

# Americas

## QUARTERLY



**Haiti  
to Chile,  
a Musical  
Journey**

PAGE 58

# The Migration Issue

More than 4.5 million people, mostly Venezuelans, have moved to another country in Latin America since 2015.

What does that mean for host countries' economies? Politics? Schools?

How does the coronavirus change things?

**A SPECIAL REPORT**

Each person on this map represents an estimated net gain of 100,000 migrants in that country since 2015.



*Americas Quarterly Virtual Event:*  
**Migration in Latin America—  
and How COVID-19  
Changes Things**



**Event information:**

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**April 22, 2020**

Watch this event live on [www.as-coa.org](http://www.as-coa.org)

It's one of the biggest transformations in Latin America's history: more than 4.5 million migrants who have moved elsewhere in the region since 2015, mainly departing Venezuela. The response from host nations like Colombia, Peru and Brazil has been mostly generous, but is now being tested by the coronavirus, rising xenophobia and slowing economies. What is the reality faced by Venezuelans and other migrant groups, and how is it evolving during the pandemic? What are governments doing, and what can they do better? Our expert panel will bring new insight to a rapidly changing situation.

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# A Time for Compassion

The pandemic only increases the need for Latin American countries to fully integrate recent migrants into society. Yes, it will be hard.

**E**VEN BEFORE the coronavirus hit, Latin America was struggling to cope with an unprecedented challenge—to its economies, healthcare systems and societies at large.

More than 4.5 million Latin Americans have migrated elsewhere in the region since 2015. The vast majority are Venezuelans fleeing their country's ongoing tragedy, but Guatemalans, Nicaraguans, Haitians and others have also been on the move. Polls suggest most migrants intend to stay in their new homes—even if the situation back in Caracas or Port-au-Prince unexpectedly improves.

For the most part, the response from host countries has been generous—in a region far more accustomed to sending migrants than receiving them. Many Latin American governments have granted temporary visas or work permits, put extra shifts in schools to accommodate new arrivals, and publicly urged tolerance. As a New York-based publication, we cannot help but notice the contrast with the United States, and express our admiration.

Even so, the strains are clear, and growing.

This special report shows how host countries are dealing with this unprecedented flow—in schools

(page 14), in the workplace (page 32), and beyond. Many migrants have college or technical degrees, or other skills sorely missing in their new homes. They have also brought welcome contributions to food (page 46) and music (page 58). The risk is that these positive contributions and the general goodwill of recent years will now be forgotten as COVID-19 unleashes a terrible recession and increased competition for hospital beds and other public services.

Indeed, polls were already showing a backlash. A poll in December showed 62% of Colombians don't want any more Venezuelans to join the estimated 1.7 million already living there. Fifty-two percent of Peruvians say they fear Venezuelans, up from 24% in 2018. Some politicians are already seizing on this xenophobia (page 28), urging an end to visas and programs for migrants.

But such policies usually force migrants to recede further into the shadows, not leave entirely, as the U.S. experience shows. That would cause even bigger damage to economies—and public health amid a pandemic. The last thing Latin America needs is the creation of a new permanent class of vulnerable people. The region's generosity has been impressive; now is the time for more of it, not less.



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Long accustomed to seeing its citizens move north, many Latin American countries have now become a destination. Migrants are arriving by the millions, bringing with them skills, accents, cultures—and a need for jobs, health care and education.

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# Our Readers

Tell us what you think.  
Please send letters to [Brian@as-coa.org](mailto:Brian@as-coa.org)



Former Brazilian Defense Minister Raul Jungmann speaks at an event marking the launch of *AQ*'s special report on Latin American militaries. The conversation included former Colombian Defense Minister Juan Carlos Pinzón, *AQ* Editor-in-Chief Brian Winter, former U.S. Ambassador to Mexico Roberta Jacobson, and Florida International University's Frank Mora, left to right.

CNN en Español's Xavier Serbiá praises *AQ*'s special report during a conversation with *AQ*'s Brian Winter.







**Jon Lee Anderson**

@jonleeanderson

I'm a staff writer at The New Yorker.

Interesting to compare Bloomberg & Warren's answers. She has edge on marijuana, Cuba sanctions & need for US to apologize for past policies. Both sound good on Central America: The 2020 Candidates: 10 Questions on Latin America Policy [americasquarterly.org/content/2020-c...](https://americasquarterly.org/content/2020-c...) via @amerquarterly



**Mercedes DAlessandro**

@dalesmm

Doctora en Economía, Directora Nacional de Economía y Género en @Economía\_Ar  
Autora de Economía Feminista  
(publicado en )

Puede el feminismo argentino cambiar el gobierno? // Can Argentina's Feminists Change Government? [americasquarterly.org/content/can-ar...](https://americasquarterly.org/content/can-ar...) via @amerquarterly



Can Argentina's Feminists Change Government?  
[americasquarterly.org](https://americasquarterly.org)



**Fabiana Sofia Perera**

@fabiana\_sofia

Not that kind of doctor. Lover of chocolate. Nerd about all things oil. Knower of Latin America, democracy, and national security. Proud public servant

Had the privilege to be a part of a very interesting conversation on Latin America's militaries yesterday at @FIU to mark the launch of the @AmerQuarterly issue on this important subject. Thank you for inviting me to participate.



@AmerQuarterly

**@SarahENielsen**

I appreciate the diverse set of questions

@AmerQuarterly posed to 2020 presidential candidates on Latin America—the region is much more than Venezuela, Mexico, and migrant crises.

**@apagliar** The new

@AmerQuarterly podcast is really quite good, hosted by @BrazilBrian

**@GregWeeksCLT**

@AmerQuarterly has a special report on militaries in Latin America. It's not the 1970s again but we cannot ignore their political influence.

**@gugachacra** Making Sense of Bolsonaro's Foreign Policy at Year One. Artigo do @GCasaroey Na Americas Quarterly

**@AntonioDeLoeraB** Top 10 stories of the decade in Latin America, according to Americas Quarterly at least. Worth a read.

**@RyanBergPhD** "Our Chilean neighbors are not mistaken if they see in Argentina a possible preview of their future." @AmerQuarterly

**@kikomdzg** What a treat we had today at @FIU's @GordonInstitute. The launch of the latest @AmerQuarterly on the growing influence of the militaries in Latin America @ASCOA. A multilayered, interactive panel with some of the top policy experts in the region.

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# panorama

LOOKING AT THE AMERICAS IN ALL DIRECTIONS

EDITED BY BRENDAN O'BOYLE

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 **THE BIG PICTURE**

A day after President Iván Duque closed the Colombia-Venezuela border in March, Venezuelan citizens attempt to carry an unconscious woman into Colombia while trying to avoid the spread of the coronavirus. Days later, Colombia closed its borders almost entirely. Other governments took similarly drastic measures to try to limit the virus' toll, including in Venezuela, where Nicolás Maduro ordered most businesses to close. Across Latin America, the rapid spread of the disease shocked economies and forced governments to delay needed reforms.

SCHNEIDER MENDOZA/AFP

STAT BOX

**80%**

share of protests in Latin America in 2019 that were peaceful, lacking violence or vandalism

Source: Armed Conflict Location & Event Data Project

QUOTES



**“No one thought the youth would rise up. They thought we were only on our phones and didn’t care.”**

—**Xiye Bastida**,  
17-year-old climate activist from Mexico



**“I have great faith that we will move our dear Mexico forward, that misfortunes and pandemics won’t affect us. Nothing of the sort.”**

—**Andrés Manuel López Obrador**,  
Mexico’s president, on March 15

UP CLOSE: BRAZIL

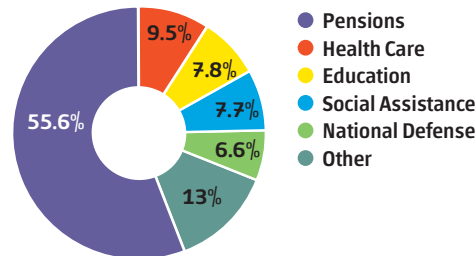


In the second year of Jair Bolsonaro’s presidency, Brazil continues to struggle with a weak economy—and a polarized politics that isn’t helping.

**ECONOMY** Economists were already slashing growth forecasts before the coronavirus outbreak. At the time of publication, markets were falling as investors kept fleeing the country, with capital outflows in 2020 beating last year’s record in just 43 days.

**POLITICS** The outbreak of the coronavirus in March increased pressure in Congress to pass pro-market reforms, but there was also a rise in calls to abandon rigid fiscal rules in order to face the pandemic and keep Brazil’s economy going. President Jair Bolsonaro drew criticism for his early downplaying of the coronavirus.

FEDERAL SPENDING IN 2019



SOURCE: Controladoria-Geral da União



What’s Up



ARGENTINA’S FILM INDUSTRY

Argentina’s creatives got a big vote of confidence when Netflix announced on March 11 it would open offices in Buenos Aires later this year. Netflix also announced plans to create more than half a dozen original Argentine series, films and documentaries.

What’s Down



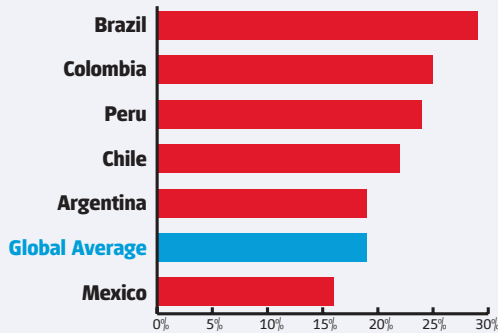
ELECTIONS

Even before the coronavirus, 2020 had been a rough year for electoral institutions. In the Dominican Republic, a malfunction in February’s municipal elections sparked protests and a redo in March. Guyana’s presidential vote in March was disputed, and, at the time of publication, authorities had called for postponing a constitutional referendum in Chile and a presidential election in Bolivia.

FEATURED GRAPH

In times of social unrest, facial recognition and artificial intelligence offer new tools for governments—and new privacy risks for citizens. An IPSOS survey of adults in 26 countries found Latin Americans more likely to be OK with governments using these technologies to maintain order.

**% who said facial recognition and artificial intelligence should be allowed as much as needed, even if citizens' privacy was at risk**



SOURCE: IPSOS Global Public Opinion on Government Use of Facial Recognition, July 2019

Violence Against Women

Dario Castillejos, Oaxaca, Mexico



AQ Q&A



**Mónica Moreno Figueroa**

Co-founder, **The Collective to Eliminate Racism in Mexico (COPERA)**

**For the first time, Mexicans had the opportunity to self-identify as Afro-Mexican, Afro-descendant or black in Mexico's 2020 census conducted in March. How did this occur?**

It's the result of a 20-year, bottom-up movement of different organizations campaigning to make the Afro-Mexican community visible. The movement has already resulted in the formal recognition of the term "Afro-Mexican," which was added to the constitution in 2019. In an intercensal survey in 2015, 1.4 million people self-identified as Afro-Mexican, Afro-descendant, or black, representing 1.2% of the total population. Since then, COPERA has been advocating for census inclusion and also launched a national campaign, AfroCenso. MX, to raise awareness around participation. When

the results come out, I expect the number of people that self-identify to be greater than in 2015.

**Why is it important that Afro-Mexicans self-identify on the census?**

The census will, hopefully, allow the Afro-Mexican community to recapture their identity with pride. It also has enormous policy implications. Obtaining data on where and in what conditions black people live in Mexico opens the window for creating policies that benefit the black population, especially at the municipal and regional levels. Indigenous populations, for example, have been identified on the census since 2001, and policies have, in turn, been tailored to the indigenous populations' specific needs.

**As an activist with COPERA, you have been campaigning to make racism public in Mexico. What are some of the unique challenges that Afro-Mexicans face?**

Black identity in Mexico lacks recognition. Issues of race, racism and slavery, and the history of people of African heritage, are not prioritized in Mexican schools. There is confusion and even sometimes denial of the existence of Afro-Mexicans and where they live.

—Leonie Rauls

MÓNICA MORENO FIGUEROA

# The Risky Politics of Anti-Money Laundering

In Mexico and Brazil, financial intelligence is dangerously entering the political arena

by Roberto Simon and Emilie Sweigart



Several factors have made Latin America better at detecting large-scale corruption, but one has been particularly transformative: progress in anti-money laundering (AML). From Brazil's Lava Jato and its subsequent Odebrecht investigations, to campaign financing cases in Chile and prosecutions against high-ranking officials in Guatemala, all relied heavily on financial intelligence.

But now, AML is facing a new risk: politics. Examples in Brazil and Mexico should give us pause.

The Mexican agency in charge of detecting suspicious transactions, the UIF, became the tip of the spear in President Andrés Manuel López Obrador's war on what he calls "the pact of the corrupt." A former electoral prosecutor sacked by the previous administration, Santiago Nieto Castillo, was tapped as director and has drastically expanded the UIF's activities (see chart). And new laws on tax fraud, making it a national security offense, granted AML agents powers to seize assets even before a conviction.

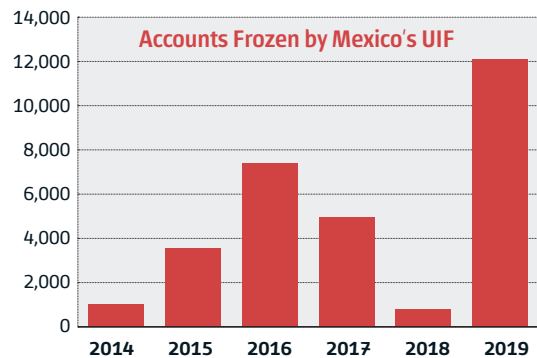
Nieto's UIF led actions against high-profile targets—from former Pemex CEO Emilio Lozoya to Supreme Court Justice Eduardo Medina Mora, all of them not aligned with AMLO. Critics have pointed out that the agency has declined to investigate corruption scandals involving people close to the president, such as the national electricity company director, Manuel Bartlett, or the head of the ruling party, Yeidckol Polevsky. Nieto has denied accusations of bias.

If López Obrador would be right to say that before him, the UIF was not doing its job, in Brazil the story is different.

Brazil's financial intelligence unit, COAF, has played a critical role in all major anti-corruption investigations since 1998. President Jair Bolsonaro promised to expand it, but things began to change after suspicious activities involving his oldest son, Senator Flávio Bolsonaro, surfaced.

Chief Supreme Court Justice Dias Toffoli not only dismissed the findings, but also froze all COAF activi-

## Under López Obrador, enforcement against suspicious transactions has surged



SOURCE: UIF

ties for four months, ruling it a violation of the "right to privacy." Meanwhile, COAF became a matter of intense political dispute between Congress and Bolsonaro, with the former blocking most of the president's proposed changes.

So how can the region control political interference in AML?

Adopting international standards and collaborating with bodies such as the Financial Action Task Force and the Egmont Group, which congregate financial intelligence units from across the world, would be a start. Diana Salazar, Ecuador's attorney general and former head of the country's AML agency, said inter-governmental organizations can provide crucial assistance in assessing risks and developing regulations.

Stronger democracies and institutions propelled Latin America's progress in AML. These elements will continue to be essential for financial intelligence in the age of cryptocurrencies, encrypted messages and new forms of bank secrecy.

**Simon** heads the AS/COA Anti-Corruption Working Group (AWG) and is politics editor at AQ

**Sweigart** is an AQ editor and researcher for AWG



SPECIAL SECTION

← THE MIGRATION ISSUE →

# 7 Effects of Migration That We Need to Talk About

Much attention has gone to the humanitarian emergencies that have forced millions of Latin Americans to flee their home countries. But what happens after they arrive at their new destinations? What about schools, economies—and the positive things that migrants bring with them? *AQ* takes a look at seven areas where migrants are changing the landscape—and that deserve our attention too.



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# LESSONS FOR EVERYBODY

**How a school in a Brazilian border state is trying— with some success— to welcome new arrivals**

by Richard Lapper

**B**OA VISTA, BRAZIL—The moment you walk into the Olavo Brasil Filho school in this sleepy Amazon city, you know something unusual is happening.

“Love your neighbor—If you can’t manage that, at least respect them,” said one sign hung from the wall.

“Two cultures, one nation,” read another.

“Your presence fills us with happiness,” a third said, written around a bright red heart.

Just three years ago, the school had only six students from Venezuela. But that increased to 63 by 2019, and by the time I visited in early 2020, 92 of the school’s 859 students had come from across the border. The surge mirrors a trend seen across much of South America—putting enormous strain on services, including schools, which are still figuring out how to assimilate the new arrivals.

Unlike elsewhere on the continent, the language in Brazil is a significant barrier for incoming Venezuelans. And kids are definitely not immune from the xenophobia often seen in society at large. But teachers are still doing their best to





Simone Catão, center, and her math students at Olavo Brasil Filho school holding the Brazilian national flag and the flag of the state of Roraima.





