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FEATURED Q&A

Will Venezuela's Food Crisis Worsen Before Improving?



A third of Venezuelans are facing hunger, according to the World Food Program. A program of the U.N. agency to help feed migrants, including Venezuelans, in Colombia is pictured above. // File Photo: U.N. World Food Program.

Q One in every three Venezuelans is facing hunger, the United Nations World Food Program found in a survey released Feb. 23. Sixty percent of households in the survey said they were reducing the portion sizes of their meals due to food shortages. What has happened to Venezuela's food production and distribution systems, and will the situation worsen or improve in the months ahead? Why have the Venezuelan government's efforts to ensure adequate food supplies failed? How can international actors help get food to Venezuelans who need it most?

A Lidia Fromm Cea, executive director of the Mesoamerica Project for Integration and Development: "Venezuela's government periodically provides subsidized food boxes for families that records say cover one-third of the population, and remittances are the most important source of cash for many to buy food, but not for all. In a recent report on global food security, the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations informs that between 2016 and 2018, about 21.2 percent of the Venezuelan population was undernourished. Undernourishment brings long-term health consequences and irreversible physical damage with a high emotional toll. How can international actors help? Under the framework of the United Nations Decade of Family Farming 2019-2028, partners can implement several solutions. First, international players can help local actors set up free diners with year-round funding while awareness at the global and regional level is continually raised. Second, they can collect food and medicine

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TODAY'S NEWS

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Guyana's Top Court Halts Release of Election Results

Guyana's high court upheld an injunction that prevents the country's elections commission from naming a winner in the March 2 presidential election. A protester was killed over the weekend amid the election controversy.

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Venezuela Detains at Least 38 PDVSA Workers

Venezuela's government has detained dozens of workers of state oil company PDVSA on charges of trafficking fuel.

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Trump Refuses to Rule Out Tariffs During Dinner With Bolsonaro

U.S. President Donald Trump met Saturday with Brazilian President Jair Bolsonaro but refused to rule out imposing tariffs on steel and iron imports from Brazil.

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Trump and Bolsonaro (L-R) met Saturday in Florida. // Photo: Brazilian Gov't.

POLITICAL NEWS

Guyana's Top Court Halts Release of Election Results

Guyana's high court on Sunday upheld an injunction that prevents the country's elections commission from naming a winner from the March 2 presidential election, Reuters reported. Protesters demonstrated in the streets of the South American nation, and a protester was fatally shot on Saturday after opposition leaders and international observers accused President David Granger's government of rigging the vote. Election observers said there were credible allegations of fraud in the tallying of the vote, which coincides with the emergence of an oil boom that is expected to bring tens of billions of dollars into the country this decade, The New York Times reported. On Friday, streets were empty and many businesses were shuttered as residents in the capital, Georgetown, remained on edge. The chief justice of Guyana's high court, Roxanne George, said Sunday that she would start hearing a case on Tuesday in order to determine whether election officials will need to restart verification of ballots in a voting area known as Region Four, Reuters reported. Opposition leaders say results from that voting area were released without verification of votes from more than half of the polling stations and that the results were manipulated

in order to put Granger ahead of his opponent, Irfaan Ali, Reuters reported. On Sunday, Guyana's election commission vowed to uphold its constitutional responsibilities.

ECONOMIC NEWS

Trump Doesn't Rule Out Tariffs in Dinner With Bolsonaro

U.S. President Donald Trump hosted his Brazilian counterpart, Jair Bolsonaro, over dinner Saturday at his Mar-a-Lago resort in Florida but refused to rule out imposing tariffs on steel and iron imports from the South American nation. When asked about the tariffs, Trump responded, "We have a very good relationship as to tariffs. And we helped Brazil and we want to always help Brazil. And the friendship is probably stronger now than it's ever been," according to a transcript released by the White House. Pressed if he would rule out tariffs, Trump said, "I don't want to make any promises. No promises." In December, Trump threatened to impose the tariffs on metals imported from Brazil and Argentina in retaliation for what he says are unfair agricultural policies. He backed off the threat a couple of weeks later after Bolsonaro asked him not to proceed with the tariffs, The New York Times reported. On Saturday, Trump and Bolsonaro also "reiterated their countries'

NEWS BRIEFS

Argentina Reports Latin America's First Death From Coronavirus

Argentina's Ministry of Health on Sunday reported Latin America's first death attributed to the coronavirus outbreak, the Associated Press reported. The 64-year-old man, who had recently traveled to Europe, suffered from underlying health problems. The man was not among the eight COVID-19 cases previously reported in Argentina, health officials said.

