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The Venezuelan Refugee Crisis: A Case Study in State-Based Strategies for Addressing
Global Mass Displacement

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by

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ABSTRACT

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Global mass displacement is at an all-time high. There are now over 100 million people displaced worldwide, and the number is only increasing. The reasons for this displacement are many, including wars, internal conflict, violence by non-state actors, natural disasters, and economic deterioration. The global refugee regime, which was created in the mid-20th century, was designed to help resettle refugees who were displaced as a result of wars in host countries that were willing to protect them. However, the constant turmoil of the past 70 years which has caused such mass displacement has far exceeded what the refugee regime was designed to handle. Today, nearly a quarter of the way into the 21st century, it is more important than ever to restructure the mechanisms that determine the fates of millions of refugees. As a global community, we must work to ensure that refugees can live with dignity, autonomy, and meaningful opportunities for their futures.

This thesis analyzes various state-based responses to refugee displacement, which typically bypass the usual procedures carried out under the global refugee regime. By examining the relatively recent and unique case of the “Venezuelan Exodus,” I look at which strategies have provided displaced Venezuelans with the most effective protections, legal

statuses, and opportunities. Building off Alexander Betts' concept of survival migration, I argue that Venezuelans who have fled their country should be considered refugees, given that, for many reasons, conditions in Venezuela have become unlivable for them. As my case study, I provide an in-depth analysis of the Brazilian response to Venezuelan refugees known as "Operação Acolhida." Through this unique state-based and military-humanitarian approach, Brazil has offered Venezuelan refugees access to the country, shelter and aid, and relocation opportunities, although the majority of Venezuelans in Brazil are not formally recognized as refugees. This case highlights the shifting notion of what it means to be a refugee, the possibilities that can arise with a reframing of "resettlement," and the growing role of military bodies in humanitarian and civilian affairs.

My research on global mass displacement and refugee migration has shown that state-based models of refugee response are more effective in complex situations of mixed migration flows. I compared various state responses to the Venezuelan refugee crisis and, more specifically, gathered data through five months of fieldwork in Brazil to examine the strengths and challenges of Operação Acolhida. I found that a universal global model for assisting refugees will not provide them with the best opportunities possible. Tailored state-specific models work better for refugees locally and can also provide useful best practices that could potentially be implemented globally.

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I. A Global Problem Without a Global Solution

Introduction

People who have been forcibly displaced are among the most vulnerable populations in the world today. Forced displacement occurs as a result of international wars, civil conflicts, state and non-state perpetrated violence, environmental disasters, and other events which render a place of origin unlivable, forcing individuals and families to make the difficult decision to leave their homes. Some may become internally displaced in their country of origin, others may apply for refugee status from their home country, and many may decide to migrate through formal or informal channels in hopes of seeking asylum in a foreign state. Those who are facing the most dire circumstances are sometimes able to find refuge in a new country that is willing to accept them. The vast majority, however, will remain trapped in liminal situations either within the borders of their nation-state, or outside these borders in refugee camps and other precarious living conditions, for an undetermined period of time. New generations of displaced people are often born and raised in a state of limbo, many of whom are essentially stateless, which leads to a cycle of uncertainty and precarity that can last for decades.

It has become increasingly clear that forced displacement is a global problem that is not going away anytime soon. The number of people who have been forcibly displaced from their homes has been steadily increasing over the past century, and there is no sign of this trend slowing down. Over 70 years ago, Hannah Arendt wrote that the only way to prevent the creation of new refugees is to end the wars and conflicts that force people to flee their homes, and that “it appears that every political event since the end of the first World War inevitably added a new category to those who lived outside the pale of law” (Arendt 1951,

277). Ongoing war and various types of conflict continue well into the 21st century, causing the displacement of more and more people each year. The creation of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) in 1950 and its development of the 1951 Convention Relating to the Status of Refugees gave rise to the modern refugee regime, initially offering hope for those forcibly displaced outside their home country. However, as this thesis and many scholarly works before it have argued, the global refugee regime that emerged in post-war Europe is no longer, and has not been for some time, offering timely and sustainable solutions for the millions of people displaced today. The leaders of the world order in the post-war era may not have anticipated the continuous volatility and violent disruption that would characterize the world in the years to come, leading to more refugees whom they would have to protect. However, the past 70 years have been marked by a long series of political events that have led to this result, while, simultaneously, the attention and level of concern for these individuals has generally decreased.

The reasons for an inability to resolve such widespread global displacement vary. On one hand, issues which originate at the state level and which state leaders – due to lack of will or lack of power – are unable to mitigate, cause people to flee either elsewhere within state borders or across international borders. On the other hand, a global refugee regime, lacking a central governing body with power to universally enforce its principles, cannot dictate where refugees can go, nor do its agencies have sufficient resources to adequately care for them during interim periods. Populations that remain internally displaced are often difficult to reach by foreign or international organizations who would be able to provide crucial aid. The process of applying for refugee status from the countries of origin can be long and difficult. It can take years for applications to be processed, and even then, there is

no guarantee that the applicant will be granted refugee status. Those who try their chances migrating across borders typically find themselves in informal working and living conditions in front-line states where they struggle to integrate, or confined to UNHCR-managed refugee camps. Some of these displaced people attempt to trek beyond the front-line states via dangerous routes led by untrustworthy smugglers in hopes of seeking asylum in a place deemed safer. The global refugee regime was supposed to protect against precarious and timeless outcomes such as this, at least in theory. Yet, the opportunities for the survival of displaced persons, and their futures, depends primarily on the decisions and actions of individual states.

At the end of 2020, there were forty-four members of the United Nations who were not signatories to the 1951 Convention or its 1967 Protocol, including high refugee-producing and refugee-receiving countries such as Iraq, Lebanon, Jordan, India, Pakistan, and Bangladesh. Janmyr (2021) documents some of the reasons given by representatives of these states in regards to their reluctance to ascend to the Convention, such as: “Lebanese government officials and policymakers consider accession to be superfluous since Lebanon already has various human rights obligations towards refugees by virtue of its ratification of other human rights instruments”; “ South Asian States believe that the Convention was framed by a select group of (European) States to suit their own interests”; and “[the Convention] does not cater to situations of mass influx or to mixed flows of migrants, both of which characterize forced population flows in this region.” In assessing the importance of the global refugee regime as it exists today, it is essential to note that regions and individual states hosting large numbers of displaced people, in fact, do not formally participate in it.

Despite the gaps and the shortcomings, the global refugee regime, spearheaded by UNHCR and guided by the principles of the 1951 Convention, has provided immeasurable protection, assistance, and hope. In global emergencies causing displacement, UNHCR staff are among the first on the ground to provide emergency shelter, food, water, and medical care. Their recommendations to state and regional leaders on how to best manage displacement crises have shaped the ways in which they respond. Assistance provided by UNHCR to individuals and families around the world who wish to undergo refugee status determination has undoubtedly facilitated both the application and relocation process for millions of refugees. Language from the 1951 Convention, a legally-binding but unenforceable international agreement, has been adapted to fit within the constitutions and legal frameworks of individual nation-states and regional bodies. The networks that UNHCR has built with other organizations globally have enabled crucial inter-agency coordination during emergencies. UNHCR is highly respected globally and arguably the most effective agency in the United Nations. Nevertheless, as the times change, so too must the visions and strategies of global governance institutions that operate in today's highly complex globalized world.

Yet, due precisely to the problems that globalization has created and the inability, in many cases, of global institutions to solve them, individual states are now more frequently developing their own solutions to such problems. While states have always held the decision-making power over global issues that penetrated their borders, the global governance regime that emerged in the 20th century provided the frameworks based on which states would act in response to matters of international peace and security, human rights violations, economic development, and environmental disasters. Increasingly, states have favored legislative and

political approaches that their leaders deem to be most beneficial for their own societies, even if these approaches do not always align with the vision and goals of international institutions. Responses to the global issue of mass displacement provide prime examples of state tendencies to bypass frameworks developed at the global level and opt instead for tailored frameworks developed at the state level. International institutions and NGOs are nonetheless most often involved in emergency response, but the ways in which responses are carried out are largely determined by individual states. Studying these alternative and varying state-based models of responding to mass displacement, which operate parallel to the models outlined by the global refugee regime, is important for developing more effective and sustainable ways to help refugees. By exploring different approaches, we can find ways to better meet the needs of refugees and ensure that they have true opportunities to rebuild their lives.

