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## FEATURED Q&A

# What Do Syrian Refugees Mean for Latin America?



Several Latin American countries have agreed to accept Syrian refugees. Above, Syrian Kurdish refugees are pictured crossing last year from Syria into Turkey. // File Photo: United Nations.

**Q** As European countries struggle to reach an agreement on whether to assist refugees from Syria, already Uruguay, Argentina, Brazil, Venezuela, Colombia and Chile have opened their doors to the victims of the Middle Eastern country's civil war. Do their offers of asylum indicate a shift in the way the region views its role in global affairs? How will admitting thousands of refugees affect the Latin American countries' economies and politics? Do the aforementioned countries have the institutions and resources in place to adequately handle the influx?

**A** Riordan Roett, professor and director of the Latin American Studies Program at the Johns Hopkins School of Advanced International Studies: "There is a tradition in Latin America of welcoming foreign nationals under varied circumstances.

Brazil welcomed European and Asian immigrants for decades beginning in the late 19th century. Most recently, the country has opened its doors to immigrants and refugees from Haiti. Mexico has a longstanding policy of receiving refugees, particularly after the Spanish Civil War. Peru has a large population of Chinese descent. What makes the current situation somewhat different is that the impact will be felt almost immediately as the refugee situation in the Middle East continues to deteriorate. The camps in neighboring countries are saturated. The European Union is in the middle of an existential debate over whether or not they can successfully welcome and integrate people of different cultures and religions. The economic uncertainty in countries like Argentina, Brazil and Venezuela means that employment opportunities will be very limited. Dealing

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## TODAY'S NEWS

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## Cabañas Becomes Cuba's New Ambassador to United States

Veteran diplomat José Cabañas, who headed the Cuban Interests Section in Washington since 2012, presented his credentials to U.S. President Barack Obama.

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## Carstens Ratified as Banxico Chief

Mexico's Senate approved another term for Agustín Carstens, who has led the country's central bank since 2010.

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### POLITICAL

## Chile Declares State of Emergency Following Quake

Officials confirmed Thursday that at least 11 people had been killed as a result of the 8.3 magnitude earthquake, which struck a coastal area Wednesday night. President Michelle Bachelet expressed relief that the death toll was not higher.

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Bachelet // File Photo: Chilean Government.

## POLITICAL NEWS

## Chile Declares State of Emergency Following Quake

Cities on the coast of north-central Chile suffered devastating damage as a result of the 8.3 magnitude earthquake that struck the country on Wednesday evening, and a state of emergency has been declared for the city of Coquimbo, BBC News reported. At least 11 people were confirmed to have been killed as

**The state of emergency allows the government to disperse aid more quickly to the victims.**

a result of the earthquake, officials said Thursday, and more than one million people have been evacuated from their homes. In Coquimbo, 15-foot waves crashed onto the shore, and by declaring a state of emergency, the government will be able to disperse aid more quickly to the coastal city, and troops will be able to provide assistance, as well. The original tremor, according to geologists cited by BBC, struck off the coast of Coquimbo, which suffered the most damage as a result of the three-minute long earthquake and its aftershocks. Government officials, including President Michele Bachelet, have expressed relief that there were not more casualties. "While unfortunate, [the death toll] was not very high considering the strength of the earthquake," she said. An 8.8 magnitude earthquake that struck Chile in 2010 resulted in 525 deaths, 81 of which came as a result of the tsunami that followed, The New York Times reported. Several officials have been charged with failing to properly assess the risk of damages from the tsunami; the public was given no forewarning before the waves struck the coast of the South American nation. Given the response in 2010, officials said they are much more satisfied with the quality of the

emergency response this week, while acknowledging that there is still much to do to improve and systematize emergency responses in the future.