**Richard Lapper** is a freelance writer and consultant who specializes in Latin America. He is an associate fellow at the Royal Institute of International Affairs in London and a member of the editorial board of *Americas Quarterly*. He held a number of senior positions at the *Financial Times* of London between 1990 and 2015 and was the newspaper's Latin America editor between 1998 and 2008.

make migrants feel at home—and the signs on the wall are just a small part of the effort. Simone Catão, 43, a charismatic math teacher who seemed to bounce with enthusiasm at every word, is behind the integration drive. “At the beginning the Venezuelans here had such low self-esteem, and the not-so-nice games that adolescents tend to play didn’t help. We had to make them feel welcome,” said Catão.

Catão’s methods include adding hyperinflation and the complexities of Venezuela’s exchange rate system to her usual lessons. “I said to the kids, let’s do some comparisons: How much does a kilo of meat cost here and how much in Venezuela? Would your family be able to buy meat if you were in Venezuela?”

She has also urged students to help one another with Spanish and Portuguese, and share their cultural heritage. In an improvised garden in the school’s courtyard, students have planted mint, parsley, and orange and pomegranate trees with neatly spelled-out labels in Portuguese and Spanish. The school canteen has started to serve Venezuelan arepas, Brazilian students teach newcomers drum rhythms, while Venezuelan parents have been invited to teach their traditional dance, the *joropo*.

Are such efforts working?

Well, as the kids here will tell you—it’s complicated.

But it’s also obvious that the integration effort in Roraima state, and places like it all over Latin America, is just getting started.

## New friends— but some bullies, too

**L**IKE MANY OTHER COUNTRIES, Brazil officially closed its borders to Venezuela amid the coronavirus pandemic in March. But most experts expect the flow of people to continue across a border that is mostly jungle and extremely difficult, in practice, to seal off. Even if the flow were to suddenly stop, more than 60,000 Venezuelans are already living in Roraima state, raising the state’s population by more than 10%.

Most have fled poorer eastern regions of Venezuela such as Anzoátegui, only to arrive in what is Brazil’s poorest state by GDP. The impact on virtually every aspect of life has been immense. Unemployment in Roraima has more than doubled. Lines at hospitals and clinics have lengthened. Homicides are down, but petty crimes and robberies are up. And during a two-week



**“This situation has been way outside our expectations.”**

—Leila Soares de Souza Perussolo, Roraima state education secretary

visit talking to dozens of teachers, parents, students and administrators, the strain on the education system was evident.

In 2019, more than 10,000 students were enrolled in Roraima state’s schools, more than three times more than the previous year, propelled by the flow of families crossing the border. “This situation has been way outside our expectations,” said Leila Soares de Souza Perussolo, the state’s education secretary.

The biggest challenges, of course, are faced by Venezuelans themselves. For 12-year-old Alvin Malave, adjusting to life in his new adopted home here in northern Brazil has been hard.

“He is less nervous now but it has been quite emotional,” said his mother, Malvin Malave, 45, who has found casual work as a manicurist. She and her hus-

band, who does the odd painting and building job, are “surviving,” she told *AQ*.

Schooling was one of the main factors that brought Malave to Brazil last year. In spite of food shortages, the mother of three was reluctant to leave her grown-up children behind, but said her young son’s education prospects were deteriorating rapidly. “There were no teachers. They had all resigned. They make more money selling things on the street,” she said.

Malave had been encouraged by the fact that her nine-year-old niece, who moved to Boa Vista two years earlier, had picked up Portuguese quickly. But for Alvin, a shy boy who prefers tennis to the Brazilian obsession of soccer, it has been harder going.

Slowly eating his way through a tub of frozen açaí, a popular Amazon fruit that Brazilians eat like ice



cream, Alvin told me he liked history and science classes but that Portuguese was difficult to learn, and that he had not been able to make Brazilian friends. “They are a little closed,” he said.

Dilmaris Carolina Durán, a 31-year-old hairdresser from Isla Margarita, arrived in Brazil last year, but her four youngest children have yet to find a place in local elementary schools. José Gregorio, her 14-year-old son, just started secondary school but has to walk an hour and a half to go to class. Many Brazilians have been resentful of new arrivals, with local students reluctant to mix with the newcomers or in some cases outright bullying them.

“I left my first school. The kids started pinching me,” said Yoriexi Gloirisbel Pena Cordero, a 12-year-old who left her home in El Tigre two years ago. “It was horrible.”

## Kids will be kids

**Y**ET WHEN I SPOKE to both Venezuelan and Brazilian students at the Olavo Brasil Filho school, almost all the chatter was upbeat. First I met with 11- and 12-year-olds, and later with teenagers between 15 and 17, and kids were all competing with one another to say favorable things.

“They call us *venecos*,” laughed Luis Alfonso Gobaria Gonsalvez, 15, who came from Venezuela in 2017. “But I have felt no prejudice at all. I was made to feel really welcome and I have Brazilian friends.” Danielle Santana Araujo, a 16-year-old Roraima native, said that after a rocky start, things had improved at school. “Brazilians and Venezuelans tended to be in separate groups. But things got better, especially when they started to speak Portuguese.”

Several younger Brazilians were anxious to share poems they had written for a competition the school held last year. “I’m human not an animal, I’m a refugee looking for a place to stay,” recited Karina Freire da Silva, an earnest 11-year-old.

Afterward, she said into my phone camera, “We will help them. They can count on us.”

Yasmin Camille Costa, a 12-year-old from Boa Vista, and her best friend, Sofia Ginet Rodríguez, who arrived from the Venezuelan town of San Félix two years ago, happily posed for photos arm in arm. “There is a lot of prejudice, but it is diminishing. We are all friends now,” said Costa.

A few miles away, close to the center of Boa Vista, is Lobo D’Almada school. There, teacher Maria Bernadete Oliveira started an initiative against bullying and



## **“There is a lot of prejudice but it is diminishing. It was worse at the beginning. We are all friends now.”**

—Yasmin Camille Costa, a 12-year-old from Boa Vista, left, with her Venezuelan friend Sofia Ginet Rodríguez

discrimination. “We wanted to make the Venezuelan kids feel welcome at the school,” said Oliveira, 47. Like Catão, Oliveira wants to persuade other schools to adopt similar schemes.

But resources available to schools have simply been inadequate to meet demand. Funding for education is adjusted according to the number of students in the system. However, the budget is calculated according to enrollment in the previous year. With the number of Venezuelan students rising so quickly, school administrators are struggling to keep pace.

Much of the good work I saw is dependent on the

goodwill and energy of teachers such as Catão and Oliveira. An irrepressible source of energy, Catão said she had to persuade fellow teachers to participate. “It was a lot of work at the start, but in the end everyone in the school is taking part,” she said. With money donated by a local politician, Catão was able to publish a small booklet, *Two Cultures and One Nation*, detailing the projects they had developed, to try to get other schools to adopt the idea. “Progress is really down to the efforts of individuals,” said João Paulo Pires, a local journalist and editor of the *Correio de Lavrado* website.



**“The population of Roraima is very hospitable, but there is a limit.”**

—Antonio Denarium, Roraima’s governor

## Nerves wear thin

**T**HE FEDERAL GOVERNMENT is funding the emergency reception of migrants through a program dubbed Operação Acolhida (Operation Welcome) managed by the army. Some \$40 million in funds were allocated in 2019 and a further \$65 million in 2020 for 11 emergency camps in Boa Vista and the border town of Pacaraima. Nearly 6,000 Venezuelans are housed in tidy rows of specially designed shacks made from lightweight steel and heat-resistant plastics.

The army also partners with agencies to help migrants find homes and jobs in the better-off southern regions of Brazil, and some 33,000 Venezuelans have relocated in the last two years. But the number of migrants crossing the border had still been rising. Colonel Carlos Cinelli, chief of staff at Operação Acolhida, told AQ that an average of 523 Venezuelans a day came

into Brazil through Pacaraima during 2019. They tend to come from more isolated eastern and southern regions of the country and generally have fewer family connections in Brazil than other migrants.

This is all a big concern for Roraima’s governor, Antonio Denarium, who, during his campaign for governor had defended closing the border. In late 2018, the impact of the wave of migration had pushed Roraima into crisis, forcing his predecessor, Suely Campos, to stop paying civil servants. That in turn triggered a strike by the police and a short-lived and unprecedented federal intervention in the state. Denarium, a farmer and one of two state governors to join President Jair Bolsonaro’s new right-wing party, the Alliance for Brazil, told AQ that his administration had been able to bring the state’s accounts back into the black.



A Venezuelan migrant travels along a highway, crossing the border into Pacaraima, Roraima state, Brazil.

But he claims that health care, education and security for Venezuelans is costing Roraima the equivalent of 10% of its annual budget. Indeed, the state is taking legal action to recover the money from the federal government. “There are a lot of Venezuelans here in Boa Vista and this is having an impact on our public services. The population of Roraima is very hospitable, but there is a limit,” he said. “[People here see] everything that comes from Brasilia is for the Venezuelans and nothing for them. They are getting really fed up.”

Violence between Brazilians and Venezuelans has been mercifully rare. The last major incident happened in August 2018 when a group of residents of Pacaraima destroyed a camp, forcing more than 1,000 migrants back over the border.

But there is plenty of evidence of low-level dis-

crimination. I heard stories about restaurant customers who didn’t want to be served by Venezuelan waiters and small businesses refusing to employ Venezuelan workers. Malave, the Venezuelan manicurist, became tearful as she described similar experiences. “There is a lot of xenophobia here. I have these experiences and I feel undermined,” she said.

Back at the Olavo Brasil Filho school, amid all the optimism, the governor’s argument resonates. “Many Brazilians feel they don’t get the same benefits as the Venezuelans and that they are losing out,” said Somara da Silva, who is 16. “We tell people here that the majority of Venezuelans are good people. Even so, a state can’t absorb a whole country. We like the Venezuelans but the state is overloaded. It has to be controlled.” ●

← THE IMPACT ON POLITICS →

# HERE TO STAY

**Colombia has chosen to integrate Venezuelans crossing the border—but the challenge has taken on a new dimension**

by Cecilia Tornaghi







Colombians serve meals to Venezuelan migrants near a transportation hub in Bogotá.

**T**HE STREAM OF VENEZUELANs fleeing from the implosion of their homeland had become routine at Colombian border towns, until the coronavirus pandemic worsened, leading the most welcoming country in the region to temporarily close the seven posts separating the country from Venezuela. But with a 1,367-mile (2,200-km) border, and almost 2 million people already in the country seeking jobs, health care, education—a normal life—the continuing challenge facing Colombia is hard to fathom.

AQ talked to Felipe Muñoz, President Iván Duque's adviser tasked with overseeing the response to the unprecedented influx of people. According to Muñoz, their goal is to integrate them—as fast as possible. This interview was edited for clarity and length.

**AQ: What enabled Colombia to absorb the equivalent of almost 3.5% of its population in such a short period of time?**

**Felipe Muñoz:** There isn't a choice. With the coronavirus pandemic we had to take the extreme measure of refusing new migrants, but as normalcy resumes we will continue to welcome and integrate them. There is a historical responsibility—about 3 million Colombians fled to Venezuela years ago due to our own conflicts—and also an ethical imperative to help people fleeing a brutal regime. We decided we should consider this an opportunity, a development challenge.

We have government agencies and local authorities of the most impacted communities working together. In 18 locations we have regular meetings between national, regional and municipal governments as well as international actors cooperating on the ground.

Border municipalities have seen their population grow up to 40% in three years, but we have been able to distribute migrants along the territory. If you consider Peru, 80% of the migrants are in Lima. In Colombia now 30% of migrants are at the border, 70% are spread through 15 regional capitals.

Felipe Muñoz, special adviser to the president of Colombia for the Colombian-Venezuelan border



**AQ: What keeps you up at night?**

**FM:** There is a lot of competition for the most complicated problem, but I'd say health. The coronavirus has put the whole world in an unprecedented situation, but even before we were dealing with an increase in sexual diseases, mental health issues—which is the most demanding and challenging problem—and even experienced cases of transmissible diseases that had been eradicated.

**AQ: How is Colombia funding these initiatives?**

**FM:** We have received in international aid less than 10% of what we need. If we compare the response plans for the Rohingya, at \$342 per migrant, or the Syrian regional plan at \$290 per person, Venezuelans received \$42, with 60% coming from the United States. It is not a competition and we are not looking to take away from Syria, of course.

We need to strengthen our relationship with development banks and involve the private sector to create a win-win strategy; there is a role for social impact bonds and other financial tools. We offered a 10-year tax incentive to attract companies to the border.

We need all sources to pitch in—the government, private sector, international aid and multilaterals.

**AQ: Don't you fear locals feeling left out?**

**FM:** We are not thinking of policies for migrants, we want to include migrants in our policies. This process is not about isolating migrants or creating refugee camps. That is the way we want to see this process, as a total inclusion on our society.

Colombians have been very generous with Venezuelan migrants and we need to be proud of that. But we have noticed a decrease in public support for our welcoming policy lately. We need to work harder in citizen security and labor market integration to contain a xenophobic sentiment in Colombia.

**AQ: How do you get them jobs when many arrive without documents?**

**FM:** We decided to regularize as many migrants as we can, because we need them to compete under the same conditions, and to keep them away from illicit businesses. We try to learn about their skills to match them with the demand for labor and are working to expedite the process of validating diplomas. More than 20% have a university or a technical degree. It is a complicated bottleneck, but we are working on it.

The informal economy is where most of the competition between locals and migrants is happening. The services sector, especially hotels, restaurants and beauty salons, have employed many Venezuelans; there is also temporary work in agriculture. We don't want to displace Colombians from the job market, so we are trying to create opportunities where it has been harder to find available workforce.

**AQ: How do you see Colombia 10 years from now?**

**FM:** I am very optimistic or I couldn't do this job! This is a young population, and now with new naturalized Colombians, new skills, new gains on the cultural side. We want to transform the thinking about migration from a humanitarian crisis to a development challenge. Because this phenomenon is going to be here for many years. We need to change our mind and begin to think that this is not an earthquake, it is a continuous earthquake. ●

## A Lesser Response to Venezuela's Crisis

International aid pledges during the first four years of Syria's crisis were far bigger than for Venezuela

**\$7.4 billion**

● \$1,500  
per person



Syrians

**\$580 million**

● \$125  
per person



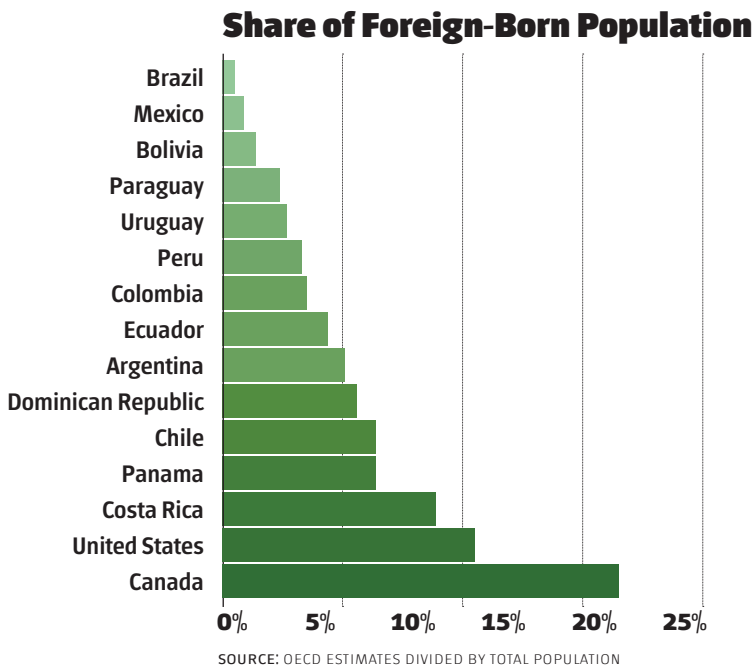
Venezuelans

SOURCE: DANY BAHAR, MEAGAN DOOLEY—  
BROOKINGS INSTITUTION

# ESTIMATED MIGRANT FLOWS SINCE 2015

Research by Leonie Rauls and Emilie Sweigart

**T**hese maps and charts reflect estimates of the unprecedented flow of migrants within Latin America since 2015. Such data are notoriously difficult to track due to the undocumented nature of much migration, and we would like to emphasize the numbers are approximate. *AQ* compiled these estimates based on multiple sources, including the OECD, the Migration Policy Institute and researchers in the field. We then checked our methodology with those parties, who told us they believed the estimates appear reasonable. In most cases the estimates were current through mid-2019.