Research Questions

The frameworks for addressing forced displacement and refugee recognition are constantly evolving and vary depending on the specific situation. In this thesis, I will explore what can be learned from state-based models of refugee protection and integration, such as military-humanitarian management of “refugee crises.” In order to answer this question, I analyze the various factors that determine the fate of refugees, compare how regions and individual states have responded to unprecedented large influxes of refugees in their territories, and identify best practices that could be replicated or adapted in other highly impacted areas. What my findings suggest is that there are significantly different state-based responses to mass arrivals of forcibly displaced people seeking asylum, which result in

uneven opportunities for refugees in terms of protections, access to services, and integration. These responses are often driven by the geopolitics of particular regions, personal preferences of state leaders, and societal perceptions in the host state of certain refugee populations. In view of these findings, I question whether a “global refugee regime” needs to exist at all – whose standard can be exclusionary for many people seeking asylum – given that all decision-making pertaining to the legal options for displaced people remains in the hands of sovereign states. Finally, I will discuss the implications of alternative models of refugee recognition and integration that are tailored to individual states and their capacities, while still maintaining effective communication and coordination with other states, and while still upholding the core values of global and regional agreements.

These questions shed light on the strengths, shortcomings, and contradictions of the global refugee regime as it exists today. They challenge the conventional meaning of “refugee” – proposing alternative conceptual frameworks – along a backdrop of shifting migration patterns and varying systems of recognition. These questions bring a focus to the integral yet conflicting relationship between a global apparatus and the internal mechanisms of sovereign states. While this topic is something that has been studied extensively already, existing literature typically focuses on cases of displaced populations who formally go through the refugee determination or asylum petition processes and are under the care of UNHCR.

Rather, I present an in-depth analysis of how the mechanisms of the global refugee regime play out in relation to regional and state decision-making and practices that fall outside its parameters. This analysis is intended to contribute to better understanding of the full repertoire of options available in an uneven global system of protection. I examine the

specific case of Venezuelan displacement, which currently makes up one of the largest populations of concern for UNHCR, and yet most Venezuelans are not recognized as refugees under the international system. I then hone in on how one particular state – Brazil – has responded to Venezuelan displacement in their own territory with a model of military-humanitarianism. In asking these research questions at the global, regional, and state-specific level based on a case that is not extensively studied, I present a novel lens by which to view the complex factors that determine the fates of refugees.

Case Study

To address my research questions, I examine the relatively recent displacement crisis now known as the “Venezuelan Exodus” as my primary case study. Building on Alexander Betts’ concept of “survival migration” (2013), I henceforth refer to all Venezuelans who have emigrated from Venezuela as “refugees,” regardless of official recognition as such or legal status in the countries they have migrated to, given that most are leaving unlivable circumstances in a country which the international community has recognized as undergoing a humanitarian crisis. Up until Russia’s invasion of Ukraine displaced over 13 million Ukrainians (UNHCR 2023), Venezuelans made up the second largest displaced population in the world with over 7 million refugees living outside Venezuela. This number is quite significant given that there is no war or specific civil conflict occurring in Venezuela, yet conditions in the country have deteriorated to the point of forcing a quarter of its population to flee.

Although most Venezuelans displaced abroad are not formally recognized as refugees, they have been designated as a population of concern for UNHCR, prompting the

agency to provide assistance in Latin American countries that initially struggled to manage an unprecedented high number of arrivals. This population has also been included in the literature on refugee migration given the nature of their displacement, but has not been as extensively studied as other large displacement crises in the past. Most of the literature on Venezuelan refugees focuses on their migration to Colombia, as it is the country which has received the majority of them. However, in this thesis I focus on Venezuelan refugee migration to Brazil, which has not been studied to the same degree. In particular, I examine the Brazilian government's implementation of "Operação Acolhida," the operation led by the Brazilian Armed Forces that was implemented in response to the Venezuelan refugee crisis, which presents a novel approach to the management of refugee crises.

Operação Acolhida, best translated as "Operation Shelter" and often referred to simply as "the operation," is the latest iteration of Brazil's use of "military-humanitarian" missions in civilian affairs. Military-humanitarianism refers to the use of a state's armed forces in foreign or domestic civilian conflicts with the goal of restoring order and security. These operations, which would normally be addressed or managed by state agencies or humanitarian organizations, have traditionally been extremely uncommon but are being increasingly implemented. In the past, Brazil's Armed Forces have been deployed to lead foreign peacekeeping missions and domestic pacification missions, each involving collaboration and coordination with civil society organizations. Scholars have extensively studied the positive and negative outcomes of these missions, particularly the cases of peacekeeping in Haiti and pacification of favelas (slums) in Rio de Janeiro. Santos and Siman (2022) assert that these cases, and those that preceded them, of Brazil's military-humanitarianism have resulted in the development of "military doctrine on Civil-Military

Coordination and Cooperation (CIMIC) within the Brazilian Armed Forces, as well as the ways this doctrinal development interacts with their engagement in peacekeeping, public security and migration management at home and abroad.” While this military doctrine raises concerns about the growing role of the armed forces in governing social life, it has the potential to offer an effective means by which to manage and improve situations that other government bodies or non-governmental organizations are unable to.

While the Brazilian Army has led operations to pacify domestic civilian conflicts in the past, this is the first time it mobilized its forces to manage a situation that did not involve conflict. And, while the armed forces may be routinely involved in issues related to border security, this was the first time that they were deployed to address a migration crisis in its entirety within a military operation framework. Such a role would have typically fallen under the responsibilities of domestic agencies such as the Brazilian Federal Police, the National Committee for Refugees (CONARE), the National Immigration Council (CNIg), or international organizations such as UNHCR and the International Organization for Migration (IOM). However, given the magnitude of the crisis that unfolded in the border state of Roraima – which started in 2016 but intensified in 2018 – a Humanitarian Logistics Task Force was assembled and Operação Acolhida was launched to provide centralized coordination and logistical oversight by the Army, while working in conjunction with domestic agencies and international organizations. Its mission consists of three pillars: ordering of the border, sheltering and aiding Venezuelan refugees, and integrating them into Brazilian society and the workforce by relocating them to other cities across the country. As of April 2023, there were nearly 450,000 Venezuelan migrants, asylum-seekers, and recognized refugees in Brazil (R4V 2023), out of which nearly 90,000 had been relocated

through Operação Acolhida, thus benefiting from the full scope of the operation. However, since the start of the operation in 2018, nearly all Venezuelan refugees in Brazil have benefitted at the least from the immediate granting of government documentation enabling them to live as residents in Brazil, with access to healthcare, the workforce, and public education.

Argument

I began this project with the belief that although the framework of the global refugee regime did not provide adequate solutions for most displaced populations today, redefined global principles with which to address refugee migration should still be in place. I believed that the best way to address the core issues of the global refugee regime was to develop effective strategies to encourage and incentivize states to follow its principles. In this view, at the very least, regional states would work to develop better systems that would lead to efficient coordination and equitable sharing of responsibility for addressing mass displacement crises in their region. However, based on the research conducted for this study and the data acquired, I argue that one standard method for refugee status determination and one specific model for responding to refugee crises are not suitable means for approaching the issue of mass displacement. I find that harnessing the strengths and capabilities of each state to provide solutions that make the most sense in their domestic environments in a logistical, economic, and sociopolitical sense is more effective and realistic. Frameworks and best practices that are deemed successful in one state could be used as examples for other states to explore and build on. However, what works in one place will not necessarily transfer to another, and the goals of international organizations, regional coalitions, and the global

community should be to evaluate the lessons and best practices of a growing range of local models.

Methodology

Data for this project was gathered from various sources. Primarily, data regarding global refugee laws and contemporary practices was gathered from the vast literature that is available on this subject. I studied the origins of the global refugee regime and how it has evolved over time, which entails an analysis of the institutions involved, the international agreements and laws that are applicable, and the norms and practices that exist with the goal of providing aid, rescue, and resettlement. I also reviewed literature on specific case studies involving the application, or lack thereof, of international refugee law. This included Alexander Betts' *Survival Migration* (2013) which focuses on forced displacement and reception of Zimbabweans, Congolese, Somalis and Ethiopians; William Maley's *What is a Refugee?* (2016), which is centered on the Australian responses to refugees arriving from various countries including Afghanistan and Myanmar; Alexander Betts and Paul Collier's *Refuge: Transforming a Broken Refugee System* (2017), in which the authors outlined in detail the trajectory of the "European refugee crisis" in which Syrian refugees were the primary group affected; as well as many other book chapters and articles. Articles used heavily included works from authors in Latin America, including works written in Spanish and Portuguese.