## Cabañas Becomes Cuba's Ambassador to United States

Cuban diplomat José Cabañas, who had run the country's interests section in the United States since 2012, on Thursday became Cuba's ambassador to the United States, Reuters reported. Cabañas was among a group of 16 new ambassadors who presented their credentials to U.S. President Barack Obama during a ceremony at the White House. "The Cuban ambassador's accreditation to the United States is a further step within the process to normalize relations between both countries," the Cuban Embassy said in a statement. Cabañas became the charge d'affaires when the United States



Cabañas // File Photo: Cuban Government.

and Cuba formally re-established diplomatic relations on July 20, converting their respective interests sections in Havana and Washington into embassies. The United States has not yet named an ambassador to Cuba, and some Republican members of Congress who are opposed to the thaw in relations between the two countries have pledged to block the nomination of any U.S. ambassador to Cuba. The U.S. trade embargo of Cuba remains in place and can only be lifted by an act of Congress. However, the Obama administration is chipping away at some restrictions in an effort to allow for expanded U.S. business activity in the Caribbean nation. The Obama administration today relaxed some restrictions on U.S.

## NEWS BRIEFS

## Brazil's Supreme Court Bans Corporate Financing of Political Campaigns

Brazil's Supreme Court on Thursday banned corporate contributions to political campaigns, the Associated Press reported. In an 8-3 vote, the Supreme Court prohibited corporate financing of campaigns, which in the most recent presidential elections provided some 90 percent of the money raised by the top presidential candidates. The court's move came in the wake of the massive corruption scandal at state-run oil company Petrobras. The law that the court struck down had allowed companies to donate as much as 2 percent of their gross revenue from the previous year to political campaigns.

## Mexican Senate Ratifies Carstens to New Term as Central Bank Chief

Mexico's Senate voted to keep Agustín Carstens as the central bank governor for another six-year term on Thursday, Reuters reported. The official vote was to give Carstens another term on Banxico's main policy-setting board, though Carstens is widely expected to keep his position as leader of the bank. During his first term, Carstens led the central bank through a time of low growth and currency depreciation in Mexico. Under Carstens, the central bank has cut interest rates to a record low of 3 percent and started the protocol of publishing meeting minutes after policy decisions.

## Peru's Pacasmayo Starts Production at New Facility

Lima-based cement maker Cementos Pacasmayo said Thursday that it has started commercial production at a new facility in Piura. The facility has a capacity of 1.6 million tons of cement annually, the company said.

companies that want to do business in Cuba, Reuters reported. The rules include eased restrictions in telecommunications, banking, remittances and other areas, as well as allowing U.S. businesses to establish a presence in the Caribbean country. The changes come ahead of Cuban President Raúl Castro's visit to New York later this month where he is to address the U.N. General Assembly. The trip will mark the first time a Cuban president has traveled to the United States since Castro's older brother Fidel spoke to the United Nations in 1995, BBC News reported. The developments also come ahead of a trip to Cuba by Pope Francis, who arrives Saturday in the island nation for a four-day visit. On Tuesday, the pope heads to the United States, which he will be for the rest of the week, with stops in Washington, New York and Philadelphia.

## ECONOMIC NEWS

### New Peru Bank Rules Seek to Lower Social Conflict: Regulator

New rules governing Peru's banking industry seek to reduce social conflicts in the South American nation, the country's banking superintendent told reporters Thursday in Lima, Bloomberg News reported. Under the new



Schydrowsky // File Photo: Peruvian Government.

regulations, which take effect March 1, banks will need to carry out both social and environmental risk assessments before providing corporate loans, said Daniel Schydrowsky, the country's superintendent for banking, insurance and pension funds. The new rules are part of

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with a few hundred or a few thousand is feasible. Attempting to take up the slack in Europe where tens of thousands have and will seek asylum is more of a challenge. On the positive side is the fact that most of the refugees are from the middle class of Syria and will bring skills and experience that may well have a positive impact on the national economies. Pope Francis' recent call for Catholic families to shelter families from Syria may have a positive resonance in the region. Latin America's willingness to contribute to addressing the crisis will be seen as a very positive policy decision at the global level."