Venezuelan Officials Say 50,000 Voting Machines Destroyed in Fire

Venezuela's electoral council on Sunday said a fire in its main warehouse had destroyed almost 50,000 voting machines and 582 computers used in the country's elections, BBC News reported. Electoral council chief Tibisay Lucena said the cause will be investigated and that "nothing is being ruled out." Recent elections in Venezuela have been undermined by disruption and fraud. Elections for the National Assembly are due to be held before the end of the year, although no date has been set yet.

Demonstrators Clash With Police in Women's Day Marches in Mexico, Chile

Some 80,000 women marched in Mexico City on Sunday to mark International Women's Day and demand that the government do more to protect them, the Los Angeles Times reported. Protesters smashed windows, broke statues and sprayed graffiti. Meanwhile, in Chile, police used water cannons and tear gas to repel protesters as more than 125,000 women marched through Santiago, Agence France-Presse reported. Millions of women in Mexico and Argentina plan to stay away from offices, and schools today to protest violence against women, Reuters reported. [Editor's note: See related Q&A in the Feb. 27 issue of the Advisor.]

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donations to send to hospitals, schools and free diners, carefully avoiding duplication of efforts by promoting efficient coordination at the global, regional, national and local levels. Coordination requires a leading champion to help different actors organize logistics and deliveries. Third, partners, agencies and universities with experience and best practices can support family farming, customizing solutions in this context. These recommendations can activate results to ensure that no one is left behind suffering from hunger and malnutrition in Venezuela."

A **Ricardo Izurieta, associate professor of global health, and Luis Galindez, adjunct professor, both at the College of Public Health at the University of South Florida:** "To understand the serious situation of food supply and nutrition in Venezuela, it is important to highlight that it is not the consequence of natural disasters, as has historically happened in other parts of the world. What does the Venezuelan government do to improve the situation? It is clear that there is no political will to

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support for democracy in the region,” including their backing of Venezuela’s Juan Guaidó, whom the United States, Brazil and dozens of other countries recognize as Venezuela’s legitimate interim president, the White House said in a statement. On Sunday, Bolsonaro traveled to Miami where he was on hand for the signing of an agreement to allow partnerships in the development of defense technology.

BUSINESS NEWS

Venezuela Detains PDVSA Workers on Trafficking Charges

Venezuela’s government has detained at least 38 workers from state oil company PDVSA on charges of trafficking fuel, Reuters reported. Venezuelan Interior Minister Nestor Reverol on Saturday said those arrested include Oswaldo Vargas, the president of the company’s maritime subsidiary, PDV Marina. Government agents also detained his assistant, six members from the Paraguaná refinery’s dispatch service and 30 crew members from PDV Marina’s “Negra Hipólita” tanker, according to Reuters. Reverol accused the workers of state treason. “This is not simply an act of diverting fuel, it is also an act of treason ... because people are lining up at service stations for fuel because of U.S. empire’s sanctions,” Reverol said on television, referring to U.S. economic sanctions targeting the government of President Nicolás Maduro. Over the past year, Venezuela’s government has charged scores of employees at PDVSA with corruption and other misdeeds, leading to a flight of talent from the struggling company, according to Reuters. Maduro declared an energy emergency in the country last month and announced the creation of a commission to rehabilitate the oil sector. Last week, the socialist president appointed four new vice presidents at PDVSA and a new president of the unit managing the company’s relations with private foreign firms, OilPrice reported. [Editor’s note: See related [Q&A](#) in the March 6 issue of the weekly Energy Advisor.]

CAPITOL HILL WATCH

A Look at U.S. Congressional Activity on Latin America

Castro Praises U.S. Court Decision Blocking ‘Remain in Mexico’ Policy

U.S. Representative Joaquin Castro (D-Tex.), who chairs the House of Representatives’ Hispanic Caucus, on Feb. 28 praised a San Francisco federal appeals court’s decision to block the administration’s so-called “Remain in Mexico” policy. The court ordered the halt of the immigration measure, which allowed U.S. officials along the U.S. southern border to send migrants to Mexico while their requests for asylum in the United States were being consid-



Castro // File Photo: U.S. House of Representatives.

ered. “This was a horrific policy that left nearly 60K people vulnerable to violence and abuse,” Castro wrote on Twitter. “This is a major win and we must keep working to ensure that this Administration’s cruel, inhumane immigration policies end once and for all,” he added. In the ruling, the court said its decision applied to the entire U.S.-Mexico border, citing the need for uniform immigration rules, The Wall Street Journal reported. Administration officials indicated in court papers that it would seek a Supreme Court review of the ruling.

Rubio Warns of Coronavirus Risk

U.S. Senator Marco Rubio (R-Fla.) on March 1 warned of the risks that spread of the new strain of coronavirus, or COVID-19, poses to Caribbean countries. “Confirmation of a #coronavirus case in #DominicanRepublic is a troubling development,” he wrote on Twitter, adding that “chances of outbreak in #Haiti [are] now very high & impact could be catastrophic” and that “cases in #Florida [are] now a near certainty.” He also said that the top priority now should be preparedness for elderly and other vulnerable Floridians.

Menendez Slams Sanders for Cuba Remark

U.S. Senator Bob Menendez (D-N.J.), the top Democrat on the Senate Foreign Relations Committee, last week criticized Democratic presidential candidate and current Senator Bernie Sanders (D-Vt.) for comments last month that portrayed late Cuban leader Fidel Castro in a favorable light, CNN reported. In a televised interview, Sanders said “it’s unfair to simply say everything is bad” about Castro’s regime. “When Fidel Castro came into office, you know what he did? He had a massive literacy program. Is that a bad thing? Even though Fidel Castro did it?” Sanders said, adding that he was “very opposed to the authoritarian nature of Cuba.” Menendez responded by saying, sarcastically, “I’m sure all those who died at Castro’s hands ... and all those who [were] tortured, those who live in my state and suffered enormously under the regime—the more than million people who fled—I’m sure they all think that the literacy program was worth all of that,” CNN reported.

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resolve the deep and serious problem that the government has created. Nevertheless, the government, in order to alleviate the lack of food supply, has implemented the Local Supply and Production Committees (CLAP), without recognizing the low nutritional situation of the population due to food scarcity, low production and low purchasing power of citizens. The 'solution' implemented consists of the distribution of food bags with some items (flour, grains, pasta and poultry) that are sold at low prices to a sector of the population that supports the government. But the government discriminates against groups that do not support it, which is the majority of the country. What can the international community do to help Venezuelans? Trying to provide answers or technical solutions to solve this social problem is difficult with a government that denies to the world the humanitarian crisis that systematically violates the human rights of the Venezuelan population. To highlight one example, a year ago with the support of international organizations and friendly countries, Colombia tried to supply large quantities of food and medicine, but the government prevented their entry, generating a situation of violence in the border city of Cúcuta. No external aid initiative can be viable as long as the government itself prevents the functioning of the different political structures and paradoxically supports corruption, drug trafficking, money laundering and use of violence as social control."

A **Javier El-Hage, chief legal officer at the Human Rights Foundation:** "Like some of the 20th century's worst humanitarian crises—in China under Mao, in Ukraine under Stalin or in North Korea and Cuba under the Kim and Castro dynasties, respectively—Venezuela's crisis is entirely man-made, a result of the Chavista regime's imposition of sweeping price controls that

disrupted the production and distribution of food and medicine. Although price controls in certain areas of the economy have been in place since 2003, they became pervasive in early 2014, lasting until late 2019. Through this period, the national regulator for prices and costs imposed 'fair prices' (artificially low) of basic goods, from flour to chicken to toothpaste, causing massive shortages, rationing and malnutrition. Today, 90 percent

“**Last year, local organizations warned that more than 300,000 children were at risk of dying of malnutrition.**”

— Javier El-Hage

of Venezuelans are living below the poverty line. In 2012, Venezuelans were able to purchase 5,700 calories worth of food each day on minimum wage, while today that amount affords them fewer than 900 calories; as a result, Venezuelans have lost an average of 24 pounds. Also caused by price controls on foreign currency (U.S. dollars) administered by CADIVI—a government office that has enriched Chavismo cronies authorizing fraudulent transactions at the expense of real imports—the country's health care system collapsed, with massive shortages in medicines and vaccines. Last year, local organizations warned that more than 300,000 children were at risk of dying of malnutrition. While the situation on the ground has improved since the partial lifting of price and currency controls in 2019, lasting change may only happen if Maduro goes and a democratic government takes over."

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