Further crucial insights that strengthened this project were gained during five months of field work in the capital city of Boa Vista in the state of Roraima, Brazil. Boa Vista is located about 213 kilometers from the Brazil-Venezuela border and is the primary hub for

Venezuelans arriving in Brazil once they have moved on from the border. Many Venezuelans have also been living in Boa Vista for some time as migrants and not refugees, thus it feels very much like a border city with mixed migration flows between the two countries. During my time there, I served as a volunteer for a Brazilian non-governmental organization, which allowed me to obtain invaluable knowledge about the protection and assistance of Venezuelan refugees as a participant observer. This opportunity also opened doors for me to meet others who worked in the humanitarian field as well as military officials who worked in the operation, many of whom I interacted with frequently and conducted interviews with. I also conducted semi-structured and informal interviews with Venezuelan refugees, which gave me additional insight into their stories on top of what I was learning through the NGO. This entire experience enabled me to get a better understanding of how the operation works, which I would not have been able to get solely from work that has been published about it. Observing the staff working where I volunteered and the refugees who they helped also gave me a sense of what their perspectives were outside of a controlled interview setting. This field research helps contribute to the work published thus far on the mission, structure, internal mechanisms, and challenges of Operação Acolhida as a humanitarian response focused on refugee integration.

Finally, my research also involved analysis of the legal instruments that provide the frameworks for refugee assistance and integration. This included international treaties and declarations such as the UN 1951 Convention Relating to the Status of Refugees and its 1967 Protocol, the UN Universal Declaration of Human Rights, and the New York Declaration for Refugees and Migrants. I also reviewed various regional agreements and declarations, primarily from Latin America but also including others: the 1984 Cartagena Declaration,

2004 Mexico Declaration and Plan of Action to Strengthen the International Protection of Refugees in Latin America, 2012 Fortaleza Mercosul Declaration of Principles on the International Protection of Refugees, 2014 Brazil Declaration “A Framework for Cooperation and Regional Solidarity to Strengthen the International Protection of Refugees, Displaced and Stateless Persons in Latin America and the Caribbean,” the 2018 Lima Declaration, the 1969 Organization of African Unity Convention Governing the Specific Aspects of Refugee Problems in Africa, and the Common European Asylum System. Lastly, I reviewed specific migration- and refugee-related laws and policies of Brazil and other countries including Colombia, Ecuador, Peru, Trinidad and Tobago, Curaçao, Aruba, Spain, and the United States. This provided insight into the ways in which all of these legal frameworks are utilized. I found that in the case of Venezuelan refugee migration to these countries, existing legal frameworks were not utilized often, and instead new policies were implemented to address this specific population.

Structure of the Thesis

This thesis is organized into four distinct sections. The first chapter provides an overview of the literature on the global refugee system and how it has developed over time, the gaps in its framework which often lead to exclusion and uneven global responsibility-sharing of refugees, and alternative models that have been proposed to better address forced displacement. The second chapter focuses on the mass displacement of Venezuelans, first by providing context regarding the economic and political situation in Venezuela, which is referred to internationally as a humanitarian crisis. I then discuss how the countries in Latin America who have received the largest amounts of Venezuelans originally responded to the

refugee crisis, and how their assistance for and integration of this refugee population evolved over the last several years. The last section of this chapter reviews how the United States and Spain, as the two countries in the global North who have received the most Venezuelan refugees, have addressed the migration of Venezuelan refugees to their territories.

The third chapter presents the case study of military-humanitarianism as a response model to mass displacement and high refugee arrivals, based on the field research conducted in Brazil. To provide context for the Brazilian government's decision to deploy its armed forces to manage not just matters of border security but rather the entire humanitarian operation, I give a brief overview of past instances when the Brazilian Armed Forces have been assigned to civilian-military peacetime missions. I then provide a detailed account of the mission and structure of Operação Acolhida based on data acquired as a participant observer and through interviews conducted on site. The final section of this chapter describes some of the gaps and challenges of Operação Acolhida as observed by me personally, as recounted by people interviewed both formally and informally, and as outlined in published scholarly work.

The concluding chapter of this thesis presents an analysis of my findings and my assessment of how the Brazilian model of responding to unprecedented Venezuelan refugee migration fits in with the broader global refugee regime. I return to my original research question and the purpose of the project, addressing how it aims to contribute to debates and best practices on refugees in Latin America and beyond. I review what I consider to be positive and concerning elements of the operation and their impact, highlighting observations and conversations I had in Boa Vista to explain why I hold those perspectives. Finally, this chapter addresses the program's best practices and their applicability in other places, and

offers considerations for future research. The goal of this research is to contribute to the debates on global mass displacement and response models by providing a more comprehensive account of Venezuela's refugee crisis and the support this population has received in Latin America and, more specifically, in Brazil.

II. The Global Refugee Regime: Gaps, Challenges, and Alternatives

Introduction

In May 2022, for the first time on record, the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees reported that the number of people worldwide who had been forcibly displaced as a result of “persecution, conflict, violence, human rights violations, or event seriously disturbing the public order” reached over 100 million (UNHCR, 2023). Out of this total number which includes refugees under UNHCR’s mandate, asylum seekers, Palestinian refugees under UNRWA’s mandate, internally displaced people, and Venezuelans displaced abroad, only about a third of them meet the criteria for the definition of “refugee” and are afforded the rights and protections outlined in the 1951 Convention. This highlights two important global issues: firstly, the magnitude of global forced displacement today and, secondly, the different labels categorizing displaced persons and thus differential responses to forced displacement that unevenly determine the fate of refugees. Through this project, I seek to identify what, in fact, determines the fates of millions of refugees globally and what can be done to improve the futures of those who are most vulnerable. In order to start making sense of such a complex problem, in this chapter I review some of the scholarly contributions on the achievements and challenges of the global refugee regime thus far.

I first analyze the impacts of the refugee regime in today’s context of global mass displacement. The modern refugee asylum system began in 1951 and has not been significantly restructured since then. As a result, it is no longer able to provide the same level of support to refugees as it was originally intended to. Next, I assess the areas in which the regime has been most successful and where it contains significant gaps in its ability to provide refugee protections, as well as examining why these gaps exist. In doing so I look at

who qualifies as a refugee under the current regime, the conditions of migrants fleeing their homes who fall under different legal categories, and the specific challenges faced by internally displaced persons, who are often not included in the current refugee protection frameworks. In the last section, I identify broad patterns of state responses to refugee displacement specifically over the last twenty years and provide an overview of some alternatives and reforms to the refugee system that have been proposed by some scholars. The current uneven and inconsistent responses to refugees demonstrate the need to reform UNHCR's vision and framework, as well as current resettlement practices and attitudes towards resettlement in general. We also need to shape a new framework for global cooperation that includes more key players and makes accountability possible.

To understand the ways in which the world can collectively and efficiently move forward with addressing mass displacement, it is important to answer three questions. Why has UNHCR's protection model failed to offer sustainable livelihoods to a majority of displaced people? What can the global refugee regime under UNHCR's guidance still offer? In what ways can the global community work better together to not only provide durable solutions for refugees but also to mitigate the root causes of displacement and the causes for onward migration? It is important to proactively develop long-term solutions to mass displacement and resettlement, rather than reactively adapting solutions from crisis to crisis. This may involve a multitude of actors who are committed to this cause in addition to UNHCR and governments. By harnessing the strengths of international organizations such as UNHCR and IOM, state governments, global and local NGOs, and private actors, it is possible to establish frameworks for refugee protection that offer more humane, durable, and even empowering solutions.

The Global Refugee Regime Today

UNHCR was created in 1950 in the aftermath of World War II and the Holocaust, which had a direct role in the establishment of the 1951 Convention Relating to the Status of Refugees. Its most referenced Article (1.A2) defines refugees who are protected under this agreement:

“As a result of events occurring before 1 January 1951 and owing to well-founded fear of being persecuted for reasons of race, religion, nationality, membership of a particular social group or political opinion, is outside the country of his nationality and is unable or, owing to such fear, is unwilling to avail himself of the protection of that country; or who, not having a nationality and being outside the country of his former habitual residence as a result of such events, is unable or, owing to such fear, is unwilling to return to it.”
(U.N. Convention, 1951).

