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## FEATURED Q&A

# What Humanitarian Needs Are Most Urgent in Venezuela?



One-third of Venezuelans suffer from food insecurity, according to the United Nations World Food Program. A grocery store in Venezuela in 2014 is pictured. // File Photo: Wilfredor via Creative Commons.

**Q The United Nations World Food Program and the government of Venezuelan President Nicolás Maduro announced April 19 that they had reached an agreement to provide food to 185,000 children this year in the South American country, where economic collapse has led to a humanitarian crisis. The U.N. agency hopes to expand the program to approximately 1.5 million children by 2023. How much outside humanitarian assistance does Venezuela need, and how likely is such assistance to be effectively delivered? What are the most pressing humanitarian needs in Venezuela right now? What logistical and other roadblocks stand in the way of expanding humanitarian assistance in Venezuela, and how can those obstacles be overcome amid the pandemic?**

**A Jacob Kurtzer, director and senior fellow of the Humanitarian Agenda at the Center for Strategic and International Studies:** "Hyperinflation in Venezuela has reduced access to food, medicines and other basic goods. Approximately 96 percent of Venezuelans live below the poverty line, and more than three million children need humanitarian assistance. Malnutrition has reached emergency thresholds for children under 5; some 280,000 are at risk of death. The Covid-19 pandemic has exacerbated pressures on the crumbling health care system and access to food. Venezuelan refugees and migrants in neighboring countries have faced evictions, economic insecurity and increased protection risks since the pandemic began. Some 105,000 Venezuelans have been forced to return, and thousands have been left stranded due to border closures. The crisis is aggravated

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Colombian President Iván Duque withdrew his government's tax reform proposal following violent protests that left several people dead.

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## Venezuela Releases Citgo Executives to House Arrest

Venezuelan authorities have released to house arrest six Citgo executives who were imprisoned more than three years ago.

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## Salvadoran Lawmakers Sack High Court, Attorney General

El Salvador's Legislative Assembly, controlled by the party of President Nayib Bukele, fired the five magistrates of the Supreme Court's constitutional chamber and Attorney General Raúl Melara.

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Melara // File Photo: Salvadoran Government.

## POLITICAL NEWS

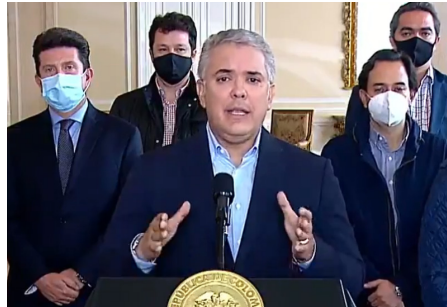
## El Salvador's Legislative Assembly Sacks High Court

El Salvador's new Legislative Assembly, which is controlled by the New Ideas party of President Nayib Bukele, in its first session on Saturday voted to remove the five magistrates of the constitutional chamber of the country's Supreme Court, the Associated Press reported. Just hours after the Saturday night vote, lawmakers also voted early Sunday to fire the country's attorney general, Raúl Melara. New magistrates were immediately installed, and Rodolfo Delgado was named attorney general, Bloomberg News reported. "And the Salvadoran people, through their representatives, said FIRED," Bukele said in a posting on Twitter. He later tweeted that he was "extremely pleased" with the legislative session. Business groups and international actors, including members of U.S. President Joe Biden's administration, expressed concerns over the developments. U.S. State Department spokesman Ned Price said Secretary of State Antony Blinken spoke with Bukele by phone on Sunday to express "the U.S. government's grave concern" over the removal of the high court's magistrates. Blinken also raised concerns with Bukele about the attorney general's removal, saying he has been "fighting corruption and impunity, and is an effective partner of efforts to combat crime in both the United States and El Salvador." On Sunday night, U.S. Vice President Kamala Harris tweeted that the United States had "deep concerns about El Salvador's democracy, in light of the National Assembly's vote to remove constitutional court judges." Ruling party lawmakers accused Melara of lacking independence, Reuters reported. In a series of posts on Twitter, Bukele addressed "the international community" in saying that the firings were warranted. "With all due respect, we're cleaning house and this isn't your concern," Bukele tweeted. The actions came as El Salvador is negotiating new financing with the International Monetary Fund.