SOURCES: IMMIGRANTS: COLOMBIA: MIGRATION COLOMBIA; MEXICO: UN DESA, MPP, STRAUSS CENTER; OTHER COUNTRIES: OECD INTERNATIONAL MIGRATION STATISTICS (CALCULATED BY SUBTRACTING JUNE 2015 ESTIMATE FROM JUNE 2019 ESTIMATE) EMIGRANTS: VENEZUELA, NICARAGUA: UNHCR; CENTRAL AMERICA: STEPHANIE LEUTERT AND SARAH SPALDING/LAWFARE/UNIVERSITY OF TEXAS, PROJECTED NUMBERS BASED ON DEPORTATIONS, ARRESTS AND ASYLUM REQUESTS; HAITI: UN DESA

 MEXICO

This number is an estimate from 2015 up to mid-2019. Since then, the Mexican asylum agency COMAR has received 50,983 asylum requests, while another projected 45,000 people seeking asylum in the United States are waiting in Mexico.

 HAITI

Emigration from Haiti into Latin America picked up steam after the 2010 earthquake that devastated the country.

Mexico  
**31,900**

 COLOMBIA

In addition to native Venezuelans, some 500,000 Colombians living in Venezuela have returned home in recent years, bringing their families.

Dominican Republic  
**182,404**

Costa Rica  
**33,540**

Panama  
**81,484**

Colombia  
**1,771,237**

Ecuador  
**370,273**

Peru  
**949,758**

Brazil  
**340,076**

Bolivia  
**13,125**

Paraguay  
**7,875**

Chile  
**731,921**

Argentina  
**180,262**

Uruguay  
**15,745**

**Estimated Outflows**  
2015–2019

**Venezuela 4,800,000**

**Guatemala 745,240**

**Honduras 595,093**

**Haiti\* 500,000**

**El Salvador 375,677**

**Nicaragua 100,000**

\*Since 2010

 **Estimated Net Gain of Immigrants**  
JUNE 2015 TO JUNE 2019

At a protest in Lima in February 2020, a woman asks the president to close the borders. "No to the entrance of Venezuelan criminals," her sign reads.

A woman in a pink t-shirt with a flamingo pattern is holding a white protest sign high above her head. The sign has handwritten text in Spanish. In the foreground, a man in a purple shirt and a dark cap is looking towards the camera. The background is a blurred night scene of a city street with lights and other people.

¡VIZCARRA!  
CIERRA LAS  
FRONTERAS.  
NO AL INGRESO DE  
DELINCUENTES VENEZOLANOS

# THE EXPLOSIVE POLITICS OF MIGRATION

**Even before the coronavirus, Peru and other countries were seeing greater xenophobia—with an uncertain impact on politics**

by Brian Winter

**L**IMA—At the Polvos Azules flea market in downtown Lima, there are so many Venezuelan vendors in row seven that some call it Little Caracas.

“I’ve been lucky—in Peru, I eat three meals a day,” said Enrique Callvit, 24, who fled Venezuela on a Friday in 2018—and found a job selling shoes here by the following Tuesday. A few stalls down, Ian, 20, said he saves enough money to send \$25 to \$50 a week home to his family. His main disappointment: he hasn’t been able to practice baseball as much as he likes. “You know how Venezuelans are, we always want to play,” he said with a laugh. “But the truth is I can’t complain.”

Indeed, the mood here was generally positive—until I ran into Maria, one of the few Peruvian vendors left on row seven. She asked if I was American. “Ahhhh, Trump!” she said with an approving smile. “I like the way he handles immigrants. In Peru, I think we’re too good, too kind.” I asked if she’d had trouble with her colleagues. “No, no, these are fine,” she replied with a sweep of the hand, lowering her voice a bit. “But there are too many criminals. I hear Maduro lets them out of prison,” she said, referring to the Venezuelan dictator, “and they come here to steal and kill.”

Sadly, such sentiments are increasingly common throughout Peru—and much of the region. After years of welcoming an unprecedented wave of migrants from Venezuela and elsewhere, many Latin Americans now say in polls they are tired of rising crime and a perceived competition for jobs, especially in the informal economy—and they want the influx to stop. Even before the coronavirus pandemic forced borders to close in March, several governments in the region were taking aggressive steps to stem the flow of migrants.

Peru’s story illustrates how much has changed. When the exodus from Venezuela began to spike in 2017, the government of Pedro Pablo Kuczynski extended a temporary work permit to arriving Venezuelans. “It was important to make a real ges-



**Brian Winter** is editor-in-chief of *Americas Quarterly* and the vice president for policy at Americas Society/Council of the Americas.

ture, not just symbolic, that we believe in freedom, in the movement of people,” Kuczynski told me. Many called it the most accommodating migration policy in South America, and the response was enormous. In 2018 alone, some 500,000 Venezuelans entered Peru. Today the total number of Venezuelans in the country is estimated at around 860,000.

To try to fathom the political and social impact of this, remember how a roughly similar number of Syrian refugees roiled politics last decade in Germany—and then consider that Peru, with 32 million people, has a little more than one-third of Germany’s population. Venezuelans speak the same language as Peruvians, of course, but there are important cultural differences between the Caribbean region and the Andes. Integrating in Peru is much harder than in Colombia, many Venezuelans who lived in both places told me. “(Peruvians) think we’re too loud,” Johnny, 31, told me. “And nobody here likes arepas, either.”

Nonetheless, most Venezuelans were quick to say they feel welcome most of the time. “The Peruvian state and the Peruvian people have shown solidarity,” said Carlos Scull, the ambassador to Peru for Juan Guaidó, whom Lima recognizes as Venezuela’s legitimate leader. Many Peruvians are still grateful to Venezuela for receiving thousands of their people during the 1970s and 1980s, a time of dictatorship and economic turmoil here. There is a sense of a debt being repaid. “But it’s also true this is a new phenomenon for Peru, and for South America in general,” Scull told me. “These are countries used to sending migrants, not receiving them.”

## Media sensationalism

**I**NDEED, DURING THE WEEK I SPENT in Peru in late February, the strains were evident—and seemed focused in two main areas.

The first was a perceived competition for jobs, particularly low-salary ones. Approximately 70% of Peru’s workers work outside the formal economy—above the Latin American average. Peru has in many respects been the region’s most successful economy over the past decade, averaging better than 4% growth a year, while poverty has fallen sharply. But the high degree of informality means there is still a day-to-day scramble for jobs—and residents on the periphery of Lima whom I spoke with felt besieged. “There’s always a Venezuelan willing to do a job for half the pay,” said Juan Pardenos, a construction worker. Scull, the ambassador, estimated that 90% of Venezuelans working in Peru do so without a formal labor contract. Ten-

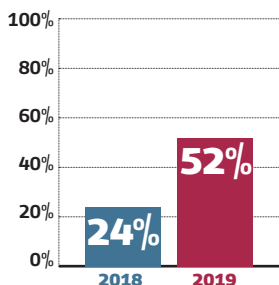


## Peruvians' Attitudes Toward Venezuelans

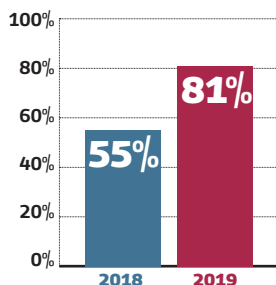
A recent poll showed rising xenophobia toward migrants.

Below, the percentage who agreed with the following statements:

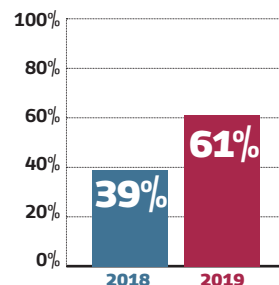
"I'm afraid of Venezuelans who are arriving in Peru."



"There are a lot of Venezuelans who are engaged in criminal activity in Peru."



"The majority of Venezuelans are unreliable or dishonest people."



SOURCE: POLL CONDUCTED BY PONTIFICIA UNIVERSIDAD CATÓLICA DEL PERÚ

sions rose further when the economy slowed in 2019, growing just 2.2%. The coronavirus crisis seemed certain to make the competition for work—and services such as health care—dramatically worse.

The other source of tension: the perception that Venezuelans are to blame for a crime wave. This is almost certainly false—Venezuelans account for 2% of reported crimes, and 3% of the population, meaning they commit fewer crimes on average than Peruvians do. But, just as in the immigration debate in the United States, this doesn't really seem to matter. Certain tabloid publications "never miss an opportunity to sensationalize a crime committed by Venezuelans," said Luisa Feline Freier, a professor focused on migration at Peru's Universidad del Pacífico.

Curiously, the strongest anti-Venezuelan sentiment in polls is found in the interior, especially in the mountains, where the fewest Venezuelans actually live. Freier, who is German, noted a similar phenomenon in her country, where the far-right AFD party has thrived in eastern areas where refugees are scarce. But even in Lima, while I was there a few hundred participated in an anti-migrant march, carrying signs like "Peru is for Peruvians."

President Martín Vizcarra's government has tried to strike a balance—integrating Venezuelans into society, while also signaling to Peruvians that it understands the growing fatigue. Successive changes to visa requirements caused official net levels of migration to fall to zero by mid-2019. Meanwhile, programs

like Lima Aprende, which added afternoon shifts to schools in the capital mainly to accommodate Venezuelan students arriving in the middle of the school year, aim to ensure they do not become part of a permanently marginalized group of society. "We know we have a window of opportunity to integrate people," the foreign minister, Gustavo Meza-Cuadra, told me. "We know how important this is."

## A time for caution

**S**O FAR, AT LEAST, there is no Peruvian equivalent of the AFD—and the handful of politicians who have attempted to incite anti-migrant sentiment have not been rewarded by voters. A candidate for Lima's mayor who in 2018 accused Venezuelans of stealing jobs cratered in polls. I met Mario Bryce, a journalist who ran for Congress, who told me Venezuelans "have another way of living" and suggested "putting tanks" at the border to stop migration. He received barely 1,000 votes in January's legislative election.

Still, after hearing so many Peruvians complain, from taxi drivers to street vendors and waiters, it was hard to escape the sensation that someone would eventually step into the void. And that was before the coronavirus arrived. David Smolansky, a Venezuelan emigre who oversees migration issues at the Organization of American States, said he was worried. "We're seeing xenophobia rise all over the region," he told me. "It's a moment to be very, very careful." ●

# A GOOD GIG— FOR NOW

**Companies like Rappi and Uber are helping many migrants get by. But host countries can do more.**

by Dany Bahar

**T**HE VENEZUELAN REFUGEE CRISIS may soon become the largest globally since World War II, different from anything Latin America has experienced before. Yet the exodus from Venezuela is unprecedented not only in size. Nearly 5 million Venezuelans have left their country and are trying to integrate into new societies at a moment when the gig economy has created a new reality for labor markets everywhere.

This interplay is producing similar stories in Bogotá, Lima, Santiago and other Latin American metropolises: the Venezuelan with a college or even a graduate degree who is driving an Uber, Lyft or Cabify to provide for his or her family. Or the Venezuelan student who dreamed about attending a university but is now riding a bike to deliver food for Rappi—the Colombian company launched in 2015 and valued at over \$1 billion. According to Rappi, 30% of its more than 100,000 couriers around the world are migrants (the company does not disclose the exact number of Venezuelan workers for fears of fueling anti-immigrant sentiment).

At first, these may seem like tragic cases of wasted talent and missed opportunities. But a fuller picture should lead to a more nuanced conclusion.

According to reports, Rappi couriers in Colombia make from \$20 to \$30 in a 14-hour shift. That's little money even for Colombian standards. Yet the hourly pay in the busiest part of the day is from \$2.30 to \$2.90—double what workers on minimum wage make per hour. Also, unemployment in urban areas in Co-



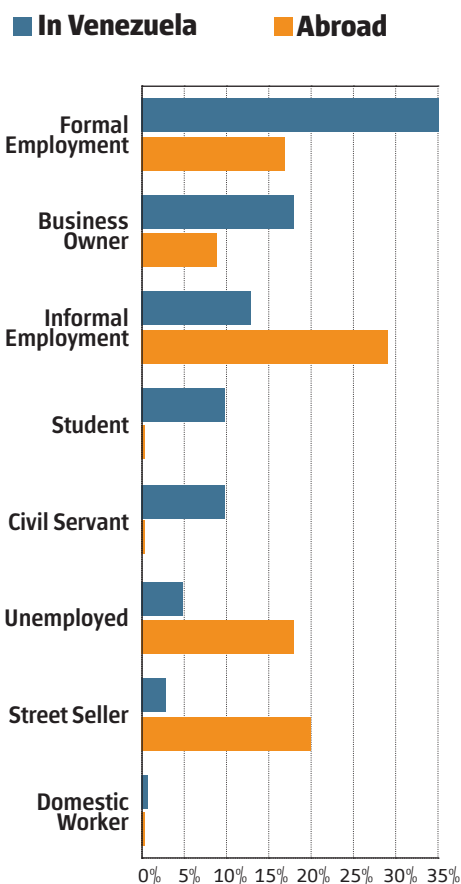
CAROL SWILJAN/NUR PHOTO/GETTY



A Rappi courier in Buenos Aires: according to the company, migrants form 30% of its workforce.

## Venezuelan migrants are adapting to precarious jobs.

A survey asked refugees about the jobs they had at home, and what they are doing now.



SOURCE: R4V—UNHCR PROTECTION MONITORING UPDATE #1

NOTE: THE QUESTIONNAIRE COVERS 19,600 PEOPLE IN EIGHT COUNTRIES, WITH 78% OF RESPONDENTS IN JUST FOUR: COLOMBIA, ECUADOR, PERU AND CHILE.

lombia has been above 10% for several years, and more than 45% of workers are informally employed—meaning better opportunities are scarce for everyone, not just migrants.

The alternative we had before—a world without Rappi, Uber and the like—wasn’t great either for foreign laborers forced to leave their countries. The gig economy is lowering the entry barriers to the labor market. It can provide more flexibility for refugees and migrants trying to integrate, potentially helping them gain access to higher-paying jobs.

However, these gains can only take hold if they are combined with policies to offset the gig economy’s downsides, such as volatile income and the lack of benefits.

## A ladder or a trap?

Whether refugees become an asset or a burden depends on certain policies in host countries. For starters, without the right to work, foreigners can’t contribute to their receiving economies. Fortunately, most countries in Latin America are aware of this and have granted work authorization to millions of Venezuelan refugees, though in some places with more red tape than in others.

But the right to work alone doesn’t mean that refugees and migrants will find the “right” job—one where they can fully use their skills and get paid accordingly. After all, presumably, one of the reasons why highly qualified Venezuelans are driving in shared-ride apps such as Uber is that finding a job is hard.

Job markets are full of imperfections, with lengthy and costly matching processes between employers and employees. Before, a migrant or refugee would likely take whatever “traditional” full-time job came first, out of desperation to get *any* job regardless of whether it was a good fit. These full-time jobs would offer little flexibility and often require a medium- to long-term commitment. Consequently, a refugee would be underemployed for a long period, which could have detrimental consequences in subsequent job searches.

Gig economy jobs have the potential to change this dynamic, for a few reasons. First, the cost of entry is low. If you sign up, undergo a few checks, and own often inexpensive equipment—such as a bicycle for delivery services or tools for contractor apps—you can hit the ground running and find “a” job relatively quickly.

Second, gig economy jobs could offer more flexibility. If the end goal is to look for a job that is a better fit, migrants and refugees can devote time and resources to the



A Venezuelan courier in Bogotá: more than 45% of the workforce in Colombia is informally employed.

search while still having some income. This is also an important aspect for migrants and refugees who are working on acquiring more skills, like language or vocational training.

Of course, gig economy jobs have several problems. Their workers might have volatile incomes and, in most cases, very limited access to benefits, such as health care insurance and private retirement funds. Frequently, available jobs have important safety issues.

So, what policies can mitigate these problems? The key is that, together with work permits, governments need to invest in extending safety nets for newcomers. This will be politically sensitive: the local population already faces deficient government services and will likely push back against fully extending them to migrants, especially to those undocumented. Yet some ideas out there could help.

One is offering conditional cash transfers for those working informally and formally, which would also reduce the income volatility of gig economy jobs. Another is unemployment insurance for migrants, capable of protecting those unable to cover very basic

living costs. And of course, guaranteeing access to health care and education is critical to allow migrant parents to work while their kids are taken care of—including with food.

Can these new opportunities for migrants and refugees hurt local workers? Academic research shows that the evidence of migrants negatively affecting natives' employment is thin, at best. This is mostly because foreigners and locals usually bring different skills to the labor market. If gig economy jobs can indeed help higher-skilled foreign laborers reach better positions, this would, in fact, reduce concerns of competition—although economists have not been able to empirically test this hypothesis.

Economists have demonstrated that refugees and migrants can provide remarkable growth opportunities for host countries. Now as the gig economy swiftly changes the labor market, policymakers must think outside the box to take full advantage of them.