The 1951 Convention was a landmark agreement that recognized the need to provide viable solutions for refugees who had been displaced by war. Many refugees could not return home immediately, and some had no home to return to. Conversely, the Convention outlined its key principle of non-refoulement in order to prevent the forcible repatriation of refugees to states in which they would be in danger. The 1951 Convention, along with its subsequent 1967 Protocol which eliminated temporal and geographical restrictions, established a framework for international cooperation to provide refugees with protection and assistance, and it remains the cornerstone of refugee protection today.

Although originally thought to be a short-term post-war agency, since its inception UNHCR has come to the aid of millions of displaced people. Although the global wars became a memory of the past, regional wars and conflict have persisted, continuing to displace people all around the world. Over time, UNHCR shifted from an agency focused on assistance with resettlement for primarily European refugees, to one which was responsible

for assisting people displaced for reasons other than war in other parts of the world: “From a Eurocentric organisation, it morphed into one with a focus on Africa and then on the wider world, and it increasingly became involved in mass relief operations” (Maley 2016, 19). The role of UNHCR continued to expand throughout the decades, from originally only helping those who became displaced by war and conflict to also coming to the rescue of those who became displaced by natural crises. As Betts and Collier explain, “By 2010...UNHCR was effectively the lead agency for protecting people displaced by natural disasters” (2017, 59). According to UNHCR’s Global Trends 2021 report, between 2001 and 2021, 11 million people received refugee status and international protection under the care of UNHCR, while 3.74 million more were awaiting decisions on their asylum claims. In addition to providing immediate relief, shelter, and basic needs, UNHCR has been instrumental in helping refugees achieve durable solutions - namely voluntary repatriation (if safe for them to return), integration in a country of first asylum, or resettlement to a third country (Maley 2016, 65)

The 1951 Convention also served as the foundation by which other regional agreements and national legislation on refugee rights and protections have been established, most of which have expanded the definition of “refugee” to include more people fleeing circumstances not outlined in the Convention. In a comparative analysis of legislative frameworks from the global South, Eduardo Arboleda (1991) argued that regional agreements such as the 1969 Organization of African Unity Convention Governing the Specific Aspects of Refugee Problems in Africa (OAU Convention) and the 1984 Cartagena Declaration on Refugees are better suited to address local circumstances. He noted that the OAU Convention, as a legally-binding instrument, “adopted a definition more closely reflecting the realities of Africa during a period of violent struggle for self-determination and

national development” (Arboleda 1991, 186). In the aftermath of decolonization and newly formed states, the OAU recognized as early as the 1960s, less than a decade after the establishment of the 1951 Convention, that the internationally recognized definition of refugees that had been the standard up until then was inadequate in addressing the various causes of refugee migration in the region. Although many African states became signatories to the 1951 Convention and adopted its definition of refugees when they became independent, the OAU not only widened the scope of the definition, but also eased the burden of proof that asylum-seekers would have to demonstrate in order to receive protections. As Arboleda summarizes, “the 1969 OAU Convention...made the term 'refugee' applicable to asylum seekers who left their country of origin owing to external aggression, occupation, foreign domination, or events seriously disturbing the public order” (1991, 194). Individuals in these situations would obtain the status of refugee without having to justify their fear of persecution, as would have been required under the 1951 Convention.” Thus, it is clear how more pragmatic and inclusive approaches to address refugee displacement have roots in the global south, and how the OAU Convention set the precedent for other progressive frameworks around refugee migration, rights, and protections.

The 1984 Cartagena Declaration is arguably the second major regional agreement in the global south that addressed the need for a wider definition of refugees to encompass more categories of people. Historically, Latin America has had a long and “proud tradition, spanning many centuries, of countries in the region being generous in providing asylum to people fleeing political persecution” (Harley 2014, 24). Before the 1951 Convention, Latin America had already established policies and protections regarding forcible repatriation and asylum based on political persecution. Following the widespread adoption of the 1951

Convention and the 1967 Protocol in the region, Latin America extended the scope of the definition of “refugee” and, in 1984, fifteen countries established the Cartagena Declaration. This regional agreement outlined protections for “persons who have fled their country because their lives, safety or freedom have been threatened by generalized violence, foreign aggression, internal conflicts, massive violation of human rights or other circumstances which have seriously disturbed public order” (Cartagena Declaration 1984). Having been established as a result of ongoing civil wars in Central and South America, and providing a new framework for states to develop refugee protections for more categories of people fleeing, the 1984 Cartagena Declaration has been “heralded as one of the greatest accomplishments in the development of the refugee protection regime in Latin America” (Fischel de Andrade 2019, 342).

African and Latin American countries who are signatories to their respective regional agreements have both nonetheless worked in conjunction with UNHCR to assist political asylum-seekers as well as people displaced during times of crisis. However, the need for these additional agreements regarding refugee rights and protections that went beyond those outlined in the 1951 Convention shows that even early on, the modern refugee regime demonstrated gaps in its ability to provide solutions for a rapidly increasing forcibly displaced population. Furthermore, as Betts and Collier note, “many of the most generous host countries in the world are not even full signatories...Countries in the Middle East and Asia have argued that the Convention does not meet the realities of displacement in their regions, and that their own cultural and legal practices in any case provide sources of sanctuary” (2018, 42). UNHCR undoubtedly provided durable solutions for refugees in the post-war era but, given that it was founded based on Eurocentric needs and with a temporary

vision, it has become unequipped to be the primary overseer of the more than 100 million displaced people. The 1951 Convention and UNHCR face considerable limitations, which are discussed in the next section. These limitations contribute to the shortcomings of the refugee system today.

Gaps and Challenges

Although the global refugee regime has provided protection to many displaced people, it nonetheless remains limited in many ways. Firstly, while the United Nations (UN) is meant to be a platform for global cooperation, and its agencies such as UNHCR are meant to have oversight and enforcement power regarding different global issues, the UN and its agencies do not have the ability to compel any nation-state to comply with their recommendations. Much like many of the rights outlined in the UN Declaration of Human Rights, the enforceability of refugee rights and protections lies in the hands of individual states and depends on their political will to uphold global agreements. Brysk and Shafir (2004) argue that although the realm of human rights has made significant strides in the last several decades, the transition from a system of citizenship rights upheld by the nation-state to a system of universal human rights upheld by global governance institutions is incomplete. This incomplete transition process has resulted in a rather limited implementation and enforcement of human rights by the sovereign nation-state, which “still remains the primary institution that administers and enforces rights, even those conceived to be universally held” (Brysk and Shafir 2004, 22). This shows the inherent contradiction in attempting to uphold universal human rights – and by extension, global refugee rights - when the signatories to global agreements have the power to interpret and implement protections as they see fit. This

contradiction has resulted in uneven and unjust responses to forced displacement, given that there has been an unequal level of “burden-sharing” by host states, which UNHCR alone does not have the capacity to mitigate.

Now in the first decades of the 21st century, amid continuous and growing mass displacement globally, there is a general reluctance of states in the global North to accept more refugees on their territory, and there are concerted efforts to prevent physical access to their borders for those seeking protection. As Maley cites, “Western states now acknowledge the rights of refugees but simultaneously criminalize the search for asylum” (cited in Maley 2016, 81). Betts and Collier furthermore state that most signatory states today in fact do not comply with the 1951 Convention: “Signatory states in the developed world find ever more elaborate ways to disregard or bypass the principle of non-refoulement, adopting a suite of deterrence of non-entrée policies that make it difficult or dangerous for refugees or to access their territory...” (2017, 42). Indeed, in Europe, countries like Italy have funded the construction of detention centers in Libya to prevent migrants from reaching Italian shores (Hom 2019); Spanish forces in North Africa have collaborated with their Moroccan and Algerian colleagues “when they spot a boat on their surveillance systems, so that these states’ authorities can proceed with ‘rescuing’ the passengers against their will (Andersson 2016, 1060); and in 2015 the European Union (EU) made a deal, negotiated by German Chancellor Merkel, with Turkey establishing that exit controls would be tightened and that any migrants who made a journey from Turkey to Greece with hopes of reaching Europe would be returned to Turkey (Betts and Collier 2017). In Australia, Operation Sovereign Borders has become an infamous government policy that involved the interception of migrants attempting

to reach Australia by boat and taking them to offshore detention centers where they were held indefinitely in inhumane living conditions (Maley 2016).

