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FEATURED Q&A

Will Public Health in Venezuela Keep Getting Worse?



Venezuelan Health Minister Antonieta Caporale was fired this month after her agency released data showing alarming declines in public health statistics. // File Photo: Venezuelan Government.

Q Public health indicators in crisis-wracked Venezuela declined dramatically last year, with infant mortality climbing 30 percent, maternal mortality rising 66 percent and malaria cases soaring 76 percent, the country's health ministry said May 9. The release of the statistics marked the first time since 2015 that the ministry has released such data. Will public health in Venezuela continue worsening, or is there reason for hope? What will it take to reverse the trend? Should the international community step up its offers of humanitarian aid to Venezuela, and if it does, will President Nicolás Maduro accept it? What are the long-term consequences of the decline in the country's public health?

A Hermes Florez, professor and director in the Division of Epidemiology at the University of Miami Miller School of Medicine and visiting professor at the University of Zulia in Maracaibo, Venezuela: "Given the deficiencies in hospital infrastructure maintenance and the lack of reliable information to respond promptly, it is likely that many public health indicators will continue to worsen. Similarly, the long-term impact that food shortages and limited access to medications will have on chronic and infectious diseases is concerning. Solidarity from the international community in providing a humanitarian aid channel will be paramount to addressing the current crisis. In March, after years of denying that Venezuela's health care system was collapsing, President Maduro delivered a speech demanding the United Nations' help with medications. Therefore, it is possible that in response to sustained pressures from international agencies and the

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ECONOMIC

Mexico, Canada Say NAFTA Talks Should Be Trilateral

Officials from the two countries said negotiations to update the North American Free Trade Agreement should include the three signatories and not produce bilateral pacts.

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POLITICAL

Trump Seeking \$140 Mn in Cuts to Colombia Aid

The cuts would represent a 36 percent reduction in the current level of aid to the South American country.

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POLITICAL

Venezuela's Maduro Advances Plan to Rewrite Constitution

Venezuelan President Nicolás Maduro pushed forward with a plan to elect a "constituent assembly," to rewrite the charter, despite opposition, including from his attorney general.

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Maduro // Photo: Venezuelan Government.

POLITICAL NEWS

Venezuela's Maduro Advances Plan to Rewrite Constitution

Amid nearly two months of violent anti-government protests that have resulted in more than 50 deaths, Venezuelan President Nicolás Maduro on Tuesday pressed forward with plans to rewrite the country's Constitution, Agence France-Presse reported. The current Consti-

“Votes or bullets, what do the people want?”

— Nicolás Maduro

tution was implemented soon after Maduro's late predecessor, Hugo Chávez, took power in 1999. In a recent interview with The Wall Street Journal, Venezuelan Attorney General Luisa Ortega referred to the charter as “unbeatable.” She said, “This is Chávez's Constitution.” However, on Tuesday, Maduro, Chávez's hand-picked successor, signed a document during an open-air rally before thousands of supporters wearing red T-shirts, setting out the terms for electing members of a new “constituent assembly” that will be tasked with rewriting the Constitution, AFP reported. Maduro said the constituent assembly would be a way to calm the violent anti-government demonstrations, which he has said are backed by the United States in an effort to overthrow “21st Century socialism,” Reuters reported. “Votes or bullets, what do the people want?” Maduro asked the crowd of supporters at the Miraflores presidential palace. Ortega expressed her discontent in a letter to Socialist Party official Elias Jaua, who is charged with creating the constituent assembly. “Instead of bringing stability or generating a climate of peace, I think this will accelerate the crisis,” Ortega wrote in the letter, which was leaked on social media. Jaua acknowledged receiving Ortega's letter, but said she was expressing a “political opinion” and had no power to change the situation.

Venezuela's opposition, which controls the National Assembly, roundly criticized Maduro's move. “What Nicolas Maduro has announced is nothing but a continuation of a coup against the Constitution,” said Julio Borges, the speaker of the legislature, AFP reported. “This National Assembly calls on Venezuelans to continue peaceful protests morning, noon and night in all corners of Venezuela until the constitution is respected.” Opposition leader Henrique Capriles, the governor of Miranda state, also blasted Maduro's move. “The Venezuelan people do not want a fraudulent Madurist constitution and we will not accept it,” said Capriles. Fifty-three people have been killed in nearly two months of violent protests, public prosecutors said Tuesday. Elections for the constituent assembly to redraft the Constitution will take place in late July, said Electoral Council President Tibisay Lucena. Also, Maduro announced that gubernatorial elections that had been scheduled for last December would be held this year, on Dec. 10.