**A** **Maria Beatriz Bonna Nogueira, fellow at the Carr Center for Human Rights Policy at the John F. Kennedy School of Government**

**at Harvard University:** "The willingness of Latin American countries to welcome refugees from Syria is, by no means, a shift from their previous positions. On the contrary, the region is known for promoting refugee rights since the 1980s, when it proposed an expanded refugee definition in the 1984 Cartagena Declaration, which includes those who flee situations of 'generalized violence' and 'massive violations of human rights'. The sense of responsibility-sharing in situations of refugee crises is also a characteristic of Latin America. The region created, in cooperation with UNHCR, the 'Solidarity Resettlement Program' by which refugees who fled to one Latin American country can be resettled in another. Brazil had been offering asylum to Syrian refugees since the beginning of the war. More than 7,700 were already welcomed in the country.

an effort to lower conflict in industries including mining. "By better anticipating potential conflicts, they can be avoided, which saves costs and everyone is better off," Schydrowsky told reporters. Protests by demonstrators concerned with potential environmental damage have put a halt to mining projects by companies including Newmont Mining and Southern

The influx that arrived in Brazil is considered small when compared especially to Syria's neighboring countries, so no negative effect on the country's economy is expected. No negative political effect is foreseen either,

“The region is known for promoting refugee rights since the 1980s.”

— Maria Beatriz Bonna Nogueira

since Brazil hosts a population of more than 10 million citizens of Syrian and Lebanese descent, so local integration will probably happen easily. It is also important to note that Brazil has been giving numerous humanitarian visas to Haitian immigrants who have arrived in the country since the 2010 earthquake. More than 28,000 visas were issued for this specific population. Brazil definitely needs to expand its capacity to process asylum claims and to provide assistance to those who arrive, since the influx has increased exponentially as compared to previous years. The government has signaled its intention to do so, and it is already making efforts to increase the number of processing units and reception centers. Last week, President Dilma Rousseff personally wrote an article called 'Refugees and Hope' to a Brazilian newspaper where she stated that 'even in this moment of domestic difficulties, Brazil opens its arms to refugees.'

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Copper. The protests have led to a decrease in investment in Peru, which is the world's third-largest producer of copper. The new regulations have the support of the country's banks. Schydrowsky said Thursday. The assessments will lead to "small" increases to the cost of loans, he added. However, he said, reduced social conflicts are worth the cost.



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**A** **Gilberto M. A. Rodrigues, professor of international relations at the Federal University of ABC in São Paulo and board member of Coordinadora Regional de Investigaciones Económicas y Sociales in Buenos Aires:** “Refugee policy is a successful human rights case in Latin America. Since the Cartagena Declaration of 1984, countries in the region have improved their legislation to introduce international norms on refugees’ protection. From the implementation of the Brazilian Refugee Law and the creation of the National Commission for Refugees (CONARE), Brazil has received refugees from Africa and the Middle East. A 2013 CONARE resolution grants Syrians a fast track procedure that facilitates humanitarian visas. For that reason, Syrians last year became the biggest refugee group in the country, with as many as 2,000 of the 8,400 officially recognized refugees. Yet, Brazil has few refugees in comparison to the country’s capacity to receive them and vis-à-vis its neighbors, such as Ecuador and Venezuela, which have received tens of thousands of Colombians. The principle of solidarity is governing that open door policy, but the existence of an historical Syrian community in South America also accounts. In many cases, the Syrian

community has given a crucial support to their compatriots, as well as Islamic organizations, which are playing a new role – in a scenario almost completely dominated by Catholic organizations. Although xenophobia

“Refugees suffer because of a lack of public policies and services needed for their integration.”

– Gilberto M. A. Rodrigues

and discrimination against refugees remains very low, refugees suffer because of a lack of public policies and services needed for their integration. Subnational governments, mainly municipalities, are the most affected by refugees’ demands. In this sense, NGOs and universities are also playing a role in supporting local governments in that task.”

*The Advisor welcomes comments on its Q&A section. Readers can write editor Gene Kuleta at [gkuleta@thedialogue.org](mailto:gkuleta@thedialogue.org).*

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**Erik Brand**  
Publisher  
[ebrand@thedialogue.org](mailto:ebrand@thedialogue.org)

**Gene Kuleta**  
Editor  
[gkuleta@thedialogue.org](mailto:gkuleta@thedialogue.org)

**Nicole Wasson**  
Reporter, Assistant Editor  
[nwasson@thedialogue.org](mailto:nwasson@thedialogue.org)

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1211 Connecticut Avenue NW, Suite 510  
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**Fax:** 202-822-9553

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Subscription Inquiries are welcomed at  
[freetrial@thedialogue.org](mailto:freetrial@thedialogue.org)

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Q&A

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