In the United States, harsh immigration policies, which were exacerbated under the Trump administration but were implemented since the Obama administration and continue now under Biden, have failed to honor the rights of many asylum seekers who reach US territory. According to Natasha Arnpriester, “the U.S. government has chosen to prioritize criminalization over upholding its legal obligations to protect asylum seekers' rights” and “subjecting asylum seekers to the criminal system for crossing a border is not only an affront to America's legacy of providing refuge to the most vulnerable, it also unnecessarily punishes individuals for pursuing their legal right-to seek asylum” (2017, 40). The next chapter will provide more information on the US response to and policies regarding asylum seekers in the last decade. What these examples show is that western countries of the global North, who are signatories to the 1951 Convention and often the most equipped to provide aid to refugees, most often choose to outsource the responsibility of managing “refugee crises” to other countries and in essence close their doors to the most vulnerable. This highlights the tensions between the 1951 Convention as a legally-binding international treaty and state sovereignty that allows for implementation of contrasting national policies.

Another gap in the rights and protections offered to those who have been forcibly displaced arises from the way in which these people become legally categorized. As Maley summarizes, “An asylum seeker is someone who is seeking to be recognised as a refugee. A person can be both a refugee (on the basis of the circumstances surrounding his or her flight or exile) and an asylum seeker (seeking the protection of the authorities in a state of which he or she is not a citizen)” (2016, 9). Under international norms, only those who meet the

criteria outlined in the 1951 Convention would qualify for refugee status and be considered for asylum. This, however, excludes many people who have been displaced from their homelands due to reasons technically outside the realm of the Convention's protections, who have consequently suffered immensely due to a lack of recognition as refugees.

Betts' concept of "survival migration" indicates that the refugee system as it currently exists is not set up to address the evolving reasons why refugees seek asylum outside their own nation-states today. According to him, survival migration occurs due to "conditions under which a person cannot get access to a fundamental set of rights in his or her country of origin and so (as a last resort) needs to seek those rights in another country. Survival migrants can be defined as 'persons who are outside their country of origin because of an existential threat for which they have no access to a domestic remedy or solution'" (Betts 2013, 22). The author explains that his concept is not about identifying more reasons for granting someone refugee status and protection. Instead, he advocates for establishing a threshold of fundamental rights. If these rights are unavailable in a person's country of origin, the international community should allow them to cross an international border and receive access to temporary or permanent sanctuary. In theory, this concept expands the scope of the definition of "refugee" as outlined in the 1951 Convention to include what are considered by some to be "the new refugees," namely those who are fleeing violence from non-state actors such as militias or gangs, climate change and environmental disaster, gender-based violence, or lack of means of subsistence (Cantor and Serna 2016). The 1969 OAU Convention and the 1984 Cartagena Declaration sought to address some of these gaps within their region, but lack of a global expansion to the criteria that people must meet to be classified as refugees

means that the international system remains exclusionary, and leads to uneven, and perhaps unjust, responses to forced displacement.

Although Betts argues that people fleeing under circumstances such as these and who migrate across international borders should be considered refugees, most end up classified as economic migrants with no specified rights or protections, or only receive temporary protective statuses in the host country. Those who become forcibly displaced but remain in their country of origin make up the majority of displaced people in need of aid and protections, yet are the ones who least receive it, further highlighting the negative impact of categorical differentiation. According to UNHCR figures, as of 2021 there were 53.2 internally displaced persons (IDPs) - double the amount of those considered refugees or those seeking asylum. Yet, this population is often left out of the dominant debates on approaches to refugee displacement and out of the minds of those preoccupied with “refugee crises.” Betts and Collier emphasize that “those people displaced from their homes who seek sanctuary elsewhere in their country should not drop off the international agenda, and their practical needs of sanctuary often go unmet” (2017, 29). The difference between IDPs and refugees is that IDPs do not cross an internationally-recognized state border, but both groups share many similarities related to the vulnerabilities they face due to becoming displaced. Mooney explains that “Cut off from their land, traditional livelihood and means of generating income, and compelled to leave all but a few possessions behind, IDPs suddenly find themselves stripped of their means of survival” (2005, 15).

Furthermore, Mooney argues that IDPs may even find themselves in more precarious conditions than refugees because 1) there is no specific UN agency mandated with addressing their needs, 2) because they do not have UNHCR’s assistance in monitoring

conditions for their safe return home, and 3) because without these guaranteed protections they become more vulnerable to acts of violence and human rights violations. Cohen notes that “there is little or no accountability for the internally displaced because no one is really in charge” (2006, 96). While UNHCR has played a role in bringing aid to IDPs along with the International Committee of the Red Cross, the World Food Program, the UN Development Program as well as other agencies and NGOs, the lack of a specific agency mandated to oversee this population means that they have largely remained on the margins of the international humanitarian agenda and off the radar of the broader international community. Over the past 15 years, IDPs have become a more visible population of concern among the UN agencies, and the UN Secretary-General has recognized that a long-term commitment is needed to address internal displacement. However, national governments bear the primary responsibility for IDPs' protection and welfare, which they are often unable or unwilling to meet.

What these gaps and challenges show is that the modern refugee regime, guided by the principles of the 1951 Convention and spearheaded by UNHCR, is not expansive nor specific enough to successfully tackle the myriad of mass displacement challenges we see today. UNHCR, lacking significant restructuring since its establishment, is not adequately equipped as a crisis response agency (which it was not meant to be) given its outdated model for providing aid, and funding uncertainties from year to year make it difficult for the agency to be innovative in its approaches to refugee assistance. As Betts and Collier (2017) conclude, there is no one-size-fits-all solution and different models will be effective for different countries. Indeed, regions and countries have in the last 50 years come up with their own terms by which to help refugees who fall outside UNHCR's scope of protections.

Countries of the global South in particular have both historically and recently resorted to regional agreements and national legislation to address the needs of refugees in their countries who would not qualify for asylum under the 1951 Convention. The following section provides an overview of these varying responses to contemporary refugee displacement and the proposed alternatives to UNHCR's solutions that have been suggested by experts in the field.

Alternative Response Models for Forced Displacement

While there are many debates about the best ways to provide protections to refugees and IDPs that are efficient, humane, and durable, there is certainly a consensus that changes to the status quo need to be made. Scholars have argued that the global refugee regime guided by tenets of the 1951 Convention and operationalized through UNHCR – in its current form – no longer offers solutions for the challenges of the 21st century. However, most have said that it needs not to be eliminated, but reformed, and – crucially – that states must adopt approaches to the granting of asylum that are not only based on their international legal responsibilities but also moral responsibilities. In discussing the current normalization by many countries of practices that return refugees to harmful environments, Musalo states that “Beyond the clear legal obligation that prohibits such action are the moral and ethical considerations arising from both religious and secular systems of thought” (2021, 779). Betts and Collier (2017) term these obligations “the duty of rescue,” which encompass the responsibility to ensure immediate rescue, restore autonomy, and provide a route out of limbo for refugees. This emphasizes the idea that providing relief and protection to refugees should not only be about providing food and shelter, but also about providing integration and

development opportunities so that refugees can work and rebuild their lives. For refugees living in camps, this also means ensuring that there are strategies in place which will eventually facilitate their departure.

Betts and Collier's 2017 book outlines a framework for restructuring the way refugee displacement is approached. The framework focuses on the majority of refugees who remain in the global South and links refugeedom to economic development. They advocate for supporting the “haven” countries that host most of the world’s refugees – those that typically share borders with the countries of origin or are located within the same region – by providing more financial assistance to those countries instead of prioritizing funding for countries in the global North. They further stress the importance of establishing aid models focused on “creating development areas in peripheral parts of the [host] country in which both refugees and the host state and society can benefit from the creation of new jobs, new markets, and improved public services” (Betts and Collier 2017, 205). By creating such models, the authors argue that refugees’ autonomy would be restored by providing them with formal work opportunities, that they would continue acquiring skills and knowledge which could potentially help them rebuild their country of origin later on, and that this would ideally prevent the need for independent onward migration or for assisted resettlement.

In order to accomplish this, the authors propose that UNHCR should partner with private investors who are searching for new manufacturing or production sites, and that states must maximize the “potential of different capabilities to harness the gains from [their] comparative advantage” (ibid). This, they argue, would ensure that responses to refugee displacement offer win-win solutions. Whereas Maley (2016) proposes a model that would resettle refugees in countries with labor shortages, Betts and Collier advocate for bringing

labor opportunities to the haven countries where most refugees are already located. In any case, the importance emphasized in these arguments is that refugees must have the right to work and have access to labor markets to give them a real chance at rebuilding a normal life and avoid future “lost generations” of people confined to refugee camps.