ECONOMIC NEWS

Mexico, Canada Say NAFTA Talks Should Be Trilateral

Mexican and Canadian officials said Tuesday that negotiations to update the North American Free Trade Agreement with the United States should be trilateral as opposed negotiating separate bilateral pacts, The Wall Street Journal reported. “NAFTA is a trilateral agreement, and that has worked because it's a trilateral North American trading relationship,” Canada's Minister for Foreign Affairs, Chrystia Freeland, said at an event in Mexico City. “NAFTA can be modernized only with the agreement of the three parties...and I am confident that that will be how we go,” she added. Mexican officials said at the event that separate bilateral agreements would be impractical, considering the complex integration of supply chains between the three nations. U.S. Trade Representative Robert Lighthizer, who last Thursday formally

NEWS BRIEFS

Trump Seeks \$140 Million in Cuts to Colombia Aid

U.S. President Donald Trump's proposed budget released Tuesday would cut \$140 million in 2018 foreign aid to Colombia, according to analysis by Colombia Reports. The 36 percent reduction from this year's funding would bring U.S. support to Colombia to its lowest level since 1986, when measured in inflation-adjusted dollars. For the rest of Latin America, the proposed budget cuts aid by a similar percentage, from \$1.83 billion to \$1.20 billion. Congressional leaders such as Eliot Engel (D-N.Y.) on Tuesday said he would not support the cuts in foreign aid. “The president's cruel and mean-spirited budget proposal is an embarrassment,” he said in a statement.

Ecuador's Incoming President Names Finance, Oil Ministers

Lenín Moreno, who is to take office today as Ecuador's president, on Tuesday named his finance and oil ministers, Reuters reported. Moreno said he would tap economics professor Carlos de la Torre as his finance minister and former oil executive Carlos Pérez as oil minister.

Mexico's Retail Sales See Largest Monthly Drop Since 2013

Retail sales in Mexico dropped by the most in more than three years in March, Reuters reported Tuesday. Sales fell 1.3 percent, a lower figure than forecast, in March from February, according to the national statistics agency. Real GDP growth accelerated to 2.8 percent year-over-year in the first quarter of this year, up from 2.3 percent the prior quarter and the highest growth rate since 2015. The new retail data could indicate that domestic demand is cooling after several quarters of growth, according to the report.

notified the U.S. Congress that NAFTA would be renegotiated in 90 days, has said the United States hopes to maintain the existing structure of the agreement, although many parts of the negotiation will be conducted bilaterally. Canada's Freeland acknowledged that some



Freeland // File Photo: Canadian Government.

issues within the region are bilateral by nature, such as U.S. disputes with Canada over lumber and with Mexico over sugar. Meanwhile, Canada has mounted an "information campaign" targeting U.S. President Donald Trump and his cabinet, as well as Congress and state and local governments, to underline the mutually beneficial trade between the countries, the CBC reported Tuesday. Canadian Prime Minister Justin Trudeau has assigned 11 cabinet ministers to key U.S. states to make the case for the trade deal, according to the report.

BUSINESS NEWS

CNPC Planning to Invest \$2 Bn in Peru Oil and Gas Block

State-run China National Petroleum Corporation, or CNPC, plans to invest \$2 billion in an oil and natural gas block in southern Peru by 2023, Rafael Zoeger, the head of state energy agency Perupetro, said at a news conference on Tuesday, Reuters reported. CNPC's block 58 has some 3.9 trillion cubic feet of natural gas reserves, according to government data, enough to increase the Andean nation's total gas reserves by more than a quarter. The investments are slated to be made over the next six years, with plans to start drilling 60

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Venezuelan people, he will finally accept this help. To respond to this health crisis and reverse these trends we need: 1) partnerships between Venezuela and international organizations with agreements to promote health care equity, address social determinants and rebuild infrastructure; 2) health policies to address access to medications and food, safety, supplies for health care facilities and workforce training; and 3) health care laws and regulations that will be enforced with appropriate accountability mechanisms. The release of information by the now former minister of health is a reason to remain hopeful. Until recently, most of us have relied on the data produced through the extraordinary efforts of organizations such as the Venezuelan Society of Public Health, which showed worsening trends on critical public health indicators. Moving beyond the 'government stage of denial' requires our prompt response and the commitment from many Venezuelan health care professionals."

