



U4C has partnered with the Hope For Venezuelan Refugees Project, led by Cristal Montañéz Baylor, to support Venezuelan refugees in Colombia. Cristal is a humanitarian, and former Miss Venezuela working in development and women empowerment for many years. She is committed to her country and actively involved in defending Venezuelan's human, political, and civil rights since 2002.

Currently, Venezuelans continue to struggle to survive in a country suffering the worst political and economic crisis in history under the Nicolas Maduro regime, a continuation of the Hugo Chávez regime. The shortage of food and medicine, lack of essential services such as electricity, water, propane gas, gasoline, and collapsed hospital systems have forced Venezuelans to abandon their homeland.

Most Venezuelans live in extreme poverty and misery. Children, elderly, and the sick are the most affected by the Venezuelan complex humanitarian crisis. Every day, more die from causes related to hunger, malnutrition, and disease. The unemployment rate is 35.5 percent and annual inflation rate of 2,667 percent was reported in January of 2021 with an unprecedented monthly minimum wage of approximately 1.20 USD per month, Venezuelans would require 144 times the minimum wage to access a basic basket of essential commodities.

This complex crisis has forced 1 in 7 Venezuelans to abandon their homeland for neighboring countries like Argentina, Brazil, Colombia, Chile, Costa Rica, Ecuador, Mexico, Panama, and the U.S. The outcome of this crisis is the most significant refugee exodus in Latin American's history and the Western Hemisphere. Colombia hosts the largest number of refugees and migrants, with nearly 1.8 million, and 845,000 Colombian and binational returnees according to the Regional Refugee and Migrant Response Plan for Refugees and Migrants from Venezuela (RMRP 2021 R4V Colombia).

According to the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) and Organization of International Migrations (OIM), the number of Venezuelans leaving their country has reached 5.4 million. The Regional Refugee and Migrant Response Plan for

Refugees and Migrants from Venezuela (RMRP) projects this number to reach 5.10 million at the end of 2021, making this crisis the biggest forced migration crisis caused by dictatorship and corruption, surpassing the Syrian refugee crisis, which has suffered from war for more than eight years.

At the end of January 2020, as the new coronavirus Sars-CoV-2 (COVID-19) began to spread throughout Europe, the Colombian authorities were aware that the disease would eventually arrive in the country and test its health system—a system already burdened by various historical, social and economic-related problems, likely to be exacerbated by the pandemic and to lead to tragedy.

The arrival of Sars-CoV-2 in Colombia coincided with the epidemic of seasonal influenza and rising outbreaks of dengue fever and malaria. Due to this, the country took early action, and on 25 March, it declared an obligatory mass quarantine. According to the World Health Organization (WHO), the Colombian government, led by President Iván Duque and the governors and mayors of the main cities, swiftly designed a strategy to respond to COVID-19 with monitoring and evaluation mechanisms and instruments such as the Unified Command Post (PMU).[1]

As the number of COVID-19 cases increased in Colombia and other neighboring countries, so did the number of displaced Venezuelans who lost their income source and were evicted from their homes. In contrast, others continued to flee from Venezuela to Colombia and other countries, escaping violence, persecution, lack of work, and scarcity of food and essential services in Venezuela, resulting in a bi-directional migration despite the restrictions imposed by the coronavirus pandemic.

The COVID-19 pandemic caused food insecurity affecting the Venezuelan refugees, migrants, Colombian returnees, and the vulnerable local communities to worsen in the region. It has been very challenging for the local and national governments and international organizations to contain the influx of refugees and provide food for this vulnerable population.

In April 2020, the Hope For Venezuelan Refugees project initiated a new phase to help respond to the food insecurity and hunger affecting thousands of Venezuelan refugees, migrants, and walker “caminantes” during the emergency crisis caused by the COVID-19 global pandemic. Working with the team of volunteers and the Rotary Club of Cúcuta, Cristal coordinated the distribution of meals, PPE, face masks, cleaning, and disinfectant supplies to the food distribution centers and shelters preparing and serving meals to this migrant population. Additionally, bags with groceries and personal hygiene supplies were distributed to vulnerable local families sponsored by the Rotary Club of Chanhassen, Rotary Club of Cúcuta, Rotary e-Club of Houston, and individuals.