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FEATURED Q&A

How Can Countries Address Migrants' Health Problems?



The U.S. Navy's USNS Comfort hospital ship left Naval Station Norfolk in Virginia last month on a mission to the Caribbean, Central America and South America. // Photo: U.S. Navy.

Q The U.S. Navy hospital ship USNS Comfort last month began a five-month humanitarian mission to the Caribbean, Central and South America to support medical systems struggling to cope, in part, with an increase in refugees from Venezuela.

It is the ship's second such mission within a year. How has Venezuela's exodus of migrants strained health systems in recipient countries, and is adequate aid being channeled to where it is most needed? Should the United States be doing more than it is, and what can other countries do to address the medical emergency? What are the longer-term solutions needed to address health problems related to unprecedented migration flows in the Americas?

A Tamara Taraciuk Broner, senior Americas researcher at Human Rights Watch: "Venezuela's health system is in collapse with increased maternal and infant mortality, the spread of vaccine-preventable diseases such as measles and diphtheria, spikes in infectious diseases such as malaria and tuberculosis, and high levels of food insecurity and malnutrition. The exodus of four million Venezuelans is straining health systems in receiving countries. Many have come in search of medicines, medical supplies or health providers. For example, the number of Venezuelans seeking medical care in Colombia's North Santander border area increased from 182 in 2015 to 5,094 in 2018. Between early 2018 and January 2019, more than 10,000 measles cases were confirmed in Brazil, the first since 2015. The strain of the virus is the same one that is causing Venezuela's outbreak. Addressing a hu-

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TODAY'S NEWS

ECONOMIC

Brazil's Lower House Advances Pension Reform

Brazil's Chamber of Deputies advanced legislation to overhaul the country's pension system. One more vote is needed in the chamber before the measure moves to the Senate.

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ECONOMIC

Colombia's Coffee Federation Wants Producers Group

Colombia's coffee federation proposed creating a new association of countries that produce the commodity in order to have a stronger global influence in the market for the crop.

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POLITICAL

Ex-Puerto Rico Officials Arrested in Graft Case

FBI agents arrested former Puerto Rico Education Secretary Julia Keleher and five others on charges related to the alleged steering of \$15.5 million in federal money to politically connected contractors.

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Keleher // File Photo: Puerto Rico Department of Education.

POLITICAL NEWS

Former Puerto Rico Officials Arrested on Corruption Charges

U.S. authorities on Wednesday arrested a former Puerto Rico secretary of education and five others on charges related to the alleged steering of \$15.5 million in federal money to politically connected, unqualified contractors, the Associated Press reported. FBI agents arrested former Education Secretary Julia Keleher, former Puerto Rico Health Insurance Administration head Ángela Ávila-Marrero, businessmen Fernando Scherrer-Caillet and Alberto Velázquez-Piñol, as well as sisters and education contractors Glenda E. Ponce-Mendoza and Mayra Ponce-Mendoza. Of the federal money in question, the territory's Department of Education spent \$13 million while Keleher headed the department, and the insurance administration spent \$2.5 million when Ávila-Marrero was its director. There was no evidence that Keleher or Ávila-Marrero personally benefited in connection with the alleged scheme, federal officials said. Velázquez-Piñol had improperly used individuals in the two departments to win contracts from the federal

government and also misappropriated federal money in order to pay for lobbying, alleged the U.S. attorney for Puerto Rico, Rosa Emilia Rodríguez. Glenda E. Ponce-Mendoza was an assistant to Keleher, and she and her sister were friends of the ex-education secretary, officials said. Keleher, who resigned from her position in April, is accused of steering public contracts to her friends, without going through formal bidding procedures. "It was alleged that the defendants engaged in a public corruption campaign and profited at the expense of the Puerto Rican citizens and students," said Neil Sanchez, special agent in charge of the U.S. Department of Education's Office of Inspector General's Southern Region. "This type of corruption is particularly egregious because it not only victimizes tax payers, it victimizes those citizens and students that are in need of educational assistance." Puerto Rico Governor Ricardo Rosselló was not involved in the investigation, said Rodríguez. The governor was on a family vacation in France when the arrests occurred, and he said he would cut the trip short and return to Puerto Rico, The New York Times reported. "It is time to be present on the island and reiterate the message personally: the agenda of this Government does not stop, despite those who have incorrectly decided to treason the trust of the People," he said in a statement, the newspaper reported.

NEWS BRIEFS

Mexican Authorities Arrest Attorney With Ties to Former Presidents

A judge in Mexico on Wednesday ordered Juan Ramón Collado, a well-known attorney with ties to former presidents, to stand trial on charges of organized crime and money laundering, the Associated Press reported. Collado stands accused of creating front companies to handle money from questionable land deals. Collado, who was arrested on Tuesday, has reportedly represented the brother of former President Carlos Salinas and other prominent politicians. He is being held pending trial.

