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Venezuela, Humanitarian Crisis

Venezuela: A Country in Crisis Needs a Bold Solution

“Carmen kneels beside her baby’s coffin, adorning the wood with tiny white wings. The wings are a Venezuelan tradition, meant to symbolize a young child who has flown away to heaven far too soon... After months without food, Carmen herself has withered away to the weight of a child, her bones visible. She is exhausted, but she has more children at home she must try to feed.” (“Venezuelan”). In Venezuela, stories like this are a terrible and common reality. Venezuelans are suffering from hunger, poverty, and a limited voice in their government. The instability of Venezuela also affects the global economy as the country holds the world’s largest oil reserves while the economic situation has increasingly hindered the state-run oil extraction (Grana-Moldovan). Main causes of this crisis include the collapse of oil prices amplified by a reliance on the one commodity as well as poor trade policies enacted by the current government held by the United Socialist Party of Venezuela. This, in turn, has led to hyperinflation, massive shortages of basic goods and the deaths of thousands due to malnutrition and limited medical care. The situation is untenable and must be resolved soon so more innocent lives can be spared and the country can resume its place in the international community.

In the last few years, Venezuela has been rendered incapable of producing its own goods and maintaining international trade, severely restricting the people’s access to essentials. This has created food shortages, putting families in desperate situations. A reporter recalls his own experience, saying Venezuelans would be at supermarkets “waiting through a line that might be 1,000 people sometimes... and find that they’ve only got cooking oil. They don’t have flour. They don’t have any of the basic things that you need there” (Casey “Bust”). More than 82 percent of the population is urban (“The World”), but food problems extend even out of the cities into the rural areas. A recent documentary reports how in a small town “people have made a roadblock, protesting for three days, but the government has taken no notice” and all they have to eat are “a few mangos” (Hernandez). Additionally, a lack of medical supplies is severely limiting medical care. A doctor reveals that in surgery, they “can’t even clean the patients” because there is no soap and “in most cases, there’s no antibiotics” so consequently “some of [the patients] come out okay, but about 1 in every 5 comes back with another infection” (Casey “Bust”).

With shortages of food, medical supplies, and other goods, the people of Venezuela are suffering every day, as they are unable to eat sufficiently and many health conditions become untreatable. News reporter Vladimir Hernandez states that “people have lost the power to choose when and what to eat” and how “this family can only have [a] bowl of rice as their meal for the whole day” (Hernandez). Malnutrition is a widespread problem stemming from the lack of food and the consequences are typical for the 31 million people currently living in Venezuela. Food, nowadays, is mainly only acquired by Venezuelans through state-subsidized food distribution centers which focus on carbohydrate diets with an increasing lack of protein (“ENCOVI”). In a rural village where a “mother [must feed] her baby with sugared water, she says she is too malnourished to produce breast milk” (Hernandez). According to a national poll, “almost 90 percent of the population cannot buy enough food” and “the average Venezuelan living in poverty lost 19 pounds during the year because of food shortages” (Pozzebon). With a typical family size of 3.8 people (“Average”), many parents are caring for multiple children and cannot supply their necessary nutrient and calorie demands.

Throughout much of Venezuela's history, from the Twentieth Century to current time, oil exports have been a significant role in the economic shifts of the nation as current figures show that "oil accounts for about 95% of Venezuela's export revenues" ("Venezuela Crisis"). Journalist Nicholas Casey discusses how Venezuela's reliance on this one commodity affects the economy: "when the price of oil goes up, it's a boom time there. And when the price of oil goes down... this is a very, very dire case" (Casey "Bust"). In the most recent years, "the nation's economy [is taking] a huge hit as a global glut of crude-oil supplies caused a roughly 60% plunge in prices" (Saefong). The political system then amplifies the negative effects because of its unsustainable socialist form. Socialism is a form of government that "calls for public rather than private ownership or control of property and natural resources" (Dagger). The oil industry is controlled by the government and its revenues are relied upon to maintain socialist policies which range from education for all to giving out household appliances. Without the financial support from oil exports, socialism in Venezuela suffers, contributing to the problems in the country.