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**Bahar** is a senior fellow in the *Global Economy and Development* program at the Brookings Institution

# WHAT COUNTRIES AND CITIES ARE DOING TO WELCOME MIGRANTS

by Brendan O'Boyle

**T**he closure of borders this year by governments across Latin America in response to the coronavirus paused, and threatens to reverse, several years of largely receptive immigration policy. The exodus of Venezuelans as well as Nicaraguans and other Central Americans from their countries has been met with varying levels of welcome. Here's how national and local governments have set about integrating these new arrivals.



A Venezuelan family receives medical attention in the Colombian border town of Maicao.

## Colombia

Before the coronavirus spurred President Iván Duque to close Colombia's border with Venezuela, some 2,000 Venezuelans were arriving daily. In recent years Colombia has taken a generous approach to migrants. "Our national policy is to try to be flexible," Christian Krüger Sarmiento, then the director of Migración Colombia, said in 2019. Such efforts include Colombia's internationally lauded Special Stay Permit, known as the PEP, a two-year permit first launched in 2017 that has given hundreds of thousands of Venezuelans regular migration status and, in turn, greater access to services like health care, banking, education and employment.

Seeing Venezuelan migration as inevitable, Colombia has allowed Venezuelans to enter the country with expired passports, opened its schools to migrant children, and given citizenship to babies born to Venezuelan mothers.

Home to one in five of the 1.8 million Venezuelan migrants in Colombia, **Bogotá** has embarked on what it calls its Migrant Assistance Route, a strategy to coordinate city services to help migrants. Bogotá, which the mayor's office proudly calls "a city of open doors," has spent more than \$59 million attending to migrants. In 2018, the city's Social Integration Office opened the first Integral Migrant Attention Center, which has helped meet the employment, psychological and logistical needs of more than 4,500 newcomers. The office also works with a special outpost at Bogotá's main bus terminal to connect arrivals with services. The government estimates that some 3,500 children have passed through city centers opened for child and adolescent migrants. Bogotá's mayor's office has partnered with different organizations for several campaigns against xenophobia, including one that invites Venezuelan migrants to attend soccer games for free.



**Barranquilla**, which ranks third in Colombia by migrant population, is in the process of launching social impact bonds to boost migrant employment. The bonds are a form of public-private partnership that Colombia has used on a national level and in the city of Cali. They allow private entities to invest in projects that have a social good, and are repaid only if the project achieves the intended results. In Barranquilla's case, social bonds are funding efforts to train and place city residents in jobs—20% of which are reserved for migrants.

"What we want to do is include migrants within our strategies," said Mariam Ajami Peralta of the Mario Santo Domingo Foundation, one of the partners in the initiative. "We've found that making services exclusive to one group creates more divisions."

In **Medellín**, the city's crisis assistance hotline has been a particularly useful tool for Venezuelans. Between 2017 and 2019, the hotline connected nearly 8,000 Venezuelans with resources like housing, transportation and medical help, as well as mental health assistance.

Members of Brazil's armed forces attend to Venezuelan migrants in Roraima.



## Brazil

In 2018, then-President Michel Temer tasked the army to lead Operação Acolhida (Operation Welcome), an effort in partnership with the U.N. refugee agency to assist Venezuelan arrivals. The army's efforts include building and renovating shelters used to house Venezuelans in Brazil's northwestern state of Roraima, on the border with Venezuela. To address the concentration of migrants in Roraima—specifically in the border town of **Pacaraima** and state capital **Boa Vista** (see page 14)—Operation Welcome has voluntarily relocated some 33,000 Venezuelans to more accommodating cities between April 2018 and February 2020. The government, which connects relocated migrants with jobs, family members and other resources, allocated around \$40 million to Operation Welcome in

2019 and an additional \$65 million in 2020 for 11 emergency camps in Boa Vista and Pacaraima.

In **São Paulo**, several public-sector agencies have partnered with the U.N. refugee agency to better absorb newcomers, including the Municipal Secretariat of Assistance and Social Development, which in 2017 created a program that connects city residents, including migrants, to new jobs. The Municipal Council for Immigrants has also worked with the U.N. to offer migrants and refugees opportunities to learn about and get involved in public policies affecting them. The state of São Paulo's Center for Immigrant Citizenship and Integration, meanwhile, offers resources for learning Portuguese, finding a job, and navigating the legal and migration systems.

OPERAÇÃO ACOLHIDA/FUCKR



## Chile

Chile's migrant population has tripled in the past three years, with large flows of people coming from Haiti (see page 27) and Venezuela. The government responded to the second group of migrants by creating a Democratic Responsibility Visa in 2019. The visa allows Venezuelans to stay in the country for a year, but requires migrants to submit various documents and a \$30 fee at a Chilean consulate before arriving. At the same time, the government announced it would offer up to 10,000 family reunification visas offering temporary residence to Haitians, who make up the third largest foreign population in Chile after Venezuelans and Peruvians. The visa is good for one year and is renewable one time.

At the federal level, Chile's Department of Migration and Foreigners—part of the Interior and Public Security Ministry—has a program that supports the work done by individual municipalities in the areas of migrant integration and intercultural exchange. Participating municipalities receive a Sello Migrante (Migrant Seal), a certification that recognizes the city's existing efforts to welcome migrants and also commits the national government to collaborate with the city in future efforts. Estación Central in **Santiago** is one example of a municipality with the Migrant Seal. To respond to its large Haitian population, the municipality created its own migration office. Estación Central also takes part in Escuela Somos Todos, a national program run by the interior ministry to get students into school regardless of their migration status.

The national migration department has also created the Compromiso Migrante (Migrant Commitment), a program similar to the Migrant Seal that incentivizes private companies and unions to take a non-discriminatory and inclusive approach to hiring and management. The recognition connects awardees with support from agencies like the International Labor Office and International Organization for Migration.

## Panama

Panama announced in March 2019 and then again in December that the government would recognize passports that have expired within the past three years, allowing a greater number of Venezuelans living in Panama to open bank accounts and conduct other official procedures.

The country has struggled to respond to a flow of migrants from around the world who cross into Panama through its rugged southern land border with Colombia. The flow of migrants peaked in 2016 at 30,000, but the number hit just under 24,000 in 2019, according to the national government, which has constructed a series of temporary shelters for migrants, including one contracted at \$8.9 million. The government also published a guide in March 2019 for coordinating the country's response according to international best practices.

## Costa Rica

In 2019, Costa Rica co-sponsored the first World Forum on Refugees in Geneva, where President Carlos Alvarado Quesada asked for international support in the country's efforts to absorb a large influx of migrants. Fed by political crises in Nicaragua and Venezuela, Costa Rica's migrant population last year was the region's largest with respect to its population, according to Alvarado, at 10.5%.

Costa Rica has opened its public elementary and secondary schools to children from across the border in Nicaragua, who numbered some 32,000 in 2019 and represent one in every 40 students.

## Argentina

Argentina is one of the few countries that allows Venezuelans to enter without a passport. Even though Venezuela was suspended from the Mercosur trade bloc in 2017, Venezuelans can receive temporary residence in Argentina with their national ID cards. After two years in the country, Venezuelans are then eligible for permanent residence.

In **Buenos Aires**, where migrants comprise 15% of the population, the city organizes a series of festivals throughout the year, each celebrating a different country or region and the cultural and economic contributions of migrants from that place. The city also produced *Hola, Soy Migrante*, a comprehensive welcome guide for new arrivals providing an introduction to the city's culture and 13 chapters of useful information on how to access health care, migration services, employment and other services. The guide debuted to some criticism from representatives of street merchants, who said the inclusive posturing doesn't line up with the city's policies. There have been protests decrying police crackdowns of Senegalese migrants working as street vendors.

A Venezuelan en route to Peru submits documents at a binational center near the border in southern Ecuador.



## Ecuador

Ecuador's 2008 constitution recognizes universal citizenship and the right to human mobility, and in 2018 the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Human Mobility launched a "national human mobility plan" outlining a set of progressive migration policies. A lax visa policy brought thousands of citizens of countries across the world to Ecuador, many hoping to continue overland to the United States. But the influx of migrants has pushed Ecuador to issue new visa requirements for citizens of 24 countries. Venezuela became one of them in August 2019. At the same time, Ecuador announced a new humanitarian visa that lets Venezuelans live in Ecuador for two years and access some social services, but requires a \$50 fee as well as a passport and a criminal history certificate, both of which can be virtually impossible to obtain. In September 2019, Ecuador undertook a regularization program and registry of Venezuelans living in the country. By late February 2020, more than 220,000 Venezuelans had registered.

Ecuador also hosted the inaugural meeting of the Quito Process, a multilateral forum first held in **Quito** in September 2018, with the goal of bringing together regional governments to share strategies and best practices for receiving Venezuelan migrants.

## Mexico

Asylum requests in Mexico rose from fewer than 9,000 in 2016 to more than 70,000 last year. That puts stress on local communities, public officials and migrants themselves—particularly in **Tapachula**, where about 60% have arrived and been forced to remain for months while their claims are processed. Andrés Ramírez, the head of Mexico’s Commission for Refugee Assistance (COMAR), said a budget increase in 2020—though still just \$2.4 million—will allow him to hire more workers to make asylum decisions and deal with the backlog. He also wants to allow asylum-seekers to wait out their requests in cities where there is higher demand for labor, such as Monterrey. “We need to invest in communities like Tapachula, so locals can see that migration benefits them as well,” Ramírez told *AQ*. Like other governments in the region, Mexico has started jobs programs for migrants. President Andrés Manuel López Obrador said he’ll provide 4,000 jobs to migrants on the southern border, but it’s not clear exactly what those jobs will be.



Central American migrants en route to Tapachula, Mexico (above). A Venezuelan sells drinks at a traffic light in Lima (below).

## Peru

In 2017 Peru launched a temporary residency permit, known as the PTP, for Venezuelans to live and work in the country legally. The document cost just \$13 to apply for, less than similar permits elsewhere in the region. However, the application period for the PTP closed in December 2018. In June 2019, the government introduced a harder-to-obtain humanitarian visa, which must be requested outside of Peru.

In June 2019, Peru’s education ministry launched Lima Aprende (Lima Learns), a campaign to ensure all children in the capital are in school. The ministry has focused on including Venezuelans in the program, and launched it alongside the Venezuelan ambassador. More than 6,000 students took part in the program the first year, and the city is creating afternoon classroom shifts in some schools to accommodate the additional students. The education ministry expects 35,000 Venezuelans will enter Peru’s education system this year.



TOP: ALFREDO ESTRELLA/AFP/GETTY; CRIS BOURNICLE/AFP/GETTY

# HOW TO MAKE MIGRATION AN OPPORTUNITY FOR LATIN AMERICA

## Technology can help

by Marisol Rodríguez Chatruc and Juan Blyde

**M**IGRATION IS NOTHING NEW in Latin America. In 2017 almost 37 million Latin Americans lived outside their country of origin, supplying almost one in seven of the world's immigrants. Many moved to the United States and Europe, but a number settled in neighboring countries. Half of the migrant population in Argentina—about 1 million people—is made up of Bolivians and Paraguayans. There are 25 Peruvians residing in Chile today for every one who did in 1990.

Broadly speaking, Latin Americans have been generous in welcoming these new arrivals.

But those episodes occurred over long periods, even decades. What is new is the crisis-driven massive migration within Latin America in recent years, which includes Venezuelans but also Haitians, Nicaraguans and other Central Americans. Countries, and particularly local communities, urgently need money—and quite a bit of it—and humanitarian aid to help assimilate these new arrivals. They also require the kinds of assistance that don't make the headlines, but are just as critical: knowledge and institutional capacities. This will ensure that migration becomes an economic opportunity for Latin America, not just a short-term burden.

Numerous studies indicate that in the long term, migration could make economies stronger and more vibrant. But there is plenty of short-term pain to get to that potential long-term gain. Many of these migrants are moving to countries that don't have a history of integrating immigrants on this scale, or



GUILLERMO LEGARÍA/GETTY



A Venezuelan crosses to Paraguachón on the Colombian side of the border.



**Marisol Rodríguez Chatruc** is an economist at the Migration Initiative of the Inter-American Development Bank (IDB). Her current agenda focuses on attitudes toward immigrants and on policies to promote migrants' integration.



**Juan Blyde** is a lead economist at the Migration Initiative of the Inter-American Development Bank (IDB). Juan's areas of research include trade, productivity, transport costs, international value chains and migration.

the deep budgets of wealthier countries and their cities.

To cite just one example: Toronto has a population of almost 6 million, nearly half of whom are foreign born. Its per-capita GDP is \$45,000. In contrast, Lima's population is twice that of Toronto and its per capita GDP one third as much, at \$15,000, and until recently only 1% of its population was foreign born. And yet Lima, with fewer resources and without Toronto's tradition of integrating migrants, has seen a sudden influx of hundreds of thousands of mostly Venezuelan arrivals. In addition, once migrants move, they tend to stay. Almost 70% of the foreign-born population in countries belonging to the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) have stayed more than 10 years.

All this makes the process traumatic, both for families fleeing in often desperate conditions as well as for communities receiving immigrants. And public opinion is shifting against migrants. In 2017, Colombians agreed by a two-to-one margin that migrants from Venezuela should be welcomed, given the situation in Venezuela. By mid-2019, only 42% agreed. One-third of Venezuelans in Peru report having suffered discrimination.

Evidence indicates that employment opportunities or wages of natives are likely to suffer where immigrants compete for the same jobs. Workers already in the recipient countries' labor market who are the closest substitutes for immigrants are most likely to experience immigration-induced wage declines or employment losses.

## The fiscal challenge

**T**HE IMPACT OF IMMIGRANTS is not limited to the labor market.

Local governments, especially those in bordering communities, must spend more on teachers, nurses, classrooms, housing and other resources. Without those investments, the quality of these services—already stretched thin—would decline, and housing prices would go up. Strained health services would struggle to contain diseases.

Migration has mixed impacts on a country's fiscal revenues. On the one hand, there is an increase in the public expenditures associated with the sharp rise in the demand for social services. On the other hand, revenues will increase from indirect taxes and income tax collection. Even if the primary balance turns positive

in the medium term, though, there could be a deficit in the short term.

And this comes at a time of fiscal constraints. Eleven IDB borrowing member countries—including the migrant recipient nations of Colombia and Ecuador—have announced or are implementing fiscal adjustment plans.

How much money is needed?

Before COVID-19, the Colombian government estimated that spending could increase between 0.4% and 0.8% of GDP, mainly in education and health care.

Also prior to the pandemic, the government of Ecuador estimated that properly addressing the situation of Venezuelan migrants would require resources of around \$550 million, or 0.5% of Ecuador's annual GDP from 2019 to 2021. COVID-19 will increase these numbers even more. When Lebanon faced a big influx of Syrian migrants beginning in 2011, the estimated cost of bringing its services back to where they were before amounted to 5.5% of its GDP.

No country can do this by itself. Donors and multilateral institutions must step up. So far, the numbers are falling short. The U.N. estimates the international community has provided \$125 per Venezuelan migrant, compared with \$1,500 for each Syrian refugee. In the short term, agencies that help migrants at the border need more resources, but we also need to do more to help local communities integrate migrants in ways that contribute to economic development, with resources, research and coordination. For instance, regional interoperability of data systems (identity, health, skills) or the harmonization of migration legal frameworks (visas, work permits) are crucial elements to better integrate migrants. This collective effort by countries to address migration flows can be supported by platforms provided by multilateral institutions.

In 2019, the Inter-American Development Bank (IDB) approved the use of \$100 million of technical assistance grants to be blended with additional grants from donor countries to leverage a total of \$1 billion in concessional loans for countries that have received large and sudden inflows of migrants.

The unprecedented nature and complexity of migration in Latin America and the Caribbean will also require unique and creative solutions. For instance, IDB programs are helping Colombia upgrade its software systems to better match job seekers with job providers in ways that help all vulnerable popu-

lations—Venezuelan as well as Colombian. In Ecuador, we are also using big data to identify the urban regions where migrants are living so governments can better target social services. Innovation and creativity will not necessarily come from applying new technologies—something that will undoubtedly be important—but from piloting and scaling up new execution mechanisms, leapfrogging unnecessary processes, or finding, among other things, new ways of working together with the private sector.

All this is necessary because the key here is not only to help migrants, but to improve the lives of vulnerable native populations, thus helping avert a costly backlash.

## A great opportunity

**M**IGRATION WILL NOT GO AWAY. Climate change and natural disasters, rather than just political crises, will drive population movements. Some estimates place the number of environmental migrants at 200 million by 2050, a figure equal to the current worldwide migrant stock. The U.N. estimates that eight countries of the region—seven in Central America and the Caribbean (Guatemala, Costa Rica, El Salvador, Nicaragua, Jamaica, Haiti and Dominican Republic) and one in South America (Guyana)—are among the world's 25 nations most at risk from natural disasters. Changing demographic trends will continue to generate incentives for people to move from countries with high fertility rates and high labor force growth to countries with relatively older populations and shortages in labor supply.