Other issues that need to be addressed are the administrative hurdles that asylum seekers encounter when having their petitions considered, if they reach that point at all. Refugee status determination (RSD) is the systemized process by which asylum claims are reviewed, which varies between countries and is sometimes handled only by the state, other times by UNHCR, and many times by a combination of both bodies. Burson (2021) explains that with rapidly increasing numbers of asylum seekers, RSD systems face many challenges in managing their caseloads, such as “inadequate management, case management tools and techniques, scheduling deficiencies and prejudice against RSD itself...backlogs are an enduring and significant problem.” Maley (2016) also reminds us that decision-makers are only human and “it is often human failings that account for the occasional indefensible decisions in asylum cases.” Various ideas for reforming RSD systems have been proposed that would make them more efficient and accountable, but most would need to be implemented at the state level and would require budgetary and staff increases, which seem unlikely given the intensification of political differences in many nation-states and societal debates on allocation of resources. Burson also notes, however, that many refugees today are not going through the RSD channels to request protections, but rather are benefitting from temporary protective programs designed and implemented by state governments. This again shows that many solutions to mass displacement today are based on a mixture of methods

carried out by both states and UNHCR, and that best solutions may not require UNHCR to be the primary or only agency mandated with the care and protection of refugees.

Indeed, the high influx of refugees over the last two decades have demonstrated that UNHCR alone does not have the capacity to meet the needs of refugees in sustainable and efficient ways – nor does it necessarily need to, according to Betts and Collier. They propose that UNHCR “can and should share the refugee mandate with other official agencies, and cooperate with NGOs, civil society organizations, refugees themselves, and businesses.” They further argue that it is beneficial to work alongside national civil society organizations – many of which have been bypassed by the international system – because they are “ideally placed, cost-efficient, and knowledgeable first-line responders.” Some countries have already set a precedent using this model on a small scale, but Betts and Collier propose making this a standard norm for global mass displacement response.

Separately, the high influx of refugees in various regions have prompted state governments to respond outside the framework of the global refugee regime, and instead implement temporary protective measures that more rapidly provide displaced populations with immediate relief and permission to remain in their territories. The most recent example of a response like this being implemented was by the EU in addressing Ukrainian refugee displacement. Musalo (2022) highlights that “the EU Council activated for the first time its 2001 Temporary Protection Directive giving Ukrainians immediate protection for a minimum of one year, as well as the right to live and receive benefits in the EU country of their choice.” Additionally, since 2014, Syrian refugees in Turkey have benefited from temporary protection under Turkish law, which considers them “guests” (Durieux 2021). In these two cases, temporary protection programs were implemented to assist those fleeing war, but such

measures have also been implemented in other countries and regions to aid those fleeing humanitarian crises or precarious conditions. While it can be argued that temporary protection programs are not suitable alternatives to formal asylum due to their temporal limits, these approaches have helped millions of people fleeing their homes and provided them protections and opportunities which they may not have received as quickly if the traditional asylum petition process was the only option. However, in these cases, UNHCR is nonetheless typically on the ground assisting the national governments and NGOs with operations and providing guidance. This supports Betts and Collier's theory that the most efficient way of managing refugee displacement cannot be restricted to just one model, but that partnerships must be established to implement response strategies best suited for individual countries.

Conclusion

This chapter has laid out the trajectory of the global refugee regime from its inception to today, described where it has been most effective and where it has significant gaps, and provided an overview of some of the alternative approaches to the status quo that have already been implemented or that are being proposed. What the literature presented here has shown is that there is no one-size-fits-all solution and that it is important not just for states to work together under the guidance of UNHCR to ensure refugees rights are protected, but that collaboration with many other parties is also important and perhaps crucially needed. The 1951 Convention and UNHCR's work may have provided many solutions to exile or displacement since the post-war era, but now 70 years later, it is important to learn from the lessons of the past in order to address the need of refugees who have become displaced in the

21st century. Most importantly, it is crucial for states to recognize that refugees are not simply passive objects or pawns in political battles, but rather are human beings who should be protected and cared for simply because of our shared humanity. Although it may be best for specific strategies to vary depending on what will be most effective in a given state or region, what must remain constant is the honoring of refugee rights to which they are entitled, the provision of safe and humane sanctuary, and an eventual path back to autonomy and out of liminal conditions. The next chapter will take a closer look at some of the responses to recent cases of refugee displacement implemented by specific countries, and will focus on state-based responses to those displaced by the humanitarian crisis in Venezuela.

III. State-Based Responses to Refugee Displacement

Introduction

As the previous chapter discussed, the 1951 Convention and its 1967 Protocol, along with UNHCR's scope of influence and crisis response models, are no longer equipped to provide adequate solutions for those who have been forcibly displaced. Rights enshrined in other global treaties also fall short of ensuring protections to this vulnerable population. The Universal Declaration of Human Rights (1948), for example, effectively recognizes a right of flight, rather than a right of asylum: "everyone has the right to seek and to enjoy in other countries asylum from persecution" (Article 14). As Freier and Gauci (2020) conclude, this means individuals were not granted a right to be given protection, but merely the right to seek it. Regional agreements on rights of refugees, while offering more protections than the global agreements provide, also have challenges. Europe's Central European Asylum System for example, although being legally-binding for all member states, does not have guarantees of fair responsibility-sharing when it comes to the acceptance rates of asylum seekers (Tsourdi 2021). In Latin America, while the core elements of the 1984 Cartagena Declaration have been incorporated into most national legislations in the region, the applicability of it to refugee cases is nonetheless up to each individual state (Fischel de Andrade 2021).

Furthermore, as many contemporary displacement crises have shown, governments have often opted to create special visas, temporary residence permits, temporary protection programs, or other special measures as responses to mass influxes of migrants. These measures tend to be adopted as alternatives to the process of refugee status determination for various reasons and have both positive and negative results. Fischel de Andrade (2021) finds that "UNHCR surveyed 12 Latin American States and found huge differences between the

rights accorded to asylees (which depend on the legal status they are granted), the duration of the various legal statuses, and the costs with which asylum seekers are encumbered.” The case of displaced Venezuelans in Latin America has further shown that lack of a single coordinated regional response – whether it be utilizing the Cartagena Declaration’s framework to offer refugee status or whether it be establishing a regional special status for Venezuelans – results in an uneven approach to the crisis consisting of unfair responsibility-sharing across countries, bureaucratic hurdles faced by Venezuelans, and mixed public perception of this refugee population. It also impacts family unity, as in many cases Venezuelan families will split up so that members can try their chances at success in various locations, with the goal of later reuniting in the country that provided the best opportunities (Interviews with refugees, November 2022).

Countries sharing borders with Venezuela, primarily Colombia and Brazil, have experimented with various “special stay” programs and novel integration approaches. Perhaps sensing that the crisis in Venezuela would not rapidly subside and given that most of the accessible land borders do not have physical barriers, both countries remained open for Venezuelans wishing to enter (with the exception of a period at the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic) and provided some sort of emergency shelter and aid. Other countries such as Peru and Ecuador were initially welcoming, although later on adopted a more restrictive approach, making it very difficult for Venezuelans to obtain a legal status if they were new arrivals. This had a ripple effect on the perceptions of members of society, and both Peru and Ecuador became socially hostile environments, making it more difficult for Venezuelans to integrate into labor markets. Venezuelan refugees who have tried venturing to Europe or the United States have faced a variety of challenges. In Spain, they have often been treated as

economic migrants, even though they are fleeing a humanitarian crisis, requiring them to go through traditional visa or residency application procedures. In the United States, although many Venezuelans have been granted temporary parole due to the nature of their flight, many more have faced significant resistance and deterrence, similar to what other Latin American migrants have faced while attempting to reach the US.

This chapter will more closely examine some of the specific responses that have been implemented by different countries in the Americas in response to the Venezuelan refugee crisis, in particular comparing responses from the global North and the global South, in an effort to assess what factors determine the opportunities offered to Venezuelan refugees. Different legal frameworks for receiving and integrating this particular group of refugees, along with the demeanor projected by government leadership towards them, has had an effect on their social and economic acceptance. This, in turn, has potential impacts on the amount of remittances that can be sent to family members still in Venezuela, adding to the incredible hardships that many in Venezuela still face and potentially triggering more displacement. I find that regardless of what multilateral agreements or legal frameworks are in place, the will of state leaders – particularly that of presidents or other executive officials – to address this refugee crisis efficiently and humanely has played a much bigger role in determining the opportunities and challenges that displaced Venezuelans have been presented with.