## ECONOMIC NEWS

## Colombia's Duque Withdraws Tax Reform Proposal

Colombian President Iván Duque said on Sunday that he would withdraw his government's tax reform proposal following protests that left multiple people dead in cities across Colombia, Reuters reported. Demonstrations, which began on Wednesday, continued in some cities on Sunday even after the announcement. The prosecutor's office said in an afternoon statement that it was probing 14 deaths related to the protests, while human rights groups have



Duque withdrew his tax reform proposal on Sunday. // Photo: @IvanDuque via Twitter.

denounced supposed police abuses and say more than 20 people have died. "I am asking Congress to withdraw the law proposed by the finance ministry and urgently process a new law that is the fruit of consensus, in order to avoid financial uncertainty," Duque said in a video. Among other measures, the original reform would have expanded the number of items subject to value-added tax, and Colombians with monthly incomes as low as 2,500,000 pesos (\$690) would pay income taxes, María Fernanda Valdés, coordinator of tax issues at Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung in Colombia, told the Advisor in a [Q&A](#) published last Wednesday. The proposal was "the most revenue-ambitious tax reform in recent Colombian history," Valdés added. The government has insisted the reform is necessary for maintaining debt sustainability given an increase in spending over the past year to face the Covid-19 pandemic that has widened the forecast for the fiscal gap, which the government expects will reach about 8.6

## NEWS BRIEFS

## Kidnappers Release Nine Including Clergy Who Had Been Held for Weeks

Five priests, two nuns and two other people that had been kidnapped in Haiti for nearly three weeks have been released, Roman Catholic authorities said on Friday, the Associated Press reported. The France-based Society of Priests of St. James did not describe how they were released or whether a ransom had been paid. The people had been kidnapped in April, a move that prompted the church to close institutions, including schools and universities, in protest. Kidnappings have more than tripled in Haiti over the past year, according to the United Nations, the AP reported.

## Four Killed When Boat Suspected of Smuggling Migrants Breaks Apart

A boat suspected of carrying smuggled migrants broke apart Sunday off the coast of San Diego, killing four people and injuring more than two dozen, the U.S. Coast Guard said, Reuters reported. The 40-foot cabin cruiser was battered to pieces by the time rescuers arrived, a San Diego Fire-Rescue official said.

## Biden Administration to Cancel Contracts Related to Trump's Border Wall

The administration of U.S. President Joe Biden is returning to the Pentagon more than \$14 billion in funds that former President Donald Trump had directed toward constructing a wall at the U.S.-Mexico border, an unnamed administration official told ABC News on Friday. The official also said the Biden administration would scrap all construction contracts related to the border wall. The government has also said it would launch two new projects along the border, one to fill holes in the Rio Grande Valley levee system and another to manage soil erosion near San Diego.

percent of GDP this year. In his announcement, Duque insisted that a reform is still needed, and he called on political parties, local officials, business leaders and civil society to work together to draft a new reform, Reuters reported.

## BUSINESS NEWS

# Venezuela Grants House Arrest to Citgo Oil Executives

Six U.S. oil executives who were imprisoned in Venezuela more than three years ago on corruption allegations were granted house arrest on Friday in a move that was widely seen as a conciliatory gesture toward the administration of U.S. President Joe Biden as the White House reviews its policy toward the Andean nation, the Associated Press reported. The partial release of the employees of Venezuelan state oil company's Houston-based refiner, Citgo, was confirmed to the AP by family members of the men, who are known as the Citgo 6. Tomeu Vadell, José Luis Zambrano, Alirio Zambrano, Jorge Toledo, Gustavo Cárdenas and José Pereira were detained by masked security agents during a meeting in Caracas in 2017. The men had been released once before, in December 2019, and were jailed again two months later when then-President Donald Trump welcomed Venezuelan opposition leader Juan Guaidó to the White House. Biden administration officials were scheduled to meet last week to review U.S. policy toward Venezuela, including sanctions on the oil sector that have crippled the government's exports and revenues. The move was seen as a possible sign that Venezuelan President Nicolás Maduro was willing to work with the Biden administration, The New York Times reported. Other steps by Maduro that have been seen as pacifying signals including allowing the U.N. World Food Program back into the country and working with the opposition on the acquisition of Covid-19 vaccines, said Geoff Ramsey of the Washington Office on Latin America.

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by the denial, manipulation and politicization of aid by the Maduro authorities. At its core, the humanitarian emergency is rooted in economic mismanagement and political exploitation; unilateral sanctions have also contributed to the economic decline and continue to create complications for humanitarian actors. Increasingly, armed groups and narco-traffickers are filling a governance vacuum in hard-to-reach areas, creating additional security and logistical challenges for humanitarian organizations negotiating access. The World Food Program agreement is a critical step to tackling the food security crisis, and, if managed correctly, it can help open the door to other essential humanitarian activities. The program seeks to scale substantially to the totality of hunger needs but should do so in a manner that preserves operational independence. The WFP should also maintain a focus on working with, and restoring, existing community food structures, so as not to create a cycle of dependence."