Colombian Government Planning to Sell Stakes in Low-Profit Companies

The government of Colombian President Iván Duque is planning to sell off public stakes in low-profit companies, expecting to generate more than \$1.8 billion a year, said César Arias, the finance ministry's director of public credit, Reuters reported Wednesday. Arias said that the money would then be diverted toward "more profitable investments," mentioning strategic sectors such as infrastructure, clean energy, education and health care. "It's a strategy that seeks to secure resources needed to maintain public investment at optimal levels," Arias added.

Itaú Taps Gailey as Chief Executive of Paraguay Unit

Brazil's Itaú Unibanco Holding has named André Gailey as the chief executive officer of its Paraguay unit, the bank said Wednesday, Reuters reported. Gailey, who has worked for Itaú Unibanco for two decades, is replacing Viviana Varas as chief executive. Gailey is currently the director of commercial banking at Itaú Unibanco's wholesale unit, Itaú BBA. As of March, Itaú Unibanco's loan portfolio in Paraguay amounted to approximately \$2.12 billion.

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manitarian crisis of this magnitude requires a collective response, yet U.N. Secretary General António Guterres' strategy has been ineffective. In April, Guterres tweeted for the first time that seven million Venezuelans needed assistance—a positive but insufficient departure from his quiet diplomacy on Venezuela. He should push the U.N. system to declare the situation the humanitarian emergency that it is and press Venezuelan authorities to allow U.N. agencies to lead a large-scale humanitarian response. Governments, including the United States, should channel humanitarian assistance into Venezuela through the United Nations, ensuring it respects the principles of human-

ity, neutrality, independence and impartiality in providing assistance. The U.N. response should assess independently the extent of the crisis and include a comprehensive strategy to assist displaced Venezuelans outside of the country."

A Martin Llewellyn, senior lecturer at the Institute of Biodiversity, Animal Health & Comparative Medicine and associate in the School of Life Sciences at the University of Glasgow: "Approximately 10 percent of the Venezuelan population has emigrated in the last five years, the majority to Colombia, but also to Brazil, Peru, Ecuador, the Caribbean

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ECONOMIC NEWS

Brazil's Lower House Advances Pension Reform Measure

Lawmakers in Brazil's lower house of Congress on Wednesday voted in favor of a bill to overhaul the country's pension system, the first and most important hurdle for the reform's congressional approval and a major win for the government of President Jair Bolsonaro, The Wall Street Journal reported. Legislators voted 379 to 131 to approve the main body of the bill following nine hours of debate. The lower house must now approve the legislation, which would modify the Constitution, in a second vote before it goes to the Senate. Each vote requires a three-fifths majority for approval. The reform is estimated to save Brazil's pension system as much as \$265 billion over 10 years, a crucial step toward cutting the country's ballooning budget deficit and avoid a potentially deep fiscal crisis, according to the report. But other measures such as tax reform would also be key to improve competitiveness and attract investment, economists say. Meanwhile, support for the pension reform among Brazilians has been increasing, Folha de S.Paulo reported, citing a survey by Datafolha. Between April and July, the percentage of Brazilians opposed to changes in the pensions system fell from 51 percent to 44 percent, and the share of those who support it rose from 41 percent to 47 percent, the survey showed. [Editor's note: See related [Q&A](#) in the Jan. 16 issue of the Advisor.]

Colombia's Coffee Federation Proposes Producers Group

Colombia's coffee federation on Wednesday proposed that countries that produce coffee form an association in order to have a stronger influence in the market for the commodity, as growers from around the world meet in Brazil to discuss economic sustainability of the crop, Reuters reported. "We need action,

THE DIALOGUE CONTINUES

How Revolutionary is the E.U.-Mercosur Trade Agreement?

Q After 20 years of on-and-off again talks, the Mercosur trade bloc, consisting of Brazil, Argentina, Uruguay and Paraguay, and the European Union have reached an agreement to strengthen commercial ties. The deal would form one of the world's largest free trade areas and includes the elimination of nearly 90 percent of tariffs on both sides. How significant is the Mercosur-E.U. trade deal, and what are its most important provisions? Which sectors in the South American countries stand to gain or lose the most from the agreement? What challenges will the deal face before its final approval, and to what extent could presidential results in Argentina and Uruguay in October affect its implementation?

