un ferrocarril entre los dos países: las promesas de Petro en Cúcuta", *Semana*, 11 November 2022.

¹⁸⁶ Tweet by Gustavo Petro, @petrogustavo, president of Colombia, 7:45am, 22 June 2022. Crisis Group Report, *Disorder on the Border*, op. cit.

¹⁸⁷ Gustavo Petro, "Colombia, potencia mundial de la vida. Programa de gobierno 2022-2026", manifesto, 2022, p. 35.

¹⁸⁸ "Petro y su política exterior: las propuestas del próximo presidente de Colombia", *El Espectador*, 20 June 2022.

¹⁸⁹ Patricia Laya, "Maduro's enemies are fleeing Colombia as persecution fears mount", Bloomberg, 5 July 2022.

negotiations between the Maduro government and an opposition alliance in Mexico started in August 2021, but Maduro suspended them two months later. In March 2022, however, the push for a negotiated settlement in Venezuela received a fresh boost when Maduro announced he would resume talks with the opposition after a high-level U.S. delegation visited Caracas.¹⁹⁰ Unfortunately, progress toward a new round of dialogue has stumbled since then, though it is not off the table, with frequent contacts between representatives of the two sides in recent months.¹⁹¹

The resumption of talks between Caracas and Washington was profoundly influenced by the war in Ukraine, but could in theory generate a climate that is favourable not just to resuming oil exports to the U.S. market, but also restarting the Mexico dialogue, preparing the ground for improved electoral conditions and providing sanctions relief. There is no quick fix for a political conflict that has dragged on for over two decades, but in the event of breakthrough toward a political settlement or a hypothetical lifting of U.S. sanctions, living standards in Venezuela could finally embark on a sustained recovery from their current nadir, while migrants might consider returning home.

Down the road, returnees could play a major role in the reconstruction of Venezuela. Yet it is uncertain how many of the Venezuelans who fled their homeland would consider going back when the situation allows for it. Estimates vary greatly, but civil society groups argue that most Venezuelan migrants and refugees plan on staying in neighbouring host countries.¹⁹²

In the meantime, Maduro has argued that Venezuelans who are facing discrimination and xenophobia abroad need a helping hand to return home. “The doors of our country are open and they can return and be in peace, without discrimination, next to their families and on their land”, he has declared.¹⁹³ A campaign to support returnees, branded Plan Vuelta a la Patria, claims to have brought back over 28,000 Venezuelans from 21 countries in 165 flights and sea journeys since 2018. This figure represents not even 0.5 per cent of the total Venezuelan diaspora, but the *chavista* government has given its campaign a high profile. While the campaign was supposedly designed for stricken migrants who could not finance a return trip, Venezuelans complained about having been charged large sums for their repatriation flights. Critics have treated the strategy as a political stunt.¹⁹⁴

¹⁹⁰ The visit came as Washington is looking for options to reduce its reliance on Russian fuel. Phil Gunson, “A Twist in Caracas: Is a Venezuela-U.S. Reboot on the Cards?”, Crisis Group Commentary, 16 March 2022.

¹⁹¹ “Venezuela government and opposition to renew talks amid humanitarian crisis”, BBC, 18 May 2022.

¹⁹² For example, the NGO Observatory of the Venezuelan Diaspora surveyed migrants and refugees in neighbouring countries. About 80 per cent indicated they had no plans to return to Venezuela. See “Observatorio de la Diáspora afirma que el número de migrantes venezolanos asciende a 7,2 millones”, *El Nacional*, 22 April 2022.

¹⁹³ “Venezuela inicia Plan Vuelta a la Patria 2022 desde Ecuador”, *TeleSur*, 23 March 2022.

¹⁹⁴ “Regresar a Venezuela en vuelos de repatriación cuesta entre 120 y 1.390 dólares”, *El Pitazo*, 8 May 2020.

Some entrepreneurial Venezuelans have also returned home, many with the aim of profiting from the elimination of price controls and free circulation of the U.S. dollar in the country.¹⁹⁵

To promote future safe returns, the Venezuelan government should not be in sole charge of these operations. International partners should press Colombia and Venezuela to open effective humanitarian corridors across the border as part of any improvement in relations between the two, with support from international agencies such as the International Organization for Migration and UN High Commissioner for Refugees.¹⁹⁶ Guarantees aimed at safeguarding human rights of returnees during their journey will be vital. UN agencies and donor countries should also increase financial and technical support for returning migrants and strengthen the responsiveness of the Venezuelan state so as to ensure returnees have food and safe transportation to their destination. Special attention for women and children who have already faced extreme risks and hardships during their flight from Venezuela is of particular importance.