Implementing wrong policies can have consequences, from xenophobic incidents to social unrest. But when the policies are done right, migrants can be a positive force for development, particularly when they are integrated socioeconomically, have access to the formal labor market, pay taxes and contribute to the health care system. Migrants tend to be young, providing a demographic dividend, particularly for countries with aging populations. Migration has also been associated with better employment for natives through occupational mobility. Research has shown that other impacts of migration in destination countries include increased foreign direct investment, exports and entrepreneurship. The contribution of all these channels can be substantial. Not only is integrating migrants the right thing to do, it could become a great development opportunity. ●



← CHANGING FLAVORS, SOUNDS, AND ART →

# A TASTE OF HOME

People moving from country to country carry more than belongings. They bring with them culture, sounds, and flavors. Here are some migrants who have opened restaurants in their new countries, drawing locals and expats alike.

Photography by Erica Canepa, Santi Carneri, Yolanda Escobar Jiménez, Benjamin Russell

Curated by Donald Partyka and Benjamin Russell





## A TASTE OF HOME



### SHER E PUNJAB Quito, Ecuador

PREVIOUS PAGE: Gurmit Boparai was born in Punjab in northwest India, but has lived in Quito for the last 35 years. His turn as a restaurateur came almost by accident. After starting an import company selling items from India to fellow migrants and curious locals alike, Boparai recognized a growing interest in Indian cuisine and culture in the city. In 2009 he opened Sher e Punjab, Quito's first Indian restaurant. According to Satwant Singh, who now runs the restaurant, diners come back again and again for the tandoori chicken, pakora and samosas. The restaurant also remains a focal point for the immigrant community in Quito—its two chefs, Arvind and Pardeep Panwar, arrived from Uttrakhand just last year.

by Yolanda Escobar Jiménez



# e p a



## **+58 AREPAS** **Asunción, Paraguay**

Until four or five years ago, eating an arepa in Paraguay was almost impossible. But now, smelling this delicious cornmeal concoction in Asunción is a part of everyday life. Daniel Villamizar is one of those with a hand in changing Paraguay's culinary scene. He moved from Caracas to Asunción in 2018 to pursue the dream of starting a business he felt was no longer possible back home. Last year, he succeeded in opening +58 Arepas, which serves a fusion of Venezuelan and Paraguayan cuisine where meat, cheese and sauces abound. "Here I feel stability. We are regarded in Paraguay as good workers, respectful, kind. We fit well with Paraguayan idiosyncrasies," Villamizar told *AQ* during a busy Saturday night at his submarine-shaped restaurant. Chicken with avocado cream and fried banana tortillas with vegetables and green garlic mayonnaise are standouts. Villamizar runs the restaurant with a Paraguayan partner, but the *sazón* is straight from Villamizar's mom, who also lives in Asunción and preps the meats and cheeses using secret family recipes.

*by Santi Carneri*

ida 

**M** Bienvenidos

DIRECTO A  
VENEZUELA  
SIN PASAPORTE

CHAC

CONECTADA  
PROSEGUR





### CHACAITO Buenos Aires, Argentina

Jolymar Hernández moved to Argentina four years ago as economic and humanitarian conditions in his native Venezuela continued to deteriorate. But he missed the sights, smells and sounds of Caracas—and decided to do something about it. “We reproduced a very famous metro station in Caracas,” Hernández said. The Venezuelan restaurant he founded with fellow immigrant Luis Molner is fashioned to look like Caracas’ iconic Chacaito subway station. “It represents a popular meeting point for us. Groups of friends meet there when they go to protests.” Diners at the Buenos Aires version of Chacaito can tuck into arepas while admiring a mural of famous Venezuelans painted on the wall. “We want to be a place where Venezuelans can feel at home and think positively about our country,” Hernández said.

*by Erica Canepa*



**EL CARBONERO**  
**Tapachula, Mexico**

A mainstay of downtown Tapachula in southern Mexico, El Carbonero specializes in authentic Salvadoran pupusas for the thousands of Central American migrants who pass through the city on their way to the United States each year. In addition to a quick, affordable meal for migrants on the move, the restaurant provides a refuge of sorts for Salvadorans facing the risks and hardships of the journey north: it is staffed entirely by Salvadoran migrants, some in need of a little cash before continuing their journeys, others preparing for a life in exile in Mexico.

*by Benjamin Russell*

**MIGRAFLIX CULTURAL CATERING**  
**São Paulo, Brazil**

São Paulo-based nonprofit Migraflix Cultural Catering provides local corporate clients with authentic global flavors, training refugees from around the world to work as cooks—and ambassadors for their home countries' culinary traditions—at parties and events. Here, Talal Al Tinawi, Yilmery de Perdomo (page 62) and Manier Sael—refugees from Syria, Venezuela and Haiti, respectively—serve up their native dishes.

*by Cecilia Tornaghi*



## A TASTE OF HOME

### EL BUEN SABOR Buenos Aires, Argentina

Maxime Tankouo was a soccer player when, at the age of 17, he left Cameroon looking for a better future. He arrived in Buenos Aires for a short holiday in 2001 and then came back one year later—this time, it turned out, for good. On a whim, a friend tried Tankouo’s cooking and told him he would make a good chef—and El Buen Sabor was quickly born. “At the beginning it wasn’t easy at all,” Tankouo said. “Argentines reacted with racism and ignorance. Many times the restaurant had no clients for the whole night. But I am stubborn. I am African.” El Buen Sabor has since earned local fame, and Tankouo takes pride in having learned to replace African spices with whatever he can find in the markets of Buenos Aires. “I feel now that some people (here) know a little bit more about my country,” Tankouo said.

*by Erica Canepa*







El Buen Sabor  
Africano

LA GENTE  
NOS AMA  
en  
yelp

CHECK IN  
HERE

tripadvisor

## A TASTE OF HOME



### SABOR CUBANO Tapachula, Mexico

Sabor Cubano opened in October 2019 to give Cuban asylum-seekers in the Mexican border town of Tapachula a much-needed taste of home. “We realized we had an opportunity to help. It’s a place for everyone to feel comfortable—and for Cubans to find food that won’t make them sick,” said Cristina Devi Rovelo, who opened the restaurant with her partner, Yaiter Fundora, a recent refugee from Cuba. Just a few doors down from a refugee center in the middle of town, the restaurant has become a gathering place for Cuban asylum-seekers stuck spending extended periods of time in the city. Lázaro González, who makes what is surely the best beef fricassee in town, has been in Tapachula for more than 10 months appealing his case. “I know my time will come, but for now I don’t mind making food and connecting with people,” González said.

*by Benjamin Russell*





**LOS TACOS DEL GORDO**  
Quito, Ecuador

“No es shawarma” (it’s not shawarma) isn’t a sign you’ll see at too many taco stands in Mexico City. But for Cristián Aguirre and Andrés Rodríguez, co-owners of Los Tacos del Gordo in Quito, it was a necessary disclaimer. Faced with a towering mound of carne al pastor, diners previously accustomed only to Tex-Mex tacos and burritos needed a few clues. Aguirre, from Mexico City, and Rodríguez, from Quito, started Los Tacos del Gordo about four years ago—and now run five locations throughout the Ecuadorian capital.

by Yolanda Escobar Jiménez

← CHANGING FLAVORS, SOUNDS, AND ART →

# THE HAITIAN MUSICIAN SINGING HIS JOURNEY IN CHILE

**Ralph Jean Baptiste bridges  
a cultural gap with music**

by Charis McGowan





COURTESY OF RALPH JEAN BAPTISTE

**S**ANTIAGO, CHILE—*Escápate conmigo otra vez*, sings Ralph Jean Baptiste in his Santiago apartment, over a demo track of slow R&B beats. His rhythmic Haitian accent deepens the melody of the Spanish lyrics.

Although born and raised speaking French Creole in Haiti's capital, Port-au-Prince, Baptiste, 29, writes all his songs in Spanish. He moved to Chile after Haiti's devastating earthquake in 2010, with dreams of a music career in tow.

"To get to audiences in Chile you have to sing in Spanish. They've never heard anything in French or Creole. I had to adapt," he said.

Adapt—he says the word as if it is inherently natural to him. Baptiste has had to adapt daily to be accepted in his new homeland. Beat by beat, over nine years of performances, he built a name for himself, and in 2019, Baptiste was finally able to release his first album, *Rafa*.

Musicians have always been a nomadic sort, and Baptiste is no different. He had spent time in the Dominican Republic, where he learned Spanish, so after the earthquake struck, Baptiste chose to pursue his music in Latin America—unlike the 46,000 displaced Haitians who sought asylum in the United States he settled in Chile after short stints in Peru and Argentina.

Baptiste was among the first in what would become a surge of Haitian migrants in Chile. The country had granted fewer than a 1,000 visas to Haitians between 2005 and 2009, and when Baptiste arrived in 2010, only 713 Haitians received Chilean working visas—a marked difference from 2018, when 126,000 were granted.



**Baptiste combines local Chilean sounds with rhythms from his native Haiti.**

Haitians were the first black, non-Spanish-speaking migrant group to arrive in Chile. They stood out. “When I arrived people looked at me strangely. They hadn’t seen Afros before. They touched my skin for luck,” Baptiste told *AQ*. “I have faced a lot of discrimination and rejection.”

When pressed to explain, Baptiste breaks into a broad smile and laughs. “I don’t like to remember the bad times.”

Beyond discrimination, being a migrant compounds the economic challenges that already exist for aspiring artists, said Dr. Marisol Facuse, who researches migration and music at the University of Chile.

“It is very hard for migrants to live off music, especially for migrants who don’t have networks, and Haitians are a community in Chile that isn’t very integrated culturally,” Facuse told *AQ*. “The question of survival is the biggest barrier.”

JORGE SEVERINO

# “I had to leave everything and go far to start from zero on a long road. It has not been easy, but you have to move forward cry and laugh life has to be lived.”

— “Aguante” by Ralph Jean Baptiste

But survive Baptiste has, and his positive outlook provides a model of the kind of integration possible for migrants with the right support and attitude. His song “Aguante” (Endurance) sums up his experience living in a foreign land:

*I had to leave everything and go far / to start from zero on a long road. / It has not been easy, but you have to move forward / cry and laugh / life has to be lived.*

“I’m inspired by his character and strength,” said Charlie Checkz, who produced several of Baptiste’s songs, including “Aguante.” Checkz values the Haitian musician’s unique contribution to Chile’s musical scene.

“We combine rhythms—us as Chileans, and his Haitian music and culture. We put that in the music.”

Baptiste describes his music as worldly, priding himself on the unique fusion of styles he creates, mixing Chilean urban and cumbia sounds with African rhythms and North American soul. In his music videos, he celebrates Chilean traditions—such as performing the country’s national dance, *Cueca*—reflecting his embrace of Chile’s culture.

And in spite of the challenges, Baptiste notes that things are changing for the better. “Around three years ago there started to be more inclusion for migrants,” he said. In 2018, he performed at an annual festival for migrant artists, organized by Chile’s cultural ministry. Last year, he won a state-funded grant to support migrants in music, which enabled him to record and produce two music videos. Things were starting to look up.

However, the momentum he was building came to an abrupt halt when the mass protests broke out in Chile last October. The following months were tense and violent—people died in clashes with the police, festivals were canceled, and few people went out to concerts.

“I had to cancel all my shows. I haven’t been able to perform since November,” Baptiste said.

However, he is sympathetic to the struggle of the Chileans. It’s a frustration shared by the migrant community, he explained. In August 2018, Chile’s president, Sebastián Piñera, claimed to be “putting the house in order” when he signed a reform outlining stricter migration policies. Three months later, the government began flying some Haitians back to their country in what it called a “humanitarian return plan.”

“People who needed help, he just sent them back,” Baptiste said.

“Chile is a complicated country,” Baptiste added. “And Chileans are fighting for a fairer life. They should include migrants in that too.”

Baptiste believes his role as a musician is important in giving voice to his community.

“A lot of Haitians would like to say something, but they can’t because they don’t speak Spanish or they just aren’t heard,” he said.

“In my songs, I can pass on the message of what they feel.”

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**McGowan** is a freelance journalist based in Santiago, Chile

# HIRING MIGRANTS IS GOOD BUSINESS

**Companies that help out new arrivals are finding it's beneficial to their bottom line too**

by **Manuela Andreoni**

**R**IO DE JANEIRO—When Yilmory de Perdomo first arrived in Brazil in 2016, fleeing her native Venezuela, she found many doors closed.

Banks wouldn't let her open a checking account. A landlady refused to rent her an apartment. When she finally found a job at a school, it was as an assistant, despite her being a trained occupational therapist with a solid career back home.

Being granted the right to live and work in Brazil, Perdomo quickly discovered, just wasn't enough to pave the way to the new life she aimed to build. "The government alone can't give jobs to all immigrants," she said.

At a time of unprecedented migration in Latin America, it will be up to the private sector to take many steps to integrate new arrivals. Companies can't do everything themselves, of course; governments must still provide work permits, licenses and other services. But ultimately, there are several things large and small businesses can do to harness the skills and buying power of migrants—and it is in their interest to do so.

"Immigrants need economic inclusion, and that's only possible if the private sector acts," said Jonathan Berezovsky, founder of Migraflix, a São Paulo-based nonprofit that helps





**“A lot of these people ended up working in call centers, which is a waste of talent.”**

—Marcela Torres, co-founder, HolaCode

integrate immigrants by promoting entrepreneurship and access to markets. “In countries such as Brazil, where government resources aren’t abundant, it’s even more important for the private sector to embrace this role.”

One example of what businesses can do came last September, when the Inter-American Development Bank and charity Tent Partnership for Refugees struck a deal with 22 companies to commit to creating thousands of jobs for migrants, integrating refugee-owned businesses in supply chains, and providing new arrivals with services.

Such efforts work best when combined with government action. Colombia and Mexico have recently rolled out tax incentives for companies to invest in border areas as part of their efforts to include migrants in the formal economy. Mexican President Andrés Manuel López Obrador called his plan a “development curtain” that could stop both Mexicans and other migrants from moving on to the United States.

## A Nudge for Action

**O**SCAR ROMERO, vice president of Bancamía, a Colombian microfinance bank, said they have so far achieved 15% of their commitment of providing banking services to 200 Venezuelan entrepreneurs by the end of 2020. The main challenge, he said, is the lack of information about immigrants and their credit history. But Bancamía wants to convince other banks that Venezuelan refugees can make good on their debts, even if they can’t provide the usual documentation.

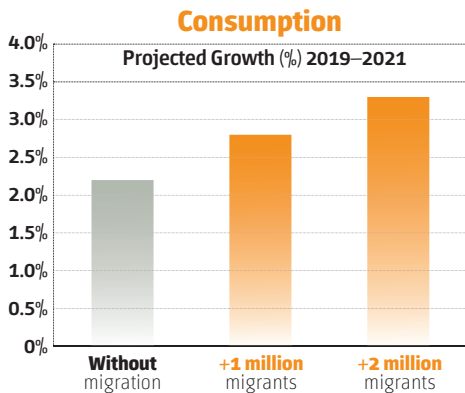
“It’s a process of generating trust,” Romero said.

Bancamía is also building a partnership with chambers of commerce across Colombia to train migrants opening their own businesses, with the possibility of then having access to credit to start out.

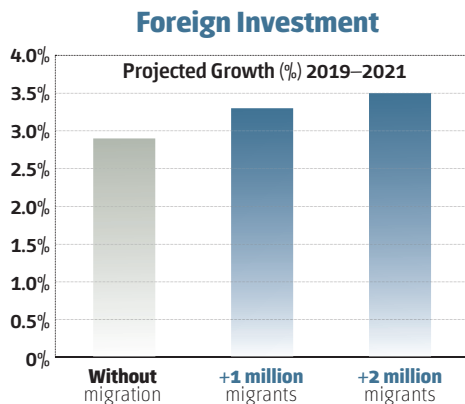
According to Tent Foundation, only half of Venezuelans living in Peru and Colombia had formal employment. In the state of São Paulo, in Brazil, Federal Police data from 2015 (the most recent available)

## The Payoff of Accepting Migrants

In Colombia, migrants are boosting domestic consumption ...



... and foreign investment



SOURCES: PROYECTO MIGRACIÓN VENEZUELA ANALYSIS OF DATA FROM FEDESARROLLO AND COLOMBIA'S NATIONAL PLANNING DEPARTMENT (2018)

shows a similar scenario: 55% of women migrants were unemployed, versus 38% of men.

And that is true for migrants with university degrees and professional experience as well, said Ileana Cruz, head of Latin America partnerships at Tent.

