

PRESS RELEASE

VENEZUELAN SUPPORT GROUP OPENS OFFICE

Eight civic and faith-based organizations have launched the Venezuela Support Group(VSG) to provide advice and assistance to Venezuelans seeking refuge from the deprivations and insecurity currently gripping their homeland. In pursuit of this aim the VSG have requested meetings with the Minister of Citizenship in order to brief the Ministry of the VSG aims and to establish liaison arrangements with the Ministry.

Member organizations of the VSG have previously publicly expressed their concerns about the humanitarian aspect of the on-going crisis in Venezuela in press releases, panel discussions and in communications with various Ministries. Concerns of the grouping have been shaped by the following considerations:

- Distinguishing humanitarian obligations to the Venezuelan people from political factors that currently influence both the internal crisis in Venezuela and Caricom Secretariat's reluctance to date to formulate specific advice to member States on how to respond to that crisis.
- Devising a flexible, evidence-based rather than speculative response appropriate to the relatively small numbers of Venezuelans currently in Guyana.
- Respecting the fact that Venezuelans in Guyana have documented their wish not to seek formal refugee status but to seek temporary renewable visas that allow them to earn money while in Guyana.

The initial focus of the VSG will be on ensuring that persons arriving receive information and assistance to secure valid visas to remain in Guyana and are not exploited financially or abused in other ways.

We have recently learnt that some consideration has been given to permit Venezuelans in Guyana to regularize their situation on the basis of possession of an ID card rather than a passport. Although, to date, there has been no formal announcement by the Government of Guyana on the matter, we welcome this development in general as protecting Venezuelans against exposure to detention, fines and deportation. Moreover, this step would also align Guyana with the recent appeal made by the UN High Commission for Refugees (UNHCR) for neighbouring countries to adopt flexible arrangements of this nature.

The VSG is currently in the process of establishing offices made available by the Catholic Church in the compound opposite the Catholic Cathedral on Brickdam. The work of the VSG is being supported in the initial phase by the UNHCR which is in the process of establishing a permanent presence in Guyana.

The VSG group will support the smooth implementation of any new regulations and related policy guidelines through the following activities:

- Ensuring the regulations and the accompanying procedures are known to arriving Venezuelans.
- Providing advice and, where necessary, accompaniment, in the process of regularizing their presence in Guyana.
- Supporting Venezuelans in need of assistance to contact family or other persons.

- Making known social and welfare services which may be accessible to Venezuelans with special needs.
- Contributing to information-gathering initiatives, especially in interior communities.
- Providing opportunities for Venezuelans to communicate with other Venezuelans.

Safeguarding the specifically humanitarian character of this response is a high priority for the SVG, in particular, insulating it from attempts to politicize it or from any association with the border issue. The SVG will also serve as a focal point through which displaced persons or families can communicate with each other.

The founding members of the SVG are:

Amerindian Peoples Association (APA)
Guyana Human Rights Association (GHRA)
Guyana Institute for Transparency Inc. (GITI)
Moray House Trust
Policy Forum Guyana
Red Thread
Roman Catholic Diocese of Guyana
Ursuline Sisters in Guyana

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