Close monitoring of the entire return process is critical. Venezuelans who opted to return home during the early months of the pandemic were received in overcrowded quarantine centres on the Venezuelan side of the border, where conditions were dire. *Colectivos*, violent para-police groups loyal to *chavista* politicians, were looking for signs of political dissent inside these centres and behaved violently toward former military officers who were perceived as traitors.¹⁹⁷

¹⁹⁵ Some Venezuelans now make more money in Venezuela than they made abroad as migrants or refugees. Ezra Fieser, Nicolle Yapur and Fabiola Zerpa, “Venezuelan migrants are coming home as Maduro embraces capitalism”, Bloomberg, 8 March 2022.

¹⁹⁶ The IOM has designed guidelines for the full spectrum of return, readmission and reintegration, which could be the departure point for future return policies. See “IOM’s Policy on the Full Spectrum of Return, Readmission and Reintegration”, IOM, April 2021.

¹⁹⁷ Crisis Group Report, *Disorder on the Border*, op. cit.

VII. Conclusion

Colombian authorities have provided a generous welcome to Venezuelans fleeing extreme hardship in their homeland, setting a high bar for granting migrants formal residency and access to public services. But the migrants' urgent quest for money, food and shelter has tended to overshadow the scope of Bogotá's legal protections. Many migrants have found themselves exposed to poverty, discrimination and physical peril. Colombia's large informal economy has failed to ease many migrants' financial straits, above all during the pandemic lockdowns. Meanwhile, the country's far-reaching armed and criminal networks have emerged as major employment providers, but at the cost of sexually exploiting women, entrapping migrants in conflict zones or dispatching them to commit crimes in cities.

The xenophobic reaction of many Colombians to Venezuelans has spiked at moments of unrest, but it owes much to the perception that migrants and refugees lower wages for locals and account for a rising share of crime, above all high-visibility offences in big cities such as drug dealing and burglary. While debate continues as to the extent of their involvement in crime, there is little doubt that vulnerable Venezuelans have been exploited as cheap, docile labour by legal employers and crime groups alike. These employment terms, and their effects on Colombians' perceptions of migrants (informed by anxiety about competing with them), have in turn been aggravated by the country's rising joblessness, worsening insecurity, buoyant illicit businesses and the pandemic's economic effects.

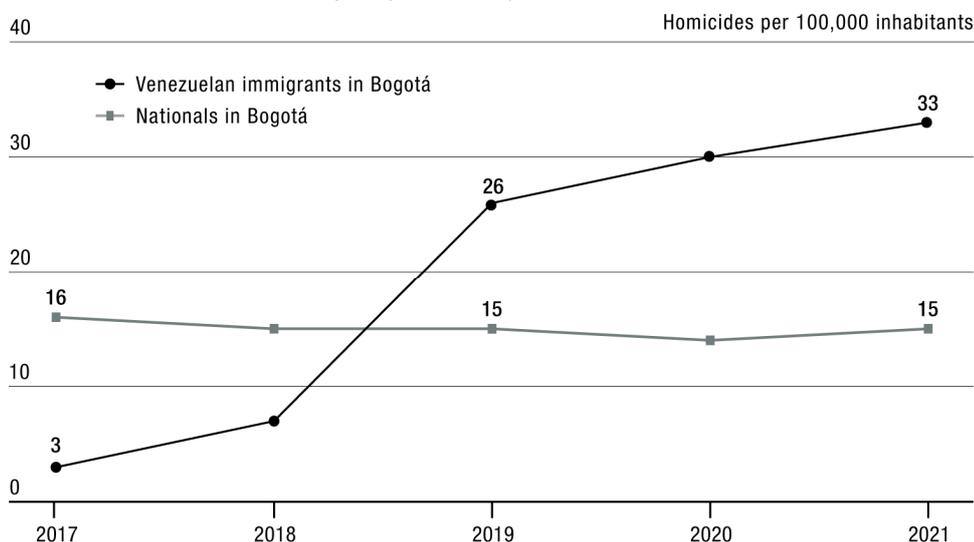
Ensuring that Venezuelans receive enhanced information and support to help protect them on arrival and doing more to enable them to join the formal economy would help rescue them from illicit recruitment and exploitation. But a safer life for Venezuelans in Colombia will also depend on improving ties between the two countries. Mending ruptured diplomatic and consular relations looks far more likely now that Gustavo Petro is the president of Colombia. Rebuilding relationships should be a priority for Caracas as well, and the broader region should do more to pool efforts to address the exodus and the criminal threats migrants face. Recognising that Venezuelans will continue to cross into Colombia should not impede strategies to facilitate safe returns to Venezuela for those who wish, especially if and when the country makes progress toward resolution of its longstanding political conflict. In the process, both governments must collaborate to increase border security and make passage safer in both directions.