With the introduction of socialism in 1999, the government put in place various trade policies that were meant to help the poor, but the long-term effects of these policies now ultimately hinder the country from being self-sustainable and hurt the economy. Laws that limit the price of food products and other essentials have led to limited production. As Casey notes, "you couldn't produce it for the price that it was going to be sold for. So what happened next? Well, you just didn't produce it anymore" (Casey "Bust"). Ultimately, this situation can be largely attributed to "years of mismanagement on every level - a lot of corruption, misunderstandings of how the economy worked or how to fix it" (Casey "Bust").

In recent years, inflation in Venezuela has skyrocketed causing a terrible economic depression as the currency value has fallen at a rapid rate requiring more and more money to purchase items. Sadly, hyperinflation is still increasing to outrageous numbers. According to Steve Hanke, a professor of applied economics at Johns Hopkins University, "annual inflation in the country has risen as high as 41,838%" (Heeb). Numbers sourced from the Venezuelan government are unreliable and no longer produced. Interestingly, while 87 percent of the population is considered impoverished and 61 percent are living in extreme poverty, many more people are 'income poor' rather than 'structurally poor' ("ENCOVI"). Much of this economic decline is very recent so people own property of greater value than what their current income would suggest showing that this is a recent phenomenon.

Finally, the crisis is likely to continue due to the rampant corruption of the current government. Stark evidence of corruption and abuse of power prevents the country from moving toward any solutions. Venezuela claims to be a Federal Presidential Republic but has clearly morphed into a dictatorship. The roots of this corruption can be traced to the late President Hugo Chávez, a populist leader who had no real knowledge or experience to lead a country. Besides being unfit for the role of president, Chávez "concentrated power in the executive, successfully increased the term limits for the president, allegedly withheld social insurance from supporters of Opposition parties and closed down Opposition television stations" (Moffitt). Now, the natural rights of the people are being constricted heavily and democracy is receding as Chávez's successor, President Nicolas Maduro and his government try and hold onto power for as long as possible. New laws "[grant] authorities broad powers to... sentence Venezuelans who publish 'messages of intolerance and hatred,' including through social media—one of the few avenues of free speech left in the country—to up to 20 years in prison" ("Venezuela's Slide"). Most recently, "President Nicolás Maduro's government used the Supreme Court, which is now entirely subservient to the executive branch, to take over legislative functions from the opposition-led National Assembly. Then it oversaw the creation of a Constituent Assembly, made up exclusively of government supporters, that is acting as a shadow legislature" ("Venezuela's Slide"). This is to be seen as another move toward dictatorship rather than the democracy the government says they are.

And, despite all the mismanagement and corruption, a significant portion of the population continues to support the current government because of the benefits they have received from it and its socialist form. Citizens need the socialist policies that crippled Venezuela and the promises made by the current government are very appealing. The government builds homes for people, finances small businesses, and ultimately attempts to redistribute wealth, though again, they did not prepare for when funding might crumble which kickstarted the problems today. In a documentary, it is explained how “the poor still rely on the policies that destroyed the country to get by. Because of this, their support of Maduro being the successor of Chavez is unwavering” (Hernandez). Socialist policies include programs designed for “increasing health services at the local level and securing pension payments for... elderly” (Valencia Ramírez 128) which many Venezuelans still wish to enjoy. Prior to Chávez, the governmental system in Venezuela favored the elite in society, prompting the socialist evolution.

Initially, many socialist policies actually did in part succeed with official figures stating that “economic growth and redistribution policies led to a significant decline in poverty, from 50 percent in 1998 to approximately 30 percent in 2013” (“The World”). Many of these programs though are now suffering from lack of funding, but many also still remember how much the government helped them back when the oil prices were up, such as “the Banco de Desarrollo de la Mujer was founded... by order of President Chávez... providing loans, it also educates its members about the ideals of the Bolivarian Revolution and attempt[s] to increase economic productivity... received direct funding from the state” (Valencia Ramírez 132). It was once promising, though it seems that this support will not last; the number of supporters to the Chavista government diminishes every day as the situation in Venezuela gets worse and worse and it becomes more clear that massive reform is needed.