**A** **Miriam Kornblith, senior director for Latin America and the Caribbean at the National Endowment for Democracy:**

"Venezuelans are facing a complex humanitarian crisis that, among other evils, has led to the massive migration of 5.5 million nationals and to 90 percent of the country's families living in poverty. The needs are incommensurable. Generations of Venezuelan children are facing malnutrition, with lasting irreversible consequences. Venezuelan civil society organizations have channeled limited humanitarian aid provided by multilateral and private agencies, but these valuable efforts are limited relative to the devastation. The main obstacle to addressing the humanitarian crisis and channeling aid is the Maduro government, following the path set by Hugo Chávez. During the catastrophic flooding affecting the central coast in December 1999, Chávez turned away a U.S. ship carrying humanitarian help. For Maduro,

external humanitarian aid is a 'Trojan Horse' intended to provide cover and excuse for a foreign intervention, and domestic efforts are equally suspicious. This year started with systematic attacks against Venezuelan NGOs providing humanitarian aid, such as Alimenta La Solidaridad, which offers meals for children in underserved communities across the country through community-based kitchens. Compounding the problem is the kleptocratic and discriminatory nature of the regime. If the Maduro regime allows humanitarian aid to enter the country, it must be managed through independent civil society networks under international supervision. Otherwise, it will only serve to enlarge the wealth of kleptocrats running the country. It will be weaponized and turned into another instrument of political control over desperate citizens, and it will provide targeted relief to regime acolytes, as the disgraceful handling of Covid-19 vaccines has already shown."

**A** **Francisco J. Sánchez, partner at Holland & Knight and former U.S. undersecretary of commerce:** "This agreement between the World Food Program and Venezuela's government is welcome news for the people of Venezuela, where the United Nations estimates that one in three Venezuelans lacks the food they need, placing the country between war-torn Afghanistan and Ethiopia in terms of food insecurity. The International Rescue Committee estimates that nearly a quarter of the population requires some form of humanitarian assistance and that 94 percent of households live in poverty. At the root of this is hyperinflation, arguably the most pressing humanitarian problem in Venezuela. This scourge prevents Venezuelans from being able to afford essentials and is spurring approximately 5,000 Venezuelans to flee every day. While the WFP announcement is heartening, the program may face obstacles from a government that is loath to

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admit that a humanitarian crisis is occurring. This could take the form of denying key staff work permits, which caused Doctors Without Borders to withdraw from the country in late 2020. It could also take the form of requiring Venezuelans to produce a loyalty card to receive the aid, like the government is doing for Covid vaccinations now. Overcoming government-imposed challenges will remain difficult for the WFP and other humanitarian agencies seeking to help Venezuelans. They must walk the line between working with the government and ensuring that their aid actually reaches vulnerable people. Hopefully, this new deal will provide a model for how to do this."

**A** **Diego Arria, member of the Advisor board, director of the Columbus Group in New York and former permanent representative of Venezuela to the United Nations:** "It is terribly wrong to consider Venezuela strictly a humanitarian catastrophe. While it is that, it does not help to disregard or to minimize a worse reality, that its people are victims of a narco-criminal, militarized corporation that partially operates the country. While it remains in control, Venezuelans will continue to suffer from monstrous decisions, such as the blocking of external assistance, including vaccines for the general population. The international community—whatever that means today—should accept and act upon the fact that the real and greatest cause of the humanitarian catastrophe of this country, once the richest in the region, is the destruction of its economy and the ransacking of its treasury by the corporation's corrupt leaders. Venezuelans' most pressing humanitarian need is to regain freedom. Without it, the criminal tyranny will continue to channel any external aid to those registered with 'Carnet de la Patria,' an identification card that the Chinese government created as an instrument of social control. In sum, not much can be done to help the Venezuelan people, regardless of

the noble motivations of those who want to help. To regain freedom is the real humanitarian vaccine Venezuela needs now. Charity cannot replace freedom."

**A** **Gina Montiel, executive director at the Office of Panama and Venezuela at the Inter-American Development Bank:** "The World Food Program's recent agreement to feed 1.5 million Venezuelan children for 15 months is very good news. However, considering the impact that just a month of malnutrition has on human development, it is too little and too late. All the humanitarian aid that can reach Venezuela's population is desperately needed. The main obstacle is the control of the territory under the Maduro regime. But also, global bureaucracy is a major roadblock that stands in the way of expanding humanitarian assistance. Venezuela's economic indicators at the IMF and the World Bank should be redefined so Venezuela can access more resources. For instance, the country could have more vaccines right now from the Covax facility if the economic indicators were the actual ones, not the ones based on indicators that the Venezuelan central bank stopped producing a few years ago. The Inter-American Development Bank is working to redefine those indicators, but high-level decisions in the U.N. system need to be made. Additionally, Venezuela must be classified not only as a low-income or a lower-middle income country, but also as a country with conflict and fragile and violent conditions. This is necessary to promote peace efforts and political change. Moreover, this redesignation is critical in order to formulate a more accurate operational framework that will allow for more effective humanitarian assistance. Finally, sustaining the existing social fabric requires better articulation and global awareness about the new threats facing nongovernmental organizations from recent legislation that the Maduro regime has imposed."

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