Context of the Venezuelan Exodus

In order to understand current responses to refugee migration and methods of addressing integration needs, this chapter looks at the case of the Venezuelan refugee crisis, which has come to be known as the “Venezuelan Exodus” (Freier et al 2020). The origins of

the crisis can be traced to 2014 and the beginning of the Nicolás Maduro regime, at which point the 2014 collapse in oil prices ravaged Venezuela's public finances (Gedan 2018). The oil sector accounted for 90% of revenues for Venezuelan exports, which highlights the considerable economic dependence on the raw material and the level of impact the country suffered due to the price drops on international oil markets in 2014 (Kleszczyńska 2020). The decline of export-based revenues and mounting debt led to a deep recession which caused widespread food and medicine shortages as well as looting and violent crime. Freier (2018) found that by the end of 2017 "there were already 280,000 malnourished children at risk of starving in Venezuela" and that by early 2018, "Venezuelans had lost an average of 11 kilograms of body weight."

In response to this, the country saw massive protests during this time, to which the Maduro regime responded with brute force, censorship, and surveillance. Member states of the Lima Group, who came together to find peaceful solutions to the crisis, condemned the rupture of democratic order in Venezuela as well as the "systematic violation of human rights and fundamental freedoms, including repression and political persecution, the existence of political prisoners and the lack of free elections" (Freier et al 2020). During this time, Venezuela saw levels of repression not seen in Latin America (with the possible recent exception of Nicaragua) since the early 1980s, a pattern which was of high concern for the region (Corrales 2020). The Venezuelan human rights group Foro Penal reported that "by the end of July 2017, the number of people who had been killed while protesting was 133" (ibid). By the end of 2017 and only three years after Maduro came into power, there were already an estimated 4 million displaced Venezuelans living outside the country due to such economic

instability, lack of basic needs, and safety concerns, which had essentially created unlivable conditions (Freier 2018).

The Venezuelan Exodus was exacerbated by the lack of a legitimate government and deep political instability that followed the 2018 presidential election. Characterized by widespread corruption, targeting of dissidents, and voter suppression, the 2018 election was largely considered undemocratic and the results deemed inconclusive. In January 2019, the Lima Group declared the 2018 election of Nicolas Maduro “did not meet international requirements of fairness and recognized the president of the National Assembly, Juan Guaidó, as the legitimate interim president of Venezuela” (Freier et al 2020). The EU countries and the United States also recognized Juan Guaidó as the interim president of Venezuela, but Nicolas Maduro refused to concede, which resulted in an internal state of diarchy (Kleszczyńska 2020). Since then, Venezuelans who have remained in the country have continued to live in conditions of extreme precarity, with the government’s health system collapsing, access to education being compromised or eliminated, and citizens facing social control and surveillance in order to access basic needs to which they are supposed to be entitled (Freier et al 2020). Compounded by the COVID-19 pandemic, it is no surprise that these extreme hardships and threats to Venezuelans’ livelihoods have led to an astonishingly high number of displaced people, making it the largest refugee crisis in the Americas to date. Although the exact numbers vary according to reports, estimates show that there are more than 7 million Venezuelan refugees outside their home country, with most remaining within Latin America (Freier and Doña-Reveco 2022).

The Venezuelan refugee crisis is often compared to the Syrian refugee crisis given the high numbers of those displaced from both countries. As of February 2023, there are

approximately 5.5 million registered Syrian refugees not including IDPs (UNHCR 2023) and approximately 7.2 Venezuelan registered refugees and migrants living outside Venezuela (R4V 2023). It is due to the serious nature of the humanitarian crisis in Venezuela, and the characteristics that differentiate this displaced population from others who may simply be considered economic migrants, that this project refers to all displaced Venezuelans outside their home country as refugees, regardless of host country or legal classification. While Syrians displaced abroad more obviously qualify as refugees given their displacement resulted from civil war, I argue that Venezuelans should also be considered refugees and not economic migrants given that for a mixture of reasons, survival is no longer possible for most of those people who have been forced to leave.

Even Syrian refugees, however, have faced resistance in their search for international protection, particularly from Europe, and most of them who have remained in the Middle Eastern region continue to live in uncertain and vulnerable conditions. Although initially welcomed with a relatively receptive attitude in 2015, particularly from Germany, Syrians were later deemed to have created a “European refugee crisis” that the region could not handle, and were faced with a series of deterrence barriers enacted by the EU (Betts and Collier 2018). Succumbing to political pressures from the EU and from German citizens, Chancellor Angela Merkel, who had previously embraced an open-door attitude, reversed course and led negotiations with the Turkish government for their collaboration in preventing asylum-seekers from leaving Turkish territory en route to the EU (ibid). Those who were granted asylum in the EU or who arrived illegally have faced rising hostility and xenophobia from host country nationals which continues today. This demonstrates that it is not necessarily the nature of a refugee-producing crisis, nor the legal status of refugees in host

countries, that determines to what extent refugees are welcomed and which opportunities they are given. Rather, the degree of reception and integration of refugees is dependent on the national (or regional) leadership and their willingness to help, as well as the perceptions held by members of society towards refugee communities. As the following section shows, these two elements have determined the reception, recognition, and treatment of Venezuelans displaced within the region of Latin America and beyond.

Response Models in Latin America & Caribbean

Colombia Response

Colombia has been the primary destination country for Venezuelan refugees, with approximately 2.5 million Venezuelans entering the country between February 2018 and January 2023 (R4V 2023). As such, it has been praised by the global community for their role in providing safe haven and legal residence to Venezuelans as the top refugee-receiving country in Latin America and second in the world following Turkey (UNHCR 2023). Colombia has generally taken a welcoming approach to Venezuelans in their country in the spirit of Latin America's long tradition of welcoming refugees (Ordóñez and Arcos 2019), and, arguably, as another step in the rebuilding of their public image following the grave human rights violations that took place in the country over the last several decades of civil conflict.

Since the 1970s, Colombia has been the stage where continuous armed conflict has played out involving multiple actors, including the Colombian government, rebel guerilla groups, state-backed paramilitaries, and criminal bands such as drug cartels. During this time, hundreds of thousands of Colombians perished and many more were victims of kidnapping,

torture, land appropriation and forced displacement. In 2007, Colombia had one of the largest displaced populations in the world (Ibáñez and Vélez 2008), with over 3 million people primarily from rural areas who were displaced internally (Burbridge 2008). In 2012, the Colombian government and the FARC (the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia) initiated peace negotiations to end the decades-long conflict. Since then and with the signing of the 2016 Peace Agreement, Colombia has been engaged in efforts towards transitional justice including truth commissions, reparations, and memorialization (de Waardt and Weber 2019), and has turned its attention towards restoring human dignity in the country.

Through the early 2000s, Venezuela was known as a country that would welcome people fleeing from neighboring countries, particularly from neighboring war-torn Colombia, and offer humanitarian protections. By the end of 2014, “nearly 200,000 refugees [had] arrived in this country during the last 15 years, about 95% of which [were] Colombians” (Carreño Malaver 2014). Venezuela was one of the most common destinations for Latin American migrants during that time due to its high oil revenues that provided prosperous living standards. Now, as the flow of migration in this region has reversed, Venezuelans are finding themselves in extreme need of the very protections they offered their neighbors in the past. Thus, in a sense, this reverse migration flow has consisted of many Colombians and their families returning home (Ordóñez and Arcos 2019). Moreover, this mass refugee migration to Colombia is expected as it shares a land border with Venezuela, has a common language and culture, and is considered generally safe given the improved conditions in Colombia since the 2016 Peace Agreement.

Although the government response to Venezuelan refugees has been receptive, Colombia did not offer refugee status to them through the framework of the Cartagena

Declaration. In fact, “the Cartagena definition applies to the forced displacement of millions of Venezuelan citizens. However, Mexico and Brazil are the only countries in the region that have applied it to Venezuelan asylum-seekers, and timidly so” (Feier and Gauci 2020). The Colombian government instead created a series of special stay permits (PEPs) to regularize the status of Venezuelans in the country (Selee and Bolter 2021). The initial permits, while neither a visa nor a form of asylum, granted Venezuelans two years of legal residency, permission to work in the country, permission to enroll children in schools, and access to the country’s public healthcare system. Del Real (2022) further notes that “PEP applications are free and can be accessed online, with applicants receiving their permits automatically,” making the process more accessible to Venezuelans. At the time of their study in 2021, Selee and Bolter reported that “the Colombian response is one of the most ambitious and largest-scale efforts in the world to offer temporary protection to a single group of displaced people arriving in a neighbouring country.”