One method of solving the crisis in Venezuela is to let events continue to unfold naturally. However, this solution is currently being proven ineffective as the people have been unable to remove the United Socialist Party from power after many years. There is an opposition in the country against the current occupiers of the government and they are often planning and conducting protests. The problem is the current people in power are essentially dictators because they do not play fair in elections and strip away human rights. When the Opposition finally had won a majority in the National Assembly, the president’s party members in Venezuela’s supreme court judged the National Assembly unconstitutional, null, and void replacing with a new assembly filled with Chavista party representatives. Clearly, any means of the Opposition to win control of the country through the current governmental system has been and likely will be futile. The future looks dangerous as “at least 124 people [have died] since opposition-led protests... began” (“Here’s”) and if events continue a revolution may even begin to unfold which is sure to bring even more devastation.

Another commonly proposed solution to the crisis in Venezuela is to organize relief efforts. These are generally funded and conducted by private groups but do occasionally take form under an international government’s command with the goal of providing basic goods. The first difficulty with this is that Venezuela has historically refused humanitarian aid. Many countries, most prominently Peru, have wanted to help Venezuela “calling for a bloc of countries to pressure Mr. Maduro to accept humanitarian donations” and then “to begin sending drugs and food” (Casey “Concern”), but the plans never succeed. Maduro allowing aid to Venezuela would portray a weak and failing government and it seems this president is more interested in maintaining power than helping his people. The main problem with this solution, though, is that it only provides temporary relief. Simply aiding the country with consumables

means that a constant supply line would have to be established which is certainly not within international interest. This in no way helps Venezuela reconstruct to become more self-sufficient.

The best solution would be to organize an international intervention led by the United Nations because only this can resolve the issue without crippling Venezuela further. According to the International Crisis Group, “the international community has, for the most part, adopted a ‘hands-off’ approach based on a reluctance to become involved in what are seen as purely internal issues” (“Venezuela: Unnatural”). There are various sanctioning efforts, but this has not presented any progress. Instead, a decisive maneuver should be employed to remove the current Venezuelan government from power without, or with the least amount of violence as possible. If this move is made without proper planning, the country would probably turn into chaos. Therefore it would be up to the international community, organized by the United Nations, to format and implement a new government in Venezuela that has more failsafes for corruption and maintaining true democracy for the people. This may seem to go against the rights of a sovereign nation, but at this point, the people, who truly are the ones who make up the nation, are calling for change. One barrier would be to convince the population of Venezuela that an external power fixing their government is not a threat to them but an aid as most people do not enjoy having their country meddled with. However, with this option, much of the chaos of a possible domestic revolution would be avoided.

Beyond this, the international community would also have to be convinced that this action is beneficial to them. Countries would have to shoulder expenses including transport for supplies, armaments, and soldiers if a more militaristic option is deemed best to accomplish the goal, as well as food and aid for the Venezuelan citizens. Simply helping end a humanitarian crisis is not something world leaders tend to fund, the current situation in Myanmar being just one example, but Venezuela does offer its massive oil reserves in return because when drilling is revived, they would contribute greatly to international trade and to re-stabilizing the country. A general change in global attitude toward crises like this is also an important requirement. There are many methods to advertise this option, the most effective being organizing World Bank and United Nations economists to research the topic and share their knowledge of the benefits.

Venezuela is a country in dire need of attention and aid; a worsening humanitarian crisis and a corrupt government will not fix the crisis it is enduring. An opposition, consisting of a diverse group of people unsatisfied with the United Socialist Party of Venezuela, protests and try to get power to save the country within the law, but the government only slides further into dictatorship and imprisons leaders of the movement. Without outside aid, Venezuela will only worsen and violence will grow. If the country is to survive, the international community must become actively involved.

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