A Peter Hakim, member of the Advisor board and president emeritus of the Inter-American Dialogue: "The E.U.-Mercosur trade agreement should be welcomed and applauded. It has the potential to bolster the economies of all the participating nations and could prove to be a shot in the arm to the deeply troubled economies of Brazil and Argentina. It should help to open the way for their broader presence in the global economy—with opportunities not only for increased trade, but also for badly needed investment and new technologies. Still, full analysis has to wait for the pact's formal ratification by 28 E.U. legislatures and their four Mercosur counterparts. That process will take time, probably two years or more—and

because the problem is clear: there are 25 million coffee producers that can barely cover their production costs," said Eugenio Vélez, a director at Colombia's coffee federation, during the opening ceremony of the 2nd Global Coffee Producers Forum, where representatives from

governments will change. Presidential elections in Argentina this October, for instance, could well produce new leadership opposed to free trade. Some E.U. signatories (particularly France, Poland and Ireland) have already expressed considerable unease with the possible upsurge in agricultural imports from Mercosur. Many E.U. nations, most vocally France, also bitterly object to Brazil's sharp cutbacks in its protection of Amazon forests and other environmental policies. The Bolsonaro agenda includes much more that offends many Europeans (last week, the president defended child labor)—and could stall ratification of the trade deal. The largest challenge confronting the E.U.-Mercosur trade arrangement is precisely what kept the Mercosur pact from achieving its ambitious aims: Argentina and Brazil's failure, first, to adhere to the pact's provisions, and even more importantly, to implement and stick with the domestic economic reforms needed to take advantage of the new commercial and investment opportunities. Both countries are today committed to actively pursuing intense reform programs to repair their economies, restore stable growth, increase productivity and improve the climate for business. Their success is what will shape and determine what the E.U.-Mercosur pact will be able to achieve."

EDITOR'S NOTE: The comment above is a continuation of the [Q&A](#) published in Monday's issue of the Advisor.

Central and South America, Asia and Africa gathered. Vélez suggested that the countries create a group to try to impose a supply limitation as a way to boost current prices. Global prices for coffee reached their lowest levels in 12 years in May.

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and worldwide. This unprecedented crisis has put significant strain on health systems throughout the region. Because health care systems in Venezuela have suffered acutely from economic shortages, as well as an exodus of trained personnel, many Venezuelan refugees have specific health care requirements that their recipient countries must meet. Of specific concern to my collaborators and me is a resurgence of vector-borne infections, such as malaria, dengue fever, Chagas disease, chikungunya and Zika. Malaria, in particular, has reached epidemic proportions. Professor Óscar Noya of the Institute of Tropical Medicine in Caracas puts the number of malaria cases in Venezuela at around two million in the last year. There is an urgent need to identify and treat cases both inside Venezuela and in migrant populations elsewhere in the region. Failing to do so will allow malaria to re-establish regionally and potentially roll back 60 years of malaria control activities on the continent. The place where aid is needed most, and it is not reaching, is within Venezuela. The situation there is by all accounts dire. Regional cooperation to deliver aid to Venezuela is paramount. Politicization of aid must be avoided at all costs. Health care workers, scientists and institutions have become a target for government oppression. State and nonstate actors must work hard not to exacerbate this situation. Cooperation between states, especially in disease control, is key in the long term to ensure the right tools are available to tackle regional health care problems. This includes strengthening the hand, and impartiality, of regional bodies such as the Pan American Health Organization. In Venezuela, current and future U.S. administrations must recognize the need to support the creation of strong and accountable state infrastructures and avoid at all costs the facilitation of the corrupt flow of sovereign wealth overseas, which to a significant extent accounts for the parlous state of the country's economy."

A **Alfonso J. Rodríguez-Morales, medical doctor, expert in tropical diseases and travel medicine, and professor at the Universidad Tecnológica de Pereira in Colombia:** "It is difficult to say to what magnitude the Venezuelan exodus of migrants has already strained health systems in recipient countries, particularly in Colombia and Brazil. However, it is clear that many infectious and tropical diseases exported from Venezu-

“Malaria, measles, diphtheria and HIV, among other conditions, are increasingly seen in migrants from [Venezuela].”

— Alfonso J. Rodríguez-Morales

ela as a consequence of the migration crisis demonstrate its potential impact. Malaria, measles, diphtheria and HIV, among other conditions, are increasingly seen in migrants from that country, and they will need both acute and long-term care, including diagnosis and treatment. Examples of where aid should be channeled and improved in order to mitigate the impact of the migration crisis are: enhanced surveillance, health care, migration health programs and the prevention and control of infectious diseases. The United States and other countries in the region, and even elsewhere, should help financially and technically with this medical emergency, including by providing resources for diagnosis and treatment. Migrant populations need help in order to be part of the recipient countries' workforce. They also need social security and regular medical services in order to normalize their situation."

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