Furthermore, as the number of Venezuelan children being born in Colombia increased, the country realized there was another issue to resolve – that of stateless children. Per Colombian law, citizenship is not automatically granted to those who are born on their territory and requires that the child’s parents be either citizens or legal residents of Colombia. As Selee and Bolter (2022) explain, this meant that Venezuelan children being born in Colombia were effectively born without a nationality, since “the de facto Venezuelan government no longer has a consulate in the country and the self-declared interim government of Venezuela lacks the ability to issue identity documents.” Thus, in 2019 the Colombian government issued an executive order granting citizenship to all Venezuelan children born in Colombia between August 2015 and August 2021.

While the PEPs offered a faster way of accessing legal status in Colombia than the refugee determination process would have, experts have identified several issues with them. First, there were many different PEPs – between August 2017 and February 2021, the government established 9 PEPs, each with their own timeframes for eligibility and application as well as other eligibility requirements (Selee and Bolter 2021). Some of these eligibility requirements included having a Venezuelan passport, having entered Colombia in a legal manner, or having a clean criminal history – requirements which many Venezuelans could not meet or prove. This meant that even though the PEP would give Venezuelans authorization to work, many could not apply for it and ended up working informally in low-paying jobs. The system was also not set up to help match Venezuelans with job opportunities, making it harder for them to integrate into the labor market. Additionally, the PEPs have typically only been valid for two years and required renewal, and they did not offer a direct path to permanent residency. Del Real (2022) refers to them as “liminal legal programmes” which are fragile and produce illegality among Venezuelan refugees given the confusion regarding their limitations.

In light of these hurdles and with the number of Venezuelans in Colombia continuing to rise, in 2021 the Colombian government implemented a Temporary Statute of Protection for Venezuelans aimed at regularizing the legal statuses of all Venezuelan refugees in the country. It guarantees the issuance of a Temporary Protection Permit (TPP), allowing Venezuelans to legally stay in Colombia for up to 10 years and have access to healthcare, labor markets, and other social services (UNHCR 2021). Unlike the previous PEPs, the 2021 TPP does not have intricate requirements or specified timeframes of entry to determine eligibility, and the only thing Venezuelans need to show is that they already lived in

Colombia when the statute went into effect (Guerrero and Rojas 2022). New arrivals would benefit from this statute if they entered Colombia through regular channels during the following two years. It is expected that at the end of the 10-year duration of the statute, Venezuelans wishing to remain in Colombia will apply for and obtain a residence visa (Embassy of Colombia 2021). The process of registering all Venezuelans already in Colombia who lack legal status still comes with its challenges, though, particularly in disseminating the information to them in the first place, as many Venezuelans are constantly on the move and some live outside the urban centers (Guerrero and Rojas 2022). However, this statute has been heralded as a bold gesture of generosity and referred to as a prime example of humanitarian action for the region and rest of the world (UNHCR 2021).

Today, the majority of Venezuelans in Colombia have been granted some form of temporary protection or special stay permit, with 2.2 out of the 2.5 million Venezuelans in the country having legal status as of February 2023 (R4V 2023). Colombia's ability to adapt its policies and strategies in the face of an unprecedented migration crisis, which overlapped with the COVID-19 pandemic and with the ongoing internal efforts to rebuild the trust and security in their own country, is certainly admirable. It provides a new lens by which to view the possibilities of refugee crisis response and integration, and allows for a reframing of the question of who gets to be a "refugee". While not a flawless system, the Colombian response to Venezuelan refugee migration as it exists today has been largely considered a success by the international community and experts in the field.

Peru Response

Responses to the Venezuelan Exodus have unfortunately not been as receptive in other countries of Latin America, even in those that are signatories to the 1951 Convention and the Cartagena Declaration. Peru is the second-highest receiving country for Venezuelan refugees, hosting approximately 1.5 million Venezuelans as of January 2023 (R4V 2023). Aron and Castillo (2020) argue that the different approaches to Venezuelans refugees in the country from 2017 until now have largely depended on the incumbent president and their leadership style, rather than on available legal instruments or the creation of special residence permits. In 2017, under President Kuczynski's leadership, "[the] government's criticism of the Venezuelan regime translated into regional leadership with the creation of the Lima Group (*Grupo de Lima* in Spanish) on 8 August 2017," which was meant to put pressure on the Venezuelan government to release political prisoners and served as a platform calling for the return of democracy to Venezuela (ibid). In practice, however, the group did not accomplish much in regard to a regional coordinated response to Venezuelan displacement. President Kuczynski's government generally treated Venezuelan refugees with openness but "did not push for the application of existing legal instruments, such as the MERCOSUR Residence Agreement or the refugee definition of the Cartagena Declaration," and instead promulgated the PTP – a temporary resident permit – as a politically viable solution (ibid).

This receptiveness was reversed with the subsequent administration. Under President Vizcarra, not only did the government's response to Venezuelans in the country shift, but the public attitude towards these refugees also turned more hostile and xenophobic. On the administrative side, "the Vizcarra government *de facto* closed its border to Venezuelan immigrants through the implementation of a so-called humanitarian visa, which had to be

applied for outside the country” (Aron and Castillo 2020). The requirements to apply for this visa included a valid passport and a certificate of criminal records which, as mentioned previously, are extremely difficult to acquire given the conditions in Venezuela. Furthermore, a visa appointment was needed in order to apply, and the Peruvian government typically had a two-year backlog for visa applications (ibid).

On the social side of things, as the number of Venezuelans in Peru continued to increase, their presence along with the Vizcarra administration’s position resulted in what Freier and Perez (2021) describe as “spaces of xenophobic discrimination and criminalisation,” which include the media, political discourses, and law enforcement. As the authors’ study showed, in a stark shift from the previous approach of treating Venezuelan refugees as “brothers,” Peruvians began to systematically blame Venezuelans for crime in their country and discriminate against them in the workplace and at schools. These attitudes were also manifested in media and popular discourses, enabling a cycle of xenophobic behavior. In contrast to Colombia’s efforts to provide sanctuary and regularization to all Venezuelan refugees, Peru’s approach as the second-highest receiving country was instead aimed at preventing their legal entry into the country and reducing the aid they had access to once inside. Unfortunately, this was also the approach of other Latin American countries despite their proclaimed commitments to protecting vulnerable populations in the region.

Ecuador Response

Ecuador is the third-highest receiving country for Venezuelan refugees, with roughly half a million Venezuelans residing in the country as of January 2023 (R4V 2023). Although hosting significantly less displaced Venezuelans than neighboring Colombia or Peru, as Malo

(2021) notes, “the relevance of Ecuador as a receiving country for Venezuelans relates to the fact that it has had the most liberal discourse and one of the most progressive legislations.” Indeed, in 2018 Ecuador took a lead in the Quito Process regional initiative, which aimed to “find solutions to Venezuelan displacement across South America...oriented towards facilitating migration from Venezuela” (ibid). In spite of this, Ecuador’s response has been much like Peru’s – initially welcoming Venezuelan refugees with receptive and generous measures, but later implementing restrictive and security-focused policies.

Once Peru implemented a visa requirement for entry, Ecuador followed course in 2018 with a similar visa requirement, along with reforms of current laws to allow for more causes for deportation. With regards to integration, Wolfe et al (2021) found that Venezuelans continually struggled to access labor markets and that “while the Ecuadorian Constitution guarantees universal access to healthcare and education, migrants often face obstacles to accessing them, including a lack of resources and social networks to help facilitate access.” Malo (2021) attributes the changes in approach to the different presidents in office between 2017 and 2021, thus showing once again that regardless of legal instruments available or multilateral agreements in place, what truly determined the receptiveness towards refugees, in this case, was the will of political leaders.

Caribbean Responses: Trinidad and Tobago, Curaçao, Aruba

Although not among the top receiving countries for Venezuelan refugees, the neighboring small island states in the Caribbean are also destinations for displaced Venezuelans. As of mid-2022, Trinidad and Tobago documented approximately 35,000 Venezuelan migrants, Curaçao documented approximately 17,000, and Aruba documented

approximately 14,000 (R4V 2023). Given the relatively small population of these island states, particularly of Aruba (~106,000) and Curaçao (~152,000), this influx of Venezuelan migrants has “created panic among states, who feel ill-equipped to respond to the sudden increase in arrivals” (Jones 2021). There is not currently much literