

Venezuela's refugee crisis is growing

Neighbouring countries are bracing to receive an additional five million Venezuelan refugees this year on top of the three million people who have already left the crisis-stricken nation.

Church and development sources have told Canadian Catholic News the situation is becoming even more dire for families sleeping in parks and begging on the streets in the Brazilian town of Boa Vista, or searching for food and work in rural Colombia.

"Every day we see the situation getting worse – more sick people, elderly travelling alone, pregnant women and children sleeping in the streets," Claritan Sr. Valdiza Carvalho wrote in an e-mail.

The exodus from the South American country has accelerated in the past year in the face of food and medicine shortages, political instability, violence and hyperinflation. The International Monetary Fund projects Venezuela's economy will collapse by 18 per cent this year, while inflation is expected to reach 10 million per cent.

The government of Venezuelan President Nicolás Maduro has been called "illegitimate and morally unacceptable" by Venezuela's bishops. Archbishop José Luis Aduaje, president of the bishops' conference, accuses the Maduro government of causing "human and social deterioration." Maduro is starting his second six-year term as president following an election that many consider to have been corrupted.

Pope Francis was drawn into Venezuelan affairs when 24 Latin American leaders wrote an open letter that criticized the Pope for failing to recognize the oppression of Venezuelans and Nicaraguans.

In his Christmas blessing, the Pope prayed that Venezuela would "recover social harmony" and its citizens would work together to protect the most vulnerable members of society. For Nicaragua, he urged its citizens to work as "brothers and sisters" to repair division and discord.

The open letter called Venezuela's government a "militarized narco-dictatorship" that systematically violates people's rights and caused widespread famine and other social ills. It expressed disappointment that the Pope failed to point out that the country's hardships are the result of government oppression.

By the end of this year at least a quarter of Venezuela's population will be on the move unless the oil-rich nation suddenly finds a way to feed its 30 million people, according to economists Dany Bahar and Douglas Barrios writing for the Brookings Institution website.

Carvalho is on the front lines of the effort to keep the Venezuelan refugees from complete destitution as the co-ordinator of the Diocese of Roraima's ministry to migrants. The remote Amazonian province of Brazil has already seen 10,000 Venezuelans arrive in 10 small municipalities. With 11 shelters running, there are still about 2,000 refugees living on the street of the provincial capital of Boa Vista, mainly around the bus terminal, Carvalho reports.

Working with the Caritas network in Brazil – a humanitarian partner of Canada's Catholic agency, Development and Peace – Carvalho's ministry is helping desperate migrants with identity papers, Portuguese lessons, food and medical care.

Meanwhile, in rural Colombia the German Catholic organization Malteser International is witnessing a rising tide of refugees.

"The numbers of people fleeing Venezuela are increasing daily," wrote Jelena Kaifenheim, Malteser International regional manager for Latin America and the Caribbean, in an e-mail. "We currently see things getting worse and worse, with little hope that 2019 will look any better."

Since 2017, Canada has spent \$2.21 million on direct humanitarian assistance in response to the crisis, plus \$4 million in regional funding for Latin America and the Caribbean.

"Canada was the first foreign country to provide support to the most vulnerable Venezuelan migrants living in Roraima's shelters," Global Affairs Canada spokesperson Maegan Graveline told Canadian Catholic News.

"This included short-term projects to provide emergency food and meet other immediate needs of migrants, as well as support for education, health and social services for those living in shelters."

Further Canadian funding is in the works for 2018-2019, Graveline said. In addition, the Canadians are training local journalists to ensure factual coverage of migration issues in the Brazilian cities receiving Venezuelan migrants, she said.

Getting aid to refugees and trying to reduce friction between migrants and their host communities is what the Global Compact for Safe, Orderly and Regular Migration is supposed to achieve, said the Maltesers' Watson.

"To see migrants as an opportunity and not only as a burden," is how Watson describes the UN-brokered agreement signed by 167 nations in Morocco last month.

The Maltesers' work with Indigenous refugees and host communities in Guajira, northeast Colombia, has been financed by Germany. While the government is set to pour another 700,000 euros (\$1 million Cdn) to keep the project going to

2020, the grant depends on Malteser International raising 10 per cent of the amount itself.