“That can be really challenging and frustrating for engineers and lawyers that are now having to work jobs in completely different fields,” she said. “But I think at the same time this also presents an opportunity for the business community.”

Many of these workers offer a potential solution to Latin America’s skills gap—there is a shortfall of at least 450,000 professionals in the technology sector, according to an estimate in September by IDC, a consultancy.

That reality is what sparked Marcela Torres to start HolaCode, a startup that teaches software development skills to migrants in Mexico.

It all started when she noticed a lack of quality opportunities for migrants in Mexico, including many who had returned from the United States with valuable skills.

“A lot of these people ended up working in call centers, which is a waste of talent,” she said.

Torres said she wants the business community to see that migrants aren’t simply victims of the horrors they went through to get to their host country. The tendency to over-victimize people, she said, “limits their opportunities.”

Berezovsky, from Migraflex, said the feedback he receives from partner companies is overwhelmingly positive. Immigrants refresh the work environment, bringing new ideas and experiences. And they tend to value the opportunities they get, reducing turnover.

The list of doors Perdomo, from Venezuela, knocked on and courses she took to get where she is now is a demonstration of this resilience.

She took culinary courses at Migraflex, which also connected her to clients, and reinvented herself as the owner of a catering service, Tentaciones de Venezuela.

“I didn’t stand still, darling!” Perdomo said. “I’m a foreigner, so I always have to be better.”

*Andreoni is a freelance journalist based in Rio de Janeiro*

# Who Can Help?

Scores of NGOs and international organizations are helping alleviate the hardships facing Latin America's migrants. Here are four that are active in the region.



## INTERNATIONAL RESCUE COMMITTEE

International Rescue Committee (IRC) offers diverse forms of aid to refugees and others displaced by violence and armed conflict. In Colombia, IRC focuses its work on sexual and reproductive health for Venezuelan migrants—and has so far provided more than 8,000 women and girls with health services. In the Northern Triangle, IRC's digital platform *CuentaNos* and WhatsApp hotline help victims of violence and displaced families gather information and learn about social services before embarking on their journeys north.

➔ [www.rescue.org](http://www.rescue.org)



## CASA DEL MIGRANTE SALTILLO

Casa del Migrante Saltillo was founded in 2002 as a temporary refuge from violence in northeast Mexico for mostly Central American migrants on their way to the United States. Since then, the home has grown to offer a full range of services, including first aid, mental health checks, and help finding jobs with local employers. Casa del Migrante Saltillo's work denouncing human rights abuses committed against migrants has earned it international recognition and, on occasion, brought its founders and employees into conflict with government officials.

➔ [www.cdmsalttillo.wixsite.com/cdmsalttillo](http://www.cdmsalttillo.wixsite.com/cdmsalttillo)



## JESUIT REFUGEE SERVICES

Jesuit Refugee Services (JRS) has offices in 56 countries around the world, including Mexico, Colombia, Ecuador and Venezuela. Each office offers a range of free services to asylum-seekers based on local community needs, with a strong focus on mental health, legal assistance, job training and education. In Tapachula, on Mexico's southern border, JRS also offers cultural events, arts and music classes, and hosts support groups for women and young people as they cope with the stresses of migration.

➔ [www.jrs.net](http://www.jrs.net)



## DOCTORS WITHOUT BORDERS

Doctors Without Borders offers free medical assistance in areas of need—including for migrants in Central America, Mexico and on Venezuela's borders with Colombia and Brazil. In Colombia, the organization focuses on non-emergency care that migrants are unable to access at public hospitals, including primary care and treatment for chronic diseases such as asthma and diabetes. In addition to providing health services, Doctors Without Borders issues reports on health conditions on the ground; one recent study found that the United States' Remain in Mexico program had put migrants at additional risk of kidnapping and sexual assault.

➔ [www.msf.org](http://www.msf.org)



A Venezuelan woman takes shelter at a U.N. refugee camp in La Guajira, Colombia.

← THE AID CHALLENGE

## Learning on Its Own

With very little aid or experience in hosting migrants, Latin America is thinking outside the box

by Andrew Selee

**M**IGRATION HAS BEEN an integral part of Latin America, but until recently it was generally a movement out of the region. Throughout the second half of the 20th century and well into the first decade of the 21st, millions of Latin Americans moved to the developed North. But in the last decade, a set of particularly acute displacement crises—especially in Venezuela and Central America—has reversed the trend, with millions of Latin Americans heading to neighboring countries and putting down roots.

More than 4 million Venezuelans have moved to almost every country in the region, with the largest numbers in Colombia, followed by Peru, Chile and Ecuador; another 100,000 Nicaraguans moved to Costa Rica; and tens of thousands (perhaps hundreds of thousands) of Hondurans, Guatemalans and Salvadorans have chosen to stay in Mexico as it becomes harder to move to the United States.

But if migration is a global issue, the picture in Latin America is conspicuously different.

In the rest of the world, displacement crises follow

a common template. When people flee their country because of a major conflict, the collapse of state functions or just generalized violence, U.N. agencies move in to assist the countries receiving the migrants. Most of those displaced are officially designated as refugees, and the international community mobilizes to build camps and provide food, shelter and schools for the refugees.

Latin America's experience couldn't be more different. Countries in the region have tried to integrate those fleeing their nations into the labor market, the education system and local neighborhoods. With very few exceptions, there are no refugee camps, and most governments have eschewed the use of the term "refugee" in favor of treating those arriving as integral parts of their new host communities. U.N. agencies, international NGOs and development banks are playing an important complementary role, but national governments have taken the helm. And the cost.

## Creative Thinking

**H**OW DID A REGION that had limited recent experience with mass immigration flows pivot so quickly to doing this? Some part of this can be explained by cultural affinities and economic ties that are much tighter, though not always uncomplicated, between immediate neighbors.

But the absence of international guidance may well have helped too. By the time U.N. agencies and international donors began to focus on the region, Latin American countries had already created their own template for receiving migrants, and eschewed the idea of granting refugee status in favor of treating the recent arrivals as migrants, developing novel ways to provide them legal status—temporary protections, work-based visas, the use of regional mobility agreements under Mercosur and Unasur, or, more rarely, asylum. Countries used the patchwork of instruments they had created during the early 2000s when migration within the region was still quite low.

These measures have been deeply imperfect, of course. Most arriving migrants find work in their new host countries, but it's generally in the informal economy, even for those with significant skills such as doctors, nurses, engineers, lawyers and teachers. Education is free, but in practice it's often hard to register a child

in school without the right documentation. And most Latin American countries, with the notable exceptions of Costa Rica, Colombia, Brazil, Argentina and Uruguay, had started to make it harder for migrants to enter even before the coronavirus crisis closed borders further. This means a growing irregular population in most countries and a greater reliance on smugglers to move people.

But the lack of international attention cuts both ways. It may well have helped spur local innovation across Latin America, but it also means that countries have largely been left on their own to manage overcrowded schools, hospitals and housing in major migrant-receiving communities, and to figure out how to manage providing legal status and adequate services to a growing immigrant population. Dany Bahar at the Brookings Institution calculates that Latin American countries have received, on average, far less than a tenth of international aid to deal with Venezuelan displacement, compared to what countries around the world received for the Syrian refugee crisis. Before the coronavirus crisis, aid was starting to flow, but still far behind the real needs.

As aid increases, it will be crucial to preserve what has worked well so far, with Latin American countries, rather than international organizations, owning the response. It has not always been perfect, but overall, Latin Americans have adjusted quickly to being nations of immigrants, finding swift, agile and generally inclusive ways of receiving displaced populations. They have shown remarkable flexibility and capacity so far, and the available evidence suggests that their economies are actually benefiting from the influx of new human capital, too.

The international community can help ensure that countries have the tools to remain open and that integration really happens. In other words, it will be vital that both immigrants and host communities benefit from the arrival of displaced neighbors. That will require crucial investments in education, health care and housing, and smart policy decisions around labor markets and human capital for both immigrants and native-born residents.

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*Selee is the president of the Migration Policy Institute*



GOBIERNO DE  
**MÉXICO**

**GOBERN**  
SECRETARÍA DE GOBERNACIÓN





African migrants wait outside the Siglo XXI detention center in Tapachula, on Mexico's southern border.

## THE HEALTH RISK

# HIDDEN SCARS

**Trauma and mental health issues pose a huge challenge for Latin America's migrants. Budgets are low, but experts are trying to help.**

by Benjamin Russell

**T**APACHULA, MEXICO—The modern name and whitewashed façade of the Siglo XXI (21st Century) “migration station” belie the nightmarish conditions inside.

Migrants who passed through the facility during their quest for asylum in Mexico told *AQ* about diarrhea-inducing food, filthy bathrooms and sleepless nights, a Haitian woman getting roughed up for not understanding orders in Spanish, and the constant fear of an apparently arbitrary 4 a.m. wake-up call to face deportation. At least three migrants have attempted suicide inside the building since 2018.

“People come out of Siglo XXI reduced to scraps,” said Verónica Martínez, a psychologist at the Fray Matías Human Rights Center in Tapachula.

Trauma is a common thread for the Central Americans, Cubans, Haitians, West Africans and others who come through this city of 350,000 near Mexico's border with Guatemala. Experts say the mental health of migrants is only starting to receive the attention it deserves—and will likely be a major issue for them, and host countries, for years to come.

“It takes a lot of work to regain the humanity of peo-

ple who came here with aspirations but are treated like they're nothing," said Martínez.

The scale of the problem is alarming at a time when Mexico has seen a surge of new arrivals fleeing violence and persecution in Central America and elsewhere. Trauma can happen before, during and after the journey. More than 55% of migrants who underwent screenings at a Doctors Without Borders (MSF, for its initials in French) facility in northern Mexico in 2019 showed moderate or grave signs of psychological suffering, according to a recent report published by the organization. Most of those cases were triggered by violence.

Néstor Rubiales, who runs MSF's mental health program in Mexico, told *AQ* that around 10% of migrants they treat for mental health issues are in need of pharmaceutical care. Those findings fit with studies from elsewhere in the region. A recent paper by researchers from Harvard Medical School and Peru's Universidad del Pacífico, which surveyed Venezuelan migrants at the Peru-Ecuador border, found that 19% showed signs of depression and 23% of anxiety.

But when it comes to mental health, money, attention and—at times—good will are in short supply. Funding services for migrants in a region where psychological support for the general population is overlooked can be a tough sell. Despite a more than 2,000% increase since 2014 in its annual number of asylum requests, the budget of the Mexican Committee for Refugee Assistance (COMAR) for 2020 is still just \$2.38 million, a fraction of which is reserved for mental health services.

That migrants tend to be forward-looking and determined to solve their own problems, along with the stigma of "going crazy," surely stops some from seeking help. The result in Tapachula is that government and civil society are struggling to keep up—and a growing number of migrants are at risk of falling through the cracks.

## Stuck in limbo

**A**LQUIDIA NUÑEZ, a 34-year-old from Honduras, arrived in Tapachula earlier this year with her two young daughters. Like many other migrants, she found that security on Mexico's southern border had become more robust, a response to the Donald Trump administration's threat to apply

tariffs on Mexican products if the government didn't stem the flow of migrants passing through its territory.

Migration officials and National Guard units now guard the Suchiate River that divides Mexico and Guatemala to stop migrants from bypassing official border crossings nearby. Additional checkpoints on the road toward Tapachula and a countrywide crackdown on undocumented migration have reduced travelers' odds of making it to the U.S. border without first going through Mexican migration proceedings. For Nuñez, that meant a stay at Siglo XXI while officials decided whether or not she'd be allowed to apply for asylum.

In 2019, more than 70,000 people applied for asylum in Mexico—up from just over 2,000 five years earlier. When their requests are approved, applicants can legally travel to the northern border, but in the meantime they are forced to remain in the same Mexican state in which they arrived. More than 60% end up in Tapachula.

The surge in requests means migrants are regularly spending far longer in the city than the 45 days COMAR is legally given to process their claims. One Cuban asylum-seeker who had spent more than 10 months waiting for a decision told *AQ* that he was being "tortured with bureaucracy."

"We try to help people get into a position where, when a decision finally does come, they are either strong enough mentally to handle a no or able to plan ahead if they get a yes," said Yamel Athie, a psychologist at Jesuit Refugee Services (JRS) in Tapachula, which, like Fray Matías, provides mental health and legal assistance to asylum-seekers.

With few job prospects and their social networks left behind, many migrants in Tapachula are stuck in limbo—too close for comfort to the places and, often, the people from which they fled. Nuñez left Honduras after her daughters' father was shot and killed. For Central American women like her, especially, crossing the border to Mexico is no guarantee of safety from the gangs or even the individuals who threatened them back home.

The risks for women and children—who make up an increasing share of asylum requests—are acute. As many as a third of female migrants become victims of sexual abuse after crossing into Mexico, according to an MSF survey. Reported sexual abuse of minors in

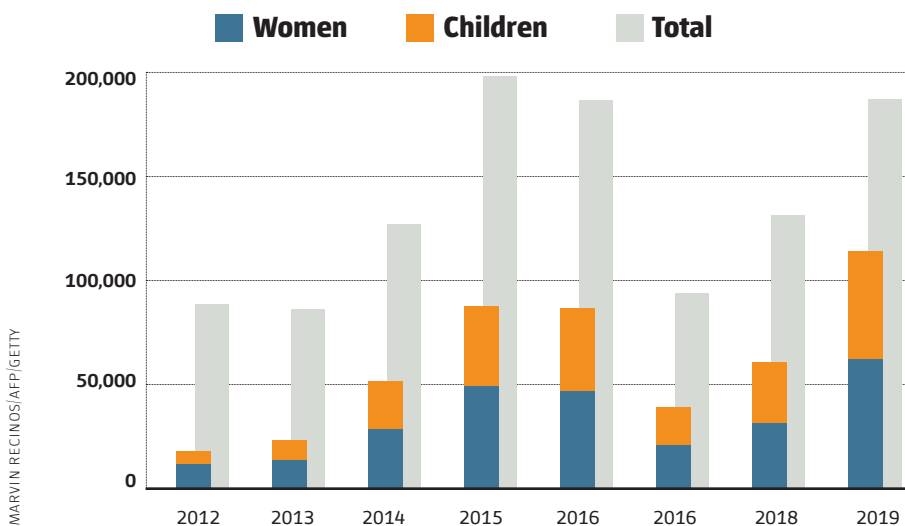




Migrant caravans on their way to the United States cross the Suchiate River that divides Mexico and Guatemala.

### A Worrying Trend

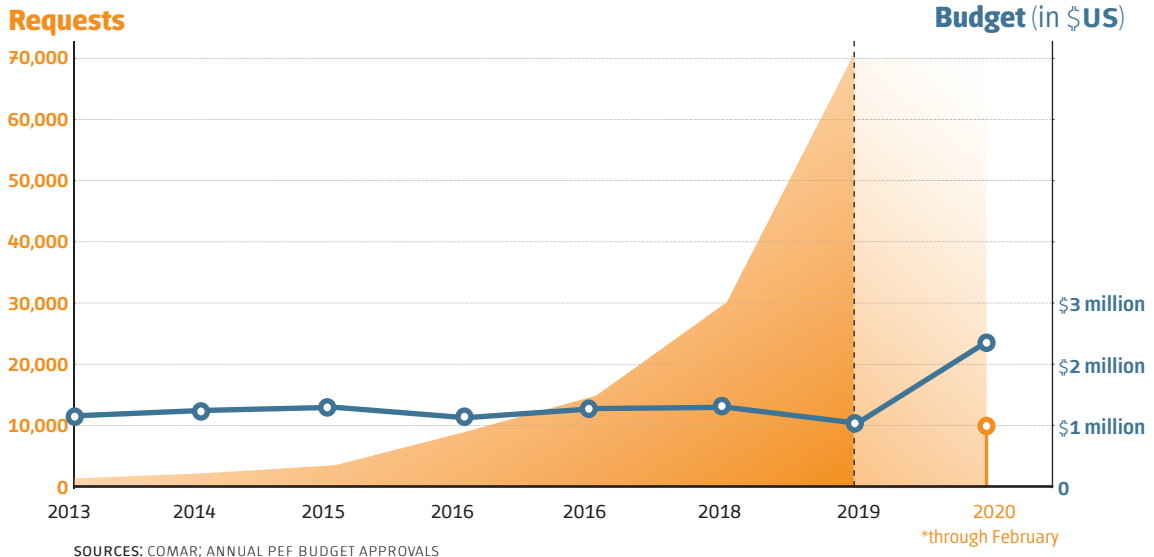
After a sharp rise earlier in the decade, the share of women and children migrating through Mexico spiked again in 2019.



SOURCE: MEXICAN SECRETARIAT OF THE INTERIOR

## Budget Limitations

Mexico’s refugee agency is lacking resources after a huge increase in asylum requests.



the state of Chiapas, where Tapachula is a main economic driver, rose by 60% in 2019.

