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SOS Venezuela: entendiendo la crisis

SOS Venezuela: Understanding the Crisis

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For nearly two months, Venezuelans have taken to the streets to protest against the government of Nicolas Maduro, the hand-picked successor of Hugo Chavez, who since taking office in 2013 has been described as one of the most controversial figures in the country's history. There are many reasons for which the Venezuelans are protesting, including the growing crisis, which increasingly affects the quality of life among the population while the government offers no solutions.

The protests began on April 1st after the Supreme Court of Justice (TSJ) deprived the National Assembly (AN) of its functions by issuing new powers to itself and to the office of the president. To date, Venezuelans have protested in almost every state of the country to show their discontent against the action, one that represented a serious break in the constitutional order.

Demonstrators hold a clear list of demands for the government: an effective response to the economic crisis; restore scheduled elections; return powers to the National Assembly; take action crime; release political prisoners; restore the rule of law; stop the violence against media and journalists; and accept offers of humanitarian help.

Violations of human rights

A total of 117 political prisoners were jailed between the governments of Chavez and Maduro, according to a list published by the Venezuelan Legal Forum, last updated on April 10th. To date, 107 of the detainees were taken during Maduro's mandate, while only 10 were seized during Chavez' rule. Adding another 56 detainees who participated in the protests between April 1st and May 16th, 2017, it makes for approximately 173 political prisoners.

Gonzalo Himiob, director of the Legal Forum, said that the number of detainees and civilians imprisoned by military tribunals increased to 155 since the protests against Maduro began and that 260 people have been brought before the courts. Both procedures violate what is established in articles 26, 254, 257 and 261 of the Venezuelan Constitution.

Meanwhile, Amnesty International (AI) denounced the constant abuse of human rights for political prisoners and demonstrators. Erika Guevara-Rosas, AI's director for the Americas, said the mistreatment of detainees and the growing number of deaths during the protests amount to 54 dead during at least 46 days of demonstrations.

Mistreatment and deaths

Government authorities have used a variety of repression measures: pepper spray, tear gas, rubber bullets, pellets and water pressure trucks. In addition, reports of crimes against humanity have been common, including of “cruel treatment and torture,” said Alfredo Romero, a representative for the Legal Forum. In a recent case, approximately 15 people reported being forced to eat “pasta with grass and excrement”.

The government forces are directly responsible for 17 deaths. Six by accident, one run over and 15 electrocuted. Among those killed during the protests were six women and 48 men. The average age is 27.8 years, according to figures by El Estímulo.

Peace is no longer a guarantee

Living with fear is routine for the average Venezuelan, and demonstrators demand that the government take effective measures to counter crime. Findings from the Venezuelan Observatory of Violence (OVV) indicate that a Venezuelan dies every 18 minutes. Figures from 2016 showed 28,479 homicides, more than the 27,875 in 2015. The murder rate is estimated at 91.8 per 100,000 inhabitants, placing Venezuela as the second bloodiest country in Latin America after El Salvador.

The same institution said that the death rate continues to grow in Venezuela after going up by 25.3 percent in 2015.

Faced with this challenge, all attempts at a fix by the government of Maduro have been ineffective. Iris Varela, Minister of Penitentiary Affairs, recently promoted a “new regime” in 7 of the 83 Venezuelan state prisons, where the “pranes”, a local name given to gang leaders inside prisons, have free reign to move in, out and around prisons and maintain full control of the penitentiary institutions.

Inflation and low income

Another important issue affecting Venezuelans is the increasing economic instability, where inflation overwhelms the country and a recession looms large. This year, experts estimate the inflation rate to be between 800 percent and 900 percent. Inflation affects imports, food supply and purchases of raw materials, while also preventing the minimum wage from climbing high enough to cover basic needs. Although the government recently approved a “comprehensive” adjustment in the base salary of 200,021 bolivars, this is equivalent to only 37USD.

Such degradation of currency brings as a direct consequence the increase of deaths in infants under 5 years, according to Susana Rafalli, a nutritionist at the Central University of Venezuela. In particular, most cases are characterized by malnutrition and poor access to medicines, as parents do not have sufficient resources to cope with shortages or to purchase food.

Isamar Manrique, a law student at Andrés Bello Catholic University, opted to go out to the street to protest because her family can't find food to buy and she is afraid her children will only know this reality.

With almost 19 years in power, the government that began in 1999 with Hugo Chavez seems to have lost their grip on the country.

Hunger and shortages

One of the main concerns for many Venezuelans is the shortage of essential items throughout the country. According to a study by More Consulting, about half of the Venezuelan population maintains a poor diet. By August 2016, 53 percent of respondents went to bed hungry because they had nothing to eat. According to the information collected, only 13.3 percent of the respondents were able to eat three protein meals a day, while 62.3 percent was able eat twice a day and 78.3 percent was able to eat only once.

The president of the polling company Datanalisis, Luis Vicente León, said that by May 2016 the shortage of basic items was at 82.2 percent, a situation that forced hundreds of Venezuelans to leave their daily routines and jobs in order remain in long queues with the hope of finding what they need at affordable prices.

Day by day, the Venezuelan consumer must adapt to the reality of living with shortages. Datanalisis estimates that buyers of regulated products remain an average of five hours in lines to purchase precious goods. Women and men visit, in average, 4.1 businesses before they find the products they are looking for, and brand variety is all but non-existent. The situation is similar when it comes to medicines. The scarcity of medicines in Venezuela recently reached 85 percent, said Freddy Ceballos, president of the Venezuelan Federation of Pharmacies. Ceballos said that without raw materials or access to foreign currency, pharmaceutical companies are unable to produce or import medicines.

Venezuelans in Tennessee seek to help

Helping from a distance is complicated, but hardly impossible. Proof of this are the various groups of Venezuelans in Tennessee who recently ramped-up their efforts to offer some relief in an area Venezuelans have suffered greatly in the last few years: lack of medicines. In Memphis, these initiatives are usually organized by Maria Calvo, an integral member of the Venezuelan community in Memphis and the former administrator of the main Facebook group for Venezuelans in Memphis.

Her most recent aid project, planned in coordination with Haidy Majors Lara - another Venezuelan resident with more than a decade living in Memphis - took place during the Latino Memphis festival on May 13th, where they managed to fill several boxes with medical supplies.

"We had never received so many donations," Calvo that day.

Venezuelans were represented with a booth at the festival thanks to the collaboration of ten Venezuelan-owned businesses in Memphis and multiple volunteers who joined together under the slogan "far away but not absent."

An express delivery company based in Miami, Shipping Cargo Zoulution, agreed to send all the donations to the Venezuelan locality of Puerto Ordaz at no cost. Once there, they will be received by a team made up of Dr. Cesar Dommar, pediatrician and executive of a local clinic; Edith Tenia, activist and community organizer; and Joswell Martinez, a student leader and first aid specialist.

In Nashville, another group of Venezuelans also mobilized to send support back home. Organized through their own Facebook group for Venezuelans living in the Tennessee capital, the community met on May 6th at the local restaurant "Antojitos La Venezolana" to donate cash, medical supplies and miscellaneous items that will be sent to needy areas if the country.