

## **PRESS RELEASE**

### **GUYANA NEEDS HUMANITARIAN PROCEDURES FOR VENEZUELAN**

This statement has been prompted by our organizations having had an opportunity to inter-act with a delegation of Venezuelan citizens currently resident in Guyana.

Guyana has remained remarkably untouched by the massive humanitarian crisis playing out across the Venezuelan border over the past two years. That situation has now changed, Venezuelans themselves estimate some 30 of their nationals are arriving in Guyana every day without visas, many of whom are of Guyanese origin whose family migrated during the 1980s. Guyana urgently needs to adopt sensible, humanitarian policies along the lines adopted by Colombia, Brazil and the majority of South American countries.

In making the proposals set out below, the signatories of this statement are conscious of the very limited resources Guyana can bring to bear on a refugee crisis. However, we are also conscious that providing Venezuelans with the assurance that they will not be treated as criminals and hounded out of the country is a humanitarian response well within Guyana's capacity to implement. Venezuelan refugees already here are making clear that) they are not looking for free services, ii) many of the Venezuelan-Guyanese among them can make arrangements with former family & friends; iii) the overwhelming need is security of being here long enough to earn some money in order to sort out a more permanent future elsewhere.

The World Bank estimates 655,400 Venezuelans left the country since 2015. (More than five times the 125,000 who left Cuba in the Mariel boat exodus in the 1980s). The International Monetary Fund estimated that inflation reached 13,000% this year. A year ago a dollar was worth about 4,200 bolivars, today it is worth 213,200 bolivars. The average monthly salary is USD3.00. The growing severity of the food shortage has contributed to the average Venezuelan losing 11 kilograms in 2017, compared to almost 8 kg lost on average in 2016.

A group of Venezuelans, some long resident in Guyana, along with returning Guyanese-Venezuelans are appealing to the Government of Guyana. *"We know that the government and its people do not owe us anything, we only want a gesture of brotherhood of humility and help" in the form of "a renewable temporary permit of one year that allows us to have the right to work, to health, to education, to free transit, we do not want to be refugees, we just need to work"*.

Other countries inundated by Venezuelans have devised a variety of schemes. Colombia has issued a Border Mobility Card, a document to allow movement around the border without a passport, but with migratory control. Every day about 25,000 Venezuelans enter Colombia and an equal number leaves, in a circular transit to buy products such as rice, sugar, pasta or personal hygiene.

Indigenous communities on the Guyana borders have seen a substantial increase in numbers due to the return to their place of origin of people who left years ago.

A local group has documented over a hundred undocumented Venezuelans. Many of them are Guyanese-Venezuelans, the second generation of those who fled in the 1980s when Guyana was experiencing conditions not dissimilar from what Venezuela is now passing through. Venezuela at that time opened its doors to them, they were allowed to work, they enjoyed the right to health to education and basic services. Entire families followed professional careers, made investment and contributed to the cultural life of the country. At the present time they constitute complete communities and residential districts in San Felix, San Cristobel and other bordering States of Venezuela. During the Presidency of President Chavez citizenship was extended to all who had remained undocumented. Venezuelans of Guyanese origin are now a substantial part of Venezuelan life.

This description, contrasts sharply with complaints made by Venezuelans of their current treatment by Guyanese officialdom. Venezuelans complain of having to pay fines of \$30,000 for being illegally in the country. They also are forced to bribe the police with similarly large amounts. Venezuelan families are being split up at entry points. One 14 boy was returned to Venezuela being without a passport while other family members were admitted.

Most of the people deported are women. Many do not have passports, in part, because the effective cost of a passport is over USD1000. Moreover, all Mercosur countries allow citizens to cross borders with an ID Card, rendering passports unnecessary. Numbers of undocumented Venezuelans is likely to increase because travelling overland costs roughly USD100 compared to the cost of flying to other more distant Latin countries.

A Guidance Note issued recently by the UN High Commission for Refugees calls on States receiving and/or already hosting Venezuelans to allow them access to their territory, and to continue to adopt appropriate and pragmatic protection-oriented responses, building on existing good practices in the region.

*“Such arrangements”, the Note states “are guided by the principle that providing international protection is a humanitarian and nonpolitical act” Such arrangements, could, for example, include ...temporary protection or stay arrangements, or alternatively visa or labour migration arrangements that would offer access to legal residence and to a standard of treatment akin to international protection.”*

States should:“ - ensure that persons benefiting from such arrangements are issued with an official document and such an arrangements should not be refused by virtue of the fact of irregular entry or lack of identity documents.”

Short –term visas should provide access “on an equal basis with other foreign nationals who are legally resident on the State’s territory and, finally under these protection arrangements “holders of complementary forms of protection, temporary protection or stay arrangements, or visa or labour migration arrangements will not be deported, expelled, or in any other way forced to return to Venezuela, consistent with international refugee and human rights law. This guarantee would need to be assured either in the official identity document received or through other effective means, such as clear instructions to law enforcement agencies.”

The signatory organizations of this Press Release are calling on the Government of Guyana based on principles of decency, humanitarian imperatives and our commitments under human rights Conventions to undertake several tasks.

Firstly, we are calling on the Judiciary and Director of Public Prosecutions to cease with immediate effect the practice of fining and jailing illegal Venezuelan immigrants.

Secondly, we call on the immigration authorities to respect Guyana's international human rights obligations to children who should not be separated from their families.

Thirdly, we urge the Government of Guyana to give effect to the exhortation of the UNHCR:

- i. To adopt more flexible procedures with respect to lack of documentation
- ii. To provide Venezuelans seeking temporary residence with security of tenure for a period of one or two years with permission to work.

Fourthly, we propose urgent revision and publication of any procedures applicable to Venezuelan-Guyanese citizens which would facilitate their remaining in Guyana

Fifthly, we propose that the immigration authorities devise a form of temporary ID card which can be provided to Venezuelans desirous of remaining in Guyana but not claiming refugee status.

Sixthly, in liaison with Immigration authorities that Townships in remote border communities be authorized and empowered to implement to a registration process of Venezuelans crossing the border.

Finally, our organizations are appealing to all Guyanese as individuals or organizations to develop a positive and welcoming approach to displaced Venezuelans. The attitude of ordinary citizens, as demonstrated wherever mass movements of peoples have taken place in recent years, is as critical as official policy in determining a successful outcome.

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**Signatories**

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**Guyana Human Rights Association**

**Transparency Institute Guyana Inc**

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