Crime may well remain an alluring option for vulnerable migrants so long as Venezuela's economy stays in the doldrums and employment in Colombia is hard to find. A route for migrants to a legal home and livelihood will require greater physical protection, more economic opportunity and serious steps toward cooperation between the two states. Overall, however, the Petro administration's advent and other developments hold out the hope that the worst of Venezuelan migrants' travails in Colombia may be in the past.

Bogotá/Washington/Brussels, 9 August 2022

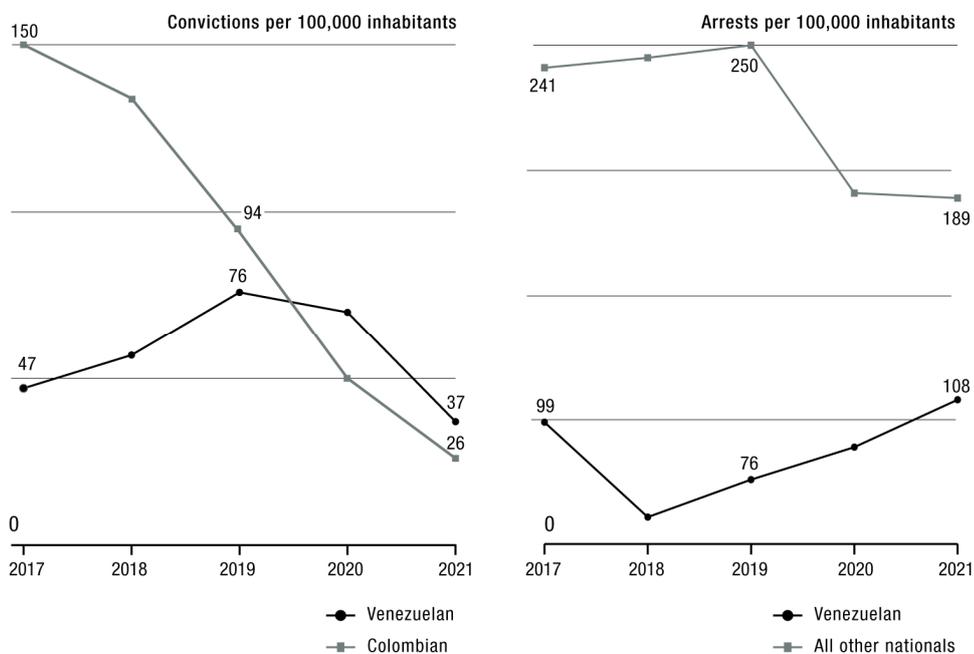
Appendix B: Venezuelan Migrants and Refugees in Colombia

Graph 1. Homicide rate in Bogota (2017-2021)



Source: Venezuelan and Colombian homicide rates from the Colombian National Institute of Legal Medicine and Forensic Sciences. The number of Venezuelan immigrants comes from Colombian state migration agency (Migración Colombia) for the years 2018 to 2021. Colombian population projections from Colombian National Statistical Administrative Department (DANE) from 2018 to 2021. For 2017, we did a reverse population projection using the average rate increase observed in the available years.

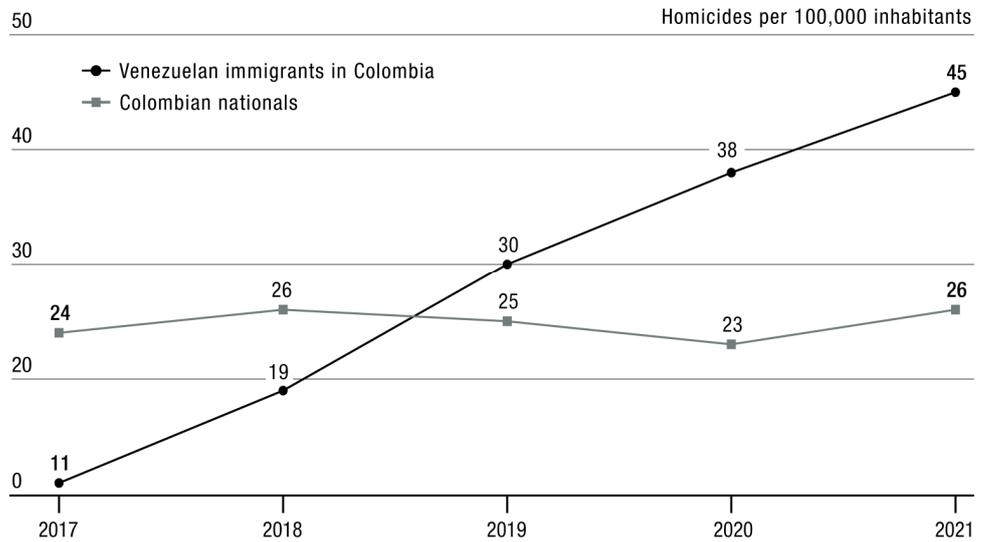
Graph 2. Conviction and arrests rates



For left panel: Crisis Group elaboration using conviction data from the Colombian Attorney General Office. Total convictions of those accused of crime according to criminal news entries to the Accusatory Oral Criminal System in Law 906 of 2004 and Law 1098 of 2006. Data collected on June 24, 2022. The number of Venezuelan immigrants comes from Migración Colombia for 2018 to 2021. Colombian population projections from DANE from 2018 to 2021. For 2017, we did a reverse population projection using the average rate increase observed in the available years.

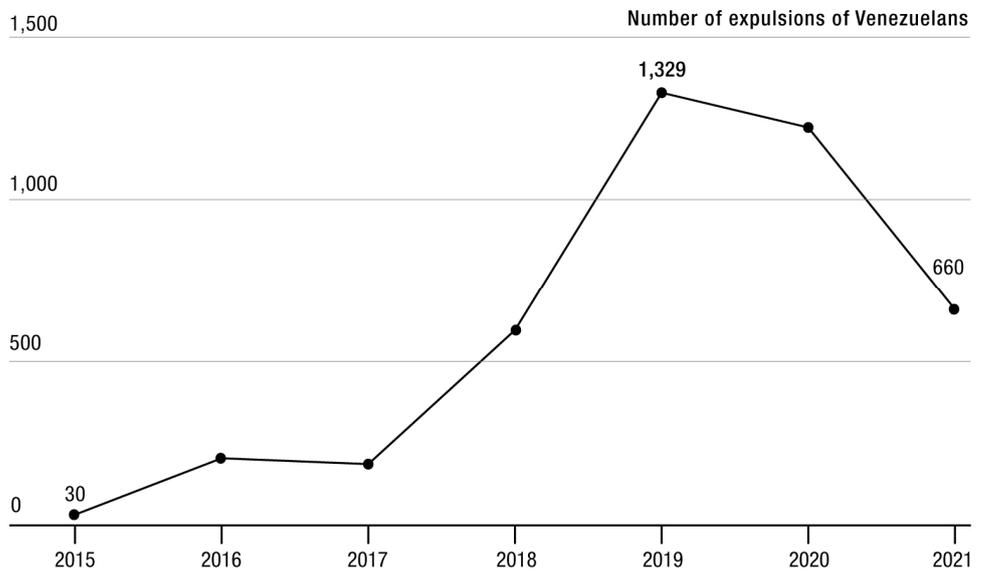
For right panel: Crisis Group elaboration using arrest data from the National Penitentiary and Prison Institute of Colombia (INPEC), and population from the Colombian Ministry of Foreign Relations, and DANE.

Graph 3. Homicide rate in Colombia (2017-2021)



Source: Venezuelan and Colombian homicides from the Colombian National Institute of Legal Medicine and Forensic Sciences. The number of Venezuelan immigrants comes from Migración Colombia for 2018 to 2021. Colombian population projections from DANE from 2018 to 2021. For 2017, we did a reverse population projection using the average rate increase observed in the available years.

Graph 4. Deportations of Venezuelans from Colombia



Source: Crisis Group elaboration using data from Armandoinfo, Dejusticia and Migracion Colombia. 2021 data from an interview with an immigration specialist in Colombia.

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Crisis Group's approach is grounded in field research. Teams of political analysts are located within or close by countries or regions at risk of outbreak, escalation or recurrence of violent conflict. Based on information and assessments from the field, it produces analytical reports containing practical recommendations targeted at key international, regional and national decision-takers. Crisis Group also publishes *CrisisWatch*, a monthly early-warning bulletin, providing a succinct regular update on the state of play in up to 80 situations of conflict or potential conflict around the world.

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Comfort Ero was appointed Crisis Group's President & CEO in December 2021. She first joined Crisis Group as West Africa Project Director in 2001 and later rose to become Africa Program Director in 2011 and then Interim Vice President. In between her two tenures at Crisis Group, she worked for the International Centre for Transitional Justice and the Special Representative of the UN Secretary-General in Liberia.

Crisis Group's international headquarters is in Brussels, and the organisation has offices in seven other locations: Bogotá, Dakar, Istanbul, Nairobi, London, New York, and Washington, DC. It has presences in the following locations: Abuja, Addis Ababa, Bahrain, Baku, Bangkok, Beirut, Caracas, Gaza City, Guatemala City, Jerusalem, Johannesburg, Juba, Kabul, Kiev, Manila, Mexico City, Moscow, Seoul, Tbilisi, Toronto, Tripoli, Tunis, and Yangon.

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