A Katherine E. Bliss, senior associate of the Global Health Policy Center of the Center for Strategic and International Studies (CSIS): "In Venezuela, which during the 20th century made considerable progress in extending life expectancy and controlling infectious diseases, the health situation is worsening. Infant and maternal mortality rates are increasing, deaths from vaccine-preventable diseases are on the rise, and in 2016 the number of malaria cases passed 240,000, the highest in 75 years. The 1999 Constitution protects citizens' right to health care and articulates the state's

wells this year. Zoeger added that Chilean oil and gas producer GeoPark would also likely present a plan to develop block 64 in northern Peru in the coming weeks. In a bid to generate more revenue for the state, Perupetro is writing up a new royalty plan for contracts based on productivity of wells and oil prices, according to Zoeger. China is Peru's top trading partner,

responsibility to provide it, but with state revenues declining due to sluggish energy prices since 2014, the oil-rich country is hard-pressed to meet basic health needs.

“The oil-rich country is hard-pressed to meet basic health needs.”

— Katherine E. Bliss

According to reports, many public health facilities lack essential medicines, as well as electricity, food, and running water. In southern Bolívar state, the percentage of malaria cases is highest. Facing an acute shortage of health providers and medicines in the most remote regions, people travel across the border to Brazil to purchase malaria drugs, which they either self-administer or sell on the black market back in Venezuela. Some experts worry that this situation could lead to increased drug resistance, both in Venezuela and throughout the region. Until recently, the Maduro administration had been reluctant to accept most external offers of support, although it continues to engage with the Pan American Health Organization. As the international community seeks ways to support the people of Venezuela in meeting their health needs, it can encourage more transparent reporting about health indicators and strengthen the involvement of civil society groups on health issues."

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buying \$7.4 billion of goods in 2015 or 19.6 percent of Peru's total exports, according to Peru Reports. In March, Peruvian President Pedro Pablo Kuczynski's government announced it may hold a bond issuance this year to pay for energy sector infrastructure projects. [Editor's note: See related Q&A in the March 17 issue of the Energy Advisor.]

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A Paula Pohlmann, assistant professor of medicine in the Division of Hematology and Oncology of the MedStar Georgetown University Hospital and Lombardi Comprehensive Cancer Center: "When resources are scarce, jeopardizing access to food, drinkable water and sanitation, problems escalate and present through declining health statistics. The World Health Organization periodically publishes its global reference list containing 100 core health indicators that have been prioritized by the global community as informative of situations and trends. It is a diagnostic tool that provides directions for policymakers, as well as guidance for implementation of actions. This list contains indicators of health status (such as infant mortality rate, maternal mortality rate, and malaria); risk factors (such as use of drinking water and sanitation services); service coverage (including contraception, antenatal/postpartum care and pap smears); and health system indicators (such as maternal deaths review, birth and death registration coverage, availability of essential medicines and health service access). With significant and unremitting famine, individual development becomes impaired, affecting the country's education indicators, and later its workforce, productive capacity and innovative poten-

tial. The first step to solving the problems leading to Venezuela's terrible reality would be running and presenting diagnostics to the public as done by the ministry of health. This is critical for successful and continuous

“With significant and unremitting famine, individual development becomes impaired.”

— Paula Pohlmann

actions, regardless of the political force in power, or its initial negative publicity. A transparent statement detailing the current situation as a well-established starting point is crucial to demonstrating progress over time, and for regaining the confidence of citizens, as well as national and international authorities. Unfortunately, President Maduro fired Health Minister Antonieta Caporale only a few days after the release of the health data, confirming his commitment to keeping Venezuela within its own enclosures.”

The Advisor welcomes comments on its Q&A section. Readers can write editor Gene Kuleta at gkuleta@thedialogue.org.

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What's Wrong with Mexico & How to Fix It

An Inter-American Dialogue Discussion with Denise Dresser
Professor of Political Science,
Instituto Tecnológico Autónomo de México

View the May 11 webcast of the discussion

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