“Everyone talks about the women being killed in Juárez (on the northern border), but nobody talks about the women being killed at the Suchiate River,” said Athie, who was born and grew up in Tapachula.

With only a handful of psychologists and psychiatrists available to treat patients in the city, migrants have few opportunities to try to come to terms with what they’ve experienced. Stigmatized and vulnerable, many female migrants fall into sex work or rely on fellow male migrants for protection, which carries its own risks.

“Migrant women repeatedly hear that they are here to be prostitutes or to steal other women’s husbands,” said Martínez. “This kind of psychological violence builds on itself and many of these women lose sight of a way forward.”

## Trying to turn the page

**M**EXICO HAS ONE OF THE HIGHEST ASYLUM acceptance rates in the world, but the government’s response to changing migration has been fickle and uneven. After first promising safe passage to incoming migrants, President Andrés Manuel López Obrador is now accused, even by some in his

own party, of militarizing Mexico’s southern border.

Following a recent trip to Tapachula, Porfirio Muñoz Ledo, a congressman with the governing Morena party, described the National Migration Institute (INM) that runs Siglo XXI as the Mexican government’s “firm, hairy hand”—the agency that migrants are made to fear and obey.

Not everyone agrees with that assessment. A spokesperson for INM told *AQ* that the agency had invested 336 million pesos (about \$14.5 million) since July 2019 into improving migration centers, and that Mexico’s human rights commission and U.N. agencies had monitored conditions at Siglo XXI.

COMAR, for its part, has psychologists on staff and offers free services to asylum-seekers. Andrés Ramírez, a former U.N. migration official who has headed the agency since 2018, told *AQ* that new hires and cooperation with international organizations will help speed up the application process and allow for better services for incoming migrants, especially those who don’t speak Spanish.

Still, the daily lines and handful of people sleeping on the sidewalk outside COMAR’s offices in Tapachula each night show how much is left to be done.

“The work will never be complete—because the refugee situation is constantly evolving,” said Ramírez.



**“We can accompany people in their treatment for awhile, but eventually they are going to move on.”**

—Yamel Athie

“But we are clear about what we need to change ... we came in with a different perspective (from previous administrations), oriented more toward human rights.”

The Mexican government also offers some job programs—López Obrador recently said he would provide 4,000 jobs to migrants on the southern border. But that pales in comparison to the more than 40,000 asylum-seekers who arrived last year in Tapachula alone. And, given the traumas of migration, expecting migrants to simply show up and be productive employees may be unrealistic.

“These aren’t lost people, but we have to change what we’re providing,” Meghan López, who runs the International Rescue Committee’s Latin America office, told *AQ*. “It’s not as simple as saying ‘There, you have a job, now we’re done.’”

The most creative solutions are coming from civil society. MSF uses WhatsApp and phone calls to pro-

vide mental health check-ups for migrants on the move. JRS hosts women’s support groups and provides free mammograms and HPV prevention services, reserving 50% for Mexican citizens to avoid feeding resentment among those who feel migrants’ needs are being given priority over their own.

Still, civil society and international organizations have resource restrictions of their own—and long-term treatment remains a challenge. Athie told *AQ* she was hesitant to suggest migrants seek psychiatric or pharmaceutical care—even if they are in need—because keeping up with treatment during migration can be logistically and economically next to impossible.

“We can accompany people in their treatment for awhile, but eventually they are going to move on,” she said. “There just aren’t enough of us.”

*Russell is a senior editor and correspondent in Mexico City for AQ*



A vaccination campaign for Venezuelans in Peru: restrictive immigration policies can undermine public health programs.

#### THE HEALTH RISK

## The Risks for Public Health

Measles, tuberculosis and other diseases have made a comeback

by Luisa Feline Freier

**L**IMA—Official data on key health indicators in Venezuela have been scarce or nonexistent for years. But information from international agencies and neighboring countries suggests that Venezuela’s health care system has long since collapsed.

The implications for other countries in the region—especially those receiving large numbers of Venezuelan migrants at their borders—are significant.

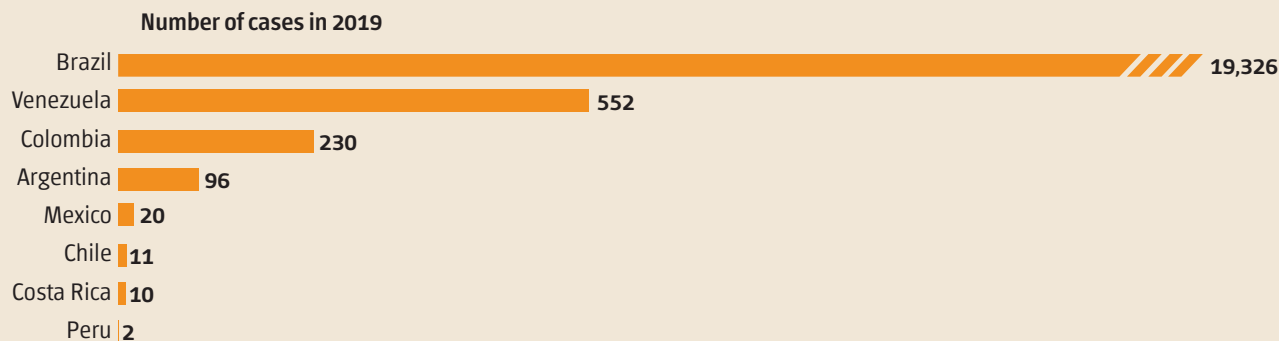
According to a 2019 report by the Organization of American States, Venezuelan hospitals lacked between 80% and 90% of essential medicines and surgical materials. More than half the country’s operating rooms were out of use and more than two-thirds of public emergency rooms were only intermittently operating. Perhaps most significantly for Venezuela’s neighbors, long-running vaccination programs have been disrupted.

The breakdown of these programs has led to the reappearance of vaccine-preventable infections that had been well-controlled for decades, including tuberculosis, hepatitis A, whooping cough and diphtheria, as well as malaria and dengue, and STDS including HIV/AIDS.

JUAN VITALE/AFP/GETTY

# A Deadly Border Crossing

The spread of measles across the region is a concern for immigration officials. PAHO tracked the most recent regional outbreak, which began in 2017, to Venezuela.



SOURCE: PAN AMERICAN HEALTH ORGANIZATION

Recent outbreaks of measles and the spread of coronavirus in the region offer two clear illustrations of the risks. According to a 2019 study conducted by researchers at the Johns Hopkins Bloomberg School of Public Health, Venezuela reported more than 7,000 measles cases from 2017 to mid-2018. That led to the emergence of measles in Colombia, where 98% of reported cases were shown to have been imported or related to other imported cases. The Pan American Health Organization estimates about 80% of confirmed cases of measles throughout the Americas in 2017 came from Venezuela. Diseases don't recognize international borders. But they spread faster—and are harder to control—in the context of large-scale migration.

Meanwhile, policies aimed at restricting migration appear ineffective. Recent limits on legal migration, including border closures related to the coronavirus outbreak, have pushed more Venezuelans to migrate irregularly, undermining best practices such as vaccination programs at official border crossings. Life for migrants in countries under lockdown is often fraught. Venezuelans in Peru, for example, are unable to access government services intended to help people live through the coronavirus quarantine, meaning food and other essentials can be hard to come by.

Some countries, such as Colombia, have taken a proactive stance.

Doctors in Colombian border cities such as Cúcuta

are treating not only cancer and AIDS, but also preventable diseases such as diphtheria, measles and malaria. The Colombian government has invested \$50 million in reproductive, sexual and mental health programs for Venezuelan immigrants, and has worked with international partners to include Venezuelans in its coronavirus treatment plans.

But border cities' hospitals have already been severely strained. According to Felipe Muñoz (page 22), adviser to Colombia's president on issues related to the Venezuelan border, the national government owes regional hospitals \$90 million for costs related to emergencies and births of Venezuelans, without taking into account potential costs from coronavirus.

This crisis is not going away. Latin America needs significantly more international help both in funding and in technical know-how regarding emergency response and how to best structure the efficient disbursement of funds from national to regional governments. In mid-2019, the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees and the International Organization for Migration reported receiving only 25% of funds needed to support aid efforts associated with Venezuelan displacement. The continued lack of assistance would be detrimental to public health, not just in the Americas but around the world.

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*Freier is an assistant professor and researcher focused on migration issues at Peru's Universidad del Pacifico*

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# Follow the Money

The exodus of migrants has opened up new remittance corridors throughout Latin America

by Leonie Rauls

**R**EMITTANCES ARE A \$100 BILLION INDUSTRY in Latin America, with money traditionally coming to the region from the United States and Europe. But the unprecedented level of intraregional migration is fostering completely new corridors, with flows now originating from countries like Costa Rica and Chile. The demand is also meeting with new ideas about supply: tech-based financial services like digital wallets and online transfers that cut costs for senders are giving a leg up for new local ventures to expand.

“The impact of this modernization is quite remarkable—the payment ecosystem is reaching the entire migrant population in Latin America, providing greater financial access,” Manuel Orozco, a remittances expert at the Inter-American Dialogue, told *AQ*.

Prior to January 2010, when the magnitude 7 earthquake devastated Haiti, there was simply no record of money being sent from Chile to the Caribbean nation. As Haitians left their homeland en masse following the disaster, the diaspora in the Andean country grew by 3,500%, and by 2019, Haiti was receiving \$115 million in remittances originating from Chile, the equivalent of 1% of its GDP. Similarly, remittances to Haiti coming from the Dominican Republic have almost tripled since 2010.

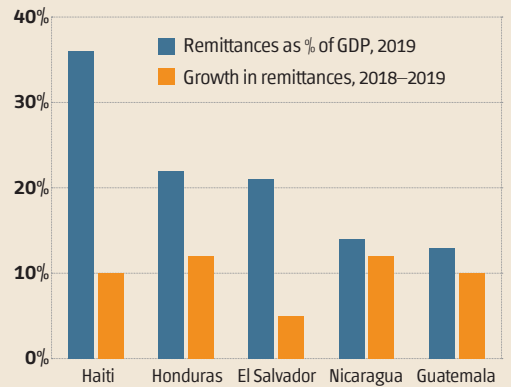
And of course, flows originating in Colombia and heading to Venezuela have also grown exponentially. Almost a third of all Venezuelan migrants settled in the neighboring country, from which they sent home \$442 million last year—compared to a flow of just \$9 million in 2010.

For Orozco, the trend is clear: intraregional remittance flows will continue to grow. Of the almost 5 million Venezuelans who have left the country since 2015, most have settled within Latin America, and roughly 75% send money back home. And most likely will do so using an app or a computer. According to the Inter-American Dialogue, remittance pick-up via digital wallets is expected to exceed 10% of all transfers in the region by 2022.

As demand increases, the money transfer industry is expanding regionally with newer—and local—players entering the competition. An Inter-American Development Bank survey of startups in the region shows 285 startups offering payments and remittances—that’s 24% of all new tech business in Latin America. Migrants have limited credit history to be able to use traditional services, but in most cases, they have a cell phone.

## Migrants are a major source of revenue for their homeland

Remittances are critical for Central America and Haiti

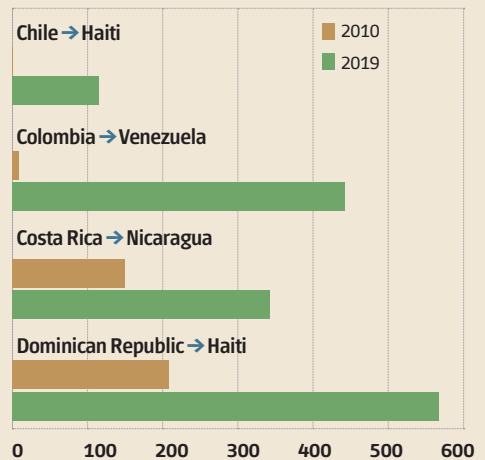


SOURCE: INTER-AMERICAN DIALOGUE

## Remittances within Latin America are on the rise

New migration patterns have increased intra-regional flows

Remittances in millions of US dollars



SOURCES: BANCO NACIONAL DE NICARAGUA; INTER-AMERICAN DIALOGUE; WORLD BANK

# WHEN CARACAS WAS A SAFE HAVEN FROM TYRANNY

**Under the Betancourt Doctrine, Venezuela became a refuge for Latin Americans fleeing dictatorship**

by **Tomás Straka**

**I**N 1958, THE DOMINICAN POLITICIAN, writer and future president Juan Bosch desperately needed a place to find refuge. He had been arrested for a second time by the Cuban dictator Fulgencio Batista for his political activities against the Dominican dictatorship. But after a few months, under pressure from a network of Latin American intellectuals, the ailing regime in Cuba agreed to let Bosch go.

At the time, Caracas was the ideal destination—for Bosch and many other Latin Americans fleeing authoritarian rule.

Venezuela was in the midst of a democratic spring. The dictator Marcos Pérez Jiménez had been overthrown earlier in 1958, and interim president Wolfgang Larrazábal had called free and fair elections. The former president Rómulo Betancourt, the leader of the Acción Democrática party, would win the ballot with a promise of swiftly consolidating democracy.

Caracas had such an intellectually rich environment that the Central University of Venezuela immediately offered Bosch a contract to hold a series of talks, later made into a famous book—*Apuntes sobre el arte de escribir cuentos* (Notes on the Art of Writing Tales). Among his students was a Colombian journalist who worked as a magazine editor: Gabriel García Márquez.

The story of the encounter between García Márquez and Bosch, who in 1963 became the Dominican Republic's first democratically elected pres-

ident, would turn into a sort of Venezuelan legend, repeated over and over since. It shows how, starting in the late 1950s, Venezuela—particularly Caracas—became a refuge based on two pillars: a robust democracy and petrodollars, which meant free speech and well-paid jobs.

Today, Venezuela is at the other extreme, with no democracy and an economic meltdown, expelling millions of its citizens to countries in Latin America and beyond. The Caracas of the golden years seems like a different planet. However, its lessons are more important than ever.

## Democracies, unite!

**T**HE DEMOCRATIC REGIME inaugurated by Betancourt had powerful enemies from the start. On one side, the hard left believed that only a Cuban-style revolution could bring freedom and development for the people of Latin America. The socialist Bolivian activist Marcelo Quiroga Santa Cruz pejoratively referred to the “Caracas Club”—a group of reformist leaders including Betancourt, Argentina’s Arturo Frondizi and Peru’s Víctor Raúl Haya de la Torre. A democracy that tried to combine free market rules with social justice, including through policies such as land reform, was too bourgeois.

Meanwhile, right-wing forces saw democracy as the first step toward anarchy and a communist takeover. Dictatorships—preferably under military





President Rómulo Betancourt, left, and Juan Bosch in the Miraflores Presidential Palace in 1962.



control—could guarantee an orderly and gradual modernization aligned with traditional values.

Against his authoritarian antagonists, Betancourt proposed a foreign policy to unite democrats using one clear formula: severing diplomatic ties with any government that did not have democratic origins. According to the Betancourt Doctrine, regimes that came to power through violence were illegitimate and Venezuela should recognize them as such, breaking relations.

Betancourt understood well the difficulties of maintaining a democracy in a region full of authoritarian regimes, particularly because several of these dictatorships had been actively supporting one another with arms, money and more for decades. The Venezuelan president strongly believed that to preserve democracy in Venezuela, he needed to build a regional coalition of democracies as well.

Already in 1950, Betancourt had organized the Pro-

Democracy and Freedom Conference in Havana, trying to unite the region's democratic forces. By 1960, he had become the champion of the democratic cause, while his nemesis was the Dominican dictator Rafael Trujillo Molina. The dispute between the two rapidly translated into violence, with Trujillo ordering a bomb attack that almost killed Betancourt in June 1960.

Dominican dissidents assassinated Trujillo the following year. However, by then the biggest threat to Betancourt was no longer right-wing regimes, but leftist guerrillas. Predicating a continental revolution, Fidel Castro began to supply Venezuelan groups with weapons, money and training to overthrow the government in Caracas. The John F. Kennedy administration fully supported Venezuela against Havana. But the Cold War polarization undermined the Betancourt Doctrine, since the specter of communism was becoming an excuse for coups against democratically elected presidents.



An alliance of reformists:  
Betancourt hosts Argentine  
President Arturo Frondizi in 1961.

**Betancourt proposed a foreign policy to unite democrats using one clear formula: severing diplomatic ties with any government that did not have democratic origins.**

## The end of the line

**T**HE 1960S WAS A TURBULENT DECADE in Latin America: the 1962 coup against Frondizi in Argentina, the 1964 destruction of Brazilian democracy, and the 1965 U.S. intervention in the Dominican Republic, among other episodes, muddied the waters for Betancourt's pro-democracy foreign policy. It became increasingly challenging for Venezuela to condemn authoritarian governments that were backed by the West and shared Caracas' opposition to Castro.

This contradiction led President Rafael Caldera to switch the Betancourt Doctrine to a *realpolitik* approach to diplomacy in the 1970s. Rhetorical support for democracy was maintained, but without breaking commercial and diplomatic relations with non-democratic governments.

The realignment did not affect Caracas' status as a haven for dissidents—and they were many. Decades before becoming president of Brazil, sociologist Fernando Henrique Cardoso was a professor at the Central University of Venezuela. El Salvador's José Napoleón Duarte, who would also later win the presidency in his country, worked at a state-owned public works company. Renowned Cuban economist Felipe Pazos became an official at the Venezuelan Central Bank. Intellectuals like Brazil's Darcy Ribeiro, Uruguay's Ángel Rama, Argentina's Tomás Eloy Martínez and Chile's Isabel Allende did much of their best work while living in Caracas.

Even after the weakening of the Betancourt Doctrine, Venezuela remained a critical force for stability and democracy in the 1970s and 1980s. For instance, Caracas helped restore the Panama Canal to the Panamanian government and—arguably its most important achievement—worked as a peace broker in the Central American civil wars, under the Contadora Group.

Six decades later, with the crisis in his home country Venezuela, Betancourt's message has gained a tragic timeliness. It is a call for collective action: most Latin American countries understand that the destruction of a democracy in the region will always be a threat to all Latin American democracies. But it is also a matter of conscience: Venezuela has done so much for Latin American dissidents in the past that several countries feel they have a moral duty to Venezuelans now fighting for democracy.

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*Straka is a history professor at Andrés Bello University in Caracas*

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## The Last Word

The fear of coronavirus cannot cloud our moral and political duties to migrants

by Susan Segal

**M**IGRATION IS ONE OF the most pressing issues we face in the hemisphere. As *AQ* prepared this issue, my focus was on the difference between a migrant and a refugee. According to the U.N. Refugee Agency (UNHCR), a person who is forced to flee due to war, violence or persecution is a refugee, while a migrant is someone who chooses to move.

That's a distinction that, at least in the case of Venezuela, is almost too small to notice. Is a person who is denied food, medicine, water, electricity and basic human rights a migrant or a refugee? I would argue that it doesn't really matter, as in practice life is almost impossible in both cases.

Then came the pandemic.

Today, whether we call a person a migrant or a refugee, the conditions in which many are living in the context of the novel coronavirus present a massive danger to each individual, old or young.

Overnight, we have transformed into a society of social distancing to protect against this invisible but very present enemy. The crowded living conditions of many migrants means they face a high risk



to catch—and spread—the virus.

As a reaction, countries have sealed their borders to migrants, freezing the legal flow of people. Another effect is to cut off the flow of day migrants who cross the border just to work or buy food.

The other outcome—possibly even more tragic—of the pandemic is a backlash against the millions of people already living in countries other than their own. This backlash

is not just about the fear of spreading disease. As unemployment rises, it will also be around competition for jobs. Finally, governments will have fewer resources to dedicate to aid the migration crisis, making the situation even more challenging.

At this point, given the realities of the coronavirus and the political fallout, there is no good solution. However, there is a humanitarian path. We cannot allow our fear of the economic and medical realities of coronavirus to overwhelm our sense of right. I implore governments and citizens to take the humanitarian path and help those in need.

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*Segal is the president and CEO of Americas Society and Council of the Americas*

# Cultura



ART

## Feliciano Centurión

by Gabriel Pérez-Barreiro

**W**HEN ARGENTINA'S MILITARY JUNTA finally ceded power in 1983, the country's art world—like much of society—was transformed by a newfound sense of openness. For the first time in a generation, the right to one's own identity and sexuality became a more urgent cause for young artists than denouncing crimes of the state. For the avant-garde painters, sculptors, musicians and others who came of age at this time, affection and free expression began to replace political ideology.



Examples of Centurión's colorful, elaborate animal sculpture and embroidery on display in New York.

One artist whose work captured this new democratic spirit was Feliciano Centurión, an artist from Paraguay who moved to Buenos Aires in the early 1980s.

The openly gay, long-haired Centurión surely dealt with prejudice and marginalization as he grew up and moved to the city as a struggling artist. But the local art community embraced him. His seductive embroidering, featuring extravagant animals and heartbreaking phrases about love, life and death, connected with Argentina's newly expressive young artists. He became part of an important group of artists who displayed their work at the Centro Cultural Ricardo Rojas, a ramshackle gallery that was little more than a wide hallway in central Buenos Aires.

Centurión died of complications from AIDS in 1996 at just 34, but his work offers delicate testimony to a life lived to the full. On a recent trip to Asunción and Buenos Aires, where I met with Centurión's family and his former partner, I found trunks and boxes filled with a cornucopia of his art: blankets, embroidery, drawings and more. Many of these works are now hanging at the Americas Society gallery in New York, in an exhibit titled *Abrigo*.

Taken from a short text written by Centurión in which he describes the use of blankets in his art, *abrigo* in Spanish has a multitude of meanings: a winter coat, but also warmth, protection and refuge. The painted and embroidered blankets evoke both the physical warmth Centurión sought during cold Buenos Aires winters, and the warmth of love and human affection that served as the guiding spirit behind his work, which can be seen at [www.as-coa.org](http://www.as-coa.org).

**Pérez-Barreiro** is guest curator of Feliciano Centurión: *Abrigo*

# Film



## **Bacurau**

WRITTEN AND DIRECTED BY  
**Kleber Mendonça Filho  
and Juliano Dornelles**

STARRING  
**Bárbara Colen,  
Thomas Aquino,  
Silvero Pereira and  
Sônia Braga**

COUNTRY  
**Brazil**

**AQ'S RATING: 9**



## FILM

# **Bacurau**

by Carlos Aguilar

IN THE NEAR-FUTURE BRAZIL OF *Bacurau*, a small working-class town stands on the brink of annihilation. The ruling elite have taken control of the water supply, and in collusion with imperialist forces plan to violently eliminate the townspeople who stand in the way of their greed. As the town fights back, the film takes a traditional “save the farm” premise and furiously radicalizes it. Heads will roll.

*Bacurau* serves as both a dark foretelling of Brazil’s future and a call to arms to stop its vision from becoming a reality. Kleber Mendonça Filho, the politically outspoken director of *Neighboring Sounds* and *Aquarius*, here teams up as co-writer

VICTOR JUCA





Bárbara Colen plays Teresa, one of Bacurau's residents who discover their town has literally fallen off the map.

and co-director with Juliano Dornelles, the production designer on his previous features. The result is a film that works equally well as a gory Western and as a grand commentary on social and economic inequality.

The small fictional town from which the movie takes its name is self-governed and tight-knit. The residents of Bacurau cover the spectrum of Brazil's racial diversity, but all share a distrust of authorities. The town operates its own museum, rejects appointed officials, and supports local revolutionary Lunga (Silvero Pereira). At the heart of the film is the confrontation between this micro-society and a pack of rabid American mercenaries, led by German-born actor Udo Kier, who at the behest of the government plan to subdue the problematic townspeople—by any means necessary.

Mendonça Filho and Dornelles refrain from completely stripping the murderous oppressors of their humanity, nor do they sanctify the locals' violent means of self-defense. But it is clear where the filmmakers' sense of justice lies.

Legendary Brazilian actress Sônia Braga is an absolute scene-stealer as Doctor Domingas, denouncing the anesthetizing effects of a government-subsidized pain-killing drug in one of many examples of the shrewd subtext beneath the film's spectacle of action.

*Bacurau's* retro feel—including dissolves and wipe transitions more familiar in decades past—further transmits the filmmakers' concern over the global rise of an antiquated authoritarianism. The film grapples frankly with classism and racism, and explores how, despite their pale skin, wealth and European heritage, the privileged Brazilians aren't considered equals by the modern-day colonizers.

"So much violence," Kier's character Michael says as the conflict with the townspeople reaches a crescendo. "This is only the beginning," he adds. That is the filmmakers' ominous warning to us all.

---

*Aguilar is an independent critic and filmmaker based in Los Angeles*

# Music



Lead singer  
Liniker fronts  
the soulful São  
Paulo-based  
Caramelows.

## AQ's Spring Playlist

by Sebastián Zubieta

**O**ur musical recommendations for a spring spent indoors, from foot-tapping Brazilian soul to a Guatemalan composer's experiments with classical sound. To listen to music from the artists here, visit [americasquarterly.org/SpringPlaylist2020](https://americasquarterly.org/SpringPlaylist2020).

MAURICIO SANTANA/GETTY

## Liniker e os Caramelows

BRAZIL

Catch Liniker e os Caramelows while you can. The soulful São Paulo-based musicians have been performing irresistibly danceable tunes since 2015, but plan to disband later this year. After a three-year hiatus from producing new music, their second—and final—album, *Goela Abaixo* (2019) picks up where the band left off with 2016's *Remonta*.

Frontwoman Liniker and her Caramelows bandmates still offer the same occasionally quirky energy and shiny arrangements, but now the sound is more nuanced, the winds and electronics more subtle, and the songwriting more focused. The album's profile—peaking in intensity early on—is unusual but effective. After a mysterious opening with the track “Brechoque,” the subdued atmosphere continues into the introduction of “Lava,” only for the song to turn into a party reggae-samba-surf and rock-cumbia hybrid. The energy continues to climb in “Beau,” the most soulful track in the record, featuring the band's powerful brass section. “De Ontem,” the group-singing “Boca” and “Bem Bom” keep up the pace before things start to calm down. A set of acoustic ballads with psychedelic touches lead up to the closing anthem, “Goela.”

For karaoke fans or listeners who simply want to lounge in the shimmering sea of the Caramelows' musicianship, most of *Goela Abaixo* has also been released in instrumental versions. But the lyrics are worth paying attention to. Liniker's activism in support of LGBTQ and Afro-Brazilian rights shines throughout, with songs celebrating love and longing as a path to self-empowerment and healing. Using queer desire, tenderness and love as tools of resistance has an illustrious history in Brazil (See Caetano Veloso turning “Menino do Rio” upside down in 1979), but this is activism that can seriously swing.

## Joaquín Orellana

GUATEMALA

On a recent trip to Guatemala City, I asked a number of non-musicians if they had ever heard the name Joaquín Orellana. Perhaps I shouldn't have been surprised that around half of them had not only heard of him, but knew what he did for a living. That a composer of experimental classical music should be so widely recognized speaks to the impact and importance of Orellana's work.

Orellana was born in Guatemala City in 1930 and received a traditional musical education, attending a conservatory to study violin and composition. But in 1967, his musical world was turned upside down by a fellowship to the Latin American Center for Music Studies at the legendary Instituto Di Tella in Buenos Aires, which would become a cradle of the avant garde movement on the continent. During his fellowship, Orellana was exposed to electronic music, which was then still in its infancy (computers took up entire rooms at the time). When he returned to Guatemala, where the technology he had used in Argentina wasn't available, Orellana made up his own solutions to achieve radical sounds, creating new instruments based on Guatemala's national favorite, the marimba. Dozens of instruments followed, big and small, made of wood, bamboo, plastic or metal—all of them both sonically and visually stunning, like the giant, curving sinusoide.

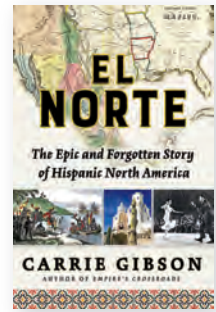
The music Orellana has been creating for his unique instruments since the 1970s is deeply connected to Guatemala's tragic history, providing a soundscape that addresses the oppression of indigenous people and the pains of the decades-long civil war that ended in 1996. About 40 of Orellana's instruments will be on display for the first time in the United States at Americas Society in New York in the upcoming exhibition *Joaquín Orellana: The Spine of Music*.

Zubieta is director of the music program at Americas Society

# Books

## *El Norte: The Epic and Forgotten Story of Hispanic North America*

Reviewed by Russell Crandall and Frederick Richardson



By Carrie Gibson  
Atlantic Monthly Press  
Hardcover, 576 pages

IN 1932, CALIFORNIA CONSERVATIONIST Christine Sterling commissioned Mexican artist David Alfaro Siqueiros to paint a mural in Los Angeles' El Pueblo neighborhood—an urban revival project-cum-tourist attraction in the middle of downtown.

Sterling expected a romantic vision of Mexico's past, but when the mural was unveiled to a sizeable crowd in October 1932, it was clear that the communist-leaning Siqueiros had different priorities. Covering an 18-by-80-foot wall, "América Tropical" depicted a crucified indigenous man surrounded by Mayan motifs and armed revolutionaries. The work elicited a startled response from the audience; Sterling labeled it anti-American. "América Tropical" was hastily painted over, and only recently unveiled again after intensive restoration efforts.

As we learn in historian and journalist Carrie Gibson's *El Norte: The Epic and Forgotten Story of Hispanic North America*, the mural saga speaks to larger themes in North America's Hispanic history. From the outset, North America was an imagined land where early explorers searched for mythical cities filled with treasure. As Gibson points out, this myth never died—it only evolved. This can be seen in the revelry of Cinco de Mayo and Columbus Day, depictions of Hispanic culture in the media, and modern political discourse surrounding Mexico, all of which paint an uneven, misleading account of Hispanic contributions to North America's past and present. Through her impressive research and enthralling prose, Gibson combats this simplification and presents a rich history that is too often left untold.

*El Norte* first explores the colonization of North (and South) America by the conquistadors and the

empires they represented. Gibson details the diverse interests that descended on the New World, while incorporating history from the native point of view as well. Of course, some of the names—Cortés, Ponce de León and even Bartolomé de las Casas—will strike most readers as at least vaguely familiar. But Gibson also relishes attention on the more obscure figures like Álvaro Núñez Cabeza de Vaca, whose epic eight-year journey began in 1528 and took him from Florida to the Gulf of California.

To fully understand the proliferation and subsequent decline of Spanish influence in North America, Gibson deftly incorporates Portuguese, English, French, and Russian colonial efforts to illustrate the fierce competition on the continent. This is a long, chaotic history that could easily consume one or more volumes on its own. Recognizing this, *El Norte* does not seek to be exhaustive, but instead tethers its chapters to specific locations in order to narrate every epoch from Columbus' landing to modern-day border disputes. For instance, in "Nootka Sound, Canada, ca. 1760s-1789," Gibson details Spanish efforts to curtail British and Russian incursions on Canadian territory while also focusing on increased interest in the West Coast more broadly. Another especially scrumptious chapter, "New Orleans, Louisiana, ca. 1790-1804," showcases how the French Revolution, slavery and the 1803 Louisiana Purchase harmed Spanish interests in the vast, largely unknown region. Through this clever structure, the reader gets a sense of broad historical developments by observing their effects in a concentrated area.

Before reaching the second half of the book, European powers recede into the background as the United

States becomes “a more confident and stable nation.” This confidence increasingly brings the United States into conflict with its neighbor to the south. For the period from 1820 to 1877, Gibson focuses on Texas and New Mexico to explore the gradual erosion of Mexican control. At the time, incorporating these new lands into the United States raised heated debate about which groups were deserving of citizenship and which were not. This often raised complex questions about race that a binary system of racial classification was ill-equipped to handle. Ambiguity surrounding “whiteness” led Tejano Mexicans in the 1850s to assert Spanish origins in order to be classified as white. Indeed, Gibson’s book continually demonstrates that throughout North American history, “belonging” often had ethnic, geographical and racial requirements.

Gibson continues to pursue these questions of race and acceptance across various locales in the early to mid-20th century. Returning from the battlefields of World War II, Mexican-Americans put a pause on enjoying post-war life to take up the fight against so-called Jaime Crow, informal rules meant to deny Mexicans and Mexican-Americans an equal place in society. Later, *El Norte* turns its attention to post-revolutionary Cuba, where a wave of immigrants fleeing Fidel Castro’s regime turned Miami into a “sort of border town,” as the “nonstop flotilla” across the Florida Straits brought a constant stream of new arrivals. Then, appropriately, the book pivots to recent U.S.-Mexico border issues such as undocumented immigration from Mexico and the Northern Triangle of Central America, serving as a powerful reminder that the issues of ownership and exclusion that pervade North America’s Hispanic history are as alive today as ever.

The scope of *El Norte* carries with it some risks. This is an ambitious book that covers a tremendous amount of material. But in no place does it feel disorienting. Ultimately, Gibson delivers a book of both impressive breadth and meticulously researched detail—adding necessary and enlightening context to an under-appreciated slice of North American history.

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**Crandall** teaches politics at Davidson College and is the author of *The Salvador Option: The United States in El Salvador* (Cambridge University Press, 2016)  
**Richardson** is a 2019 graduate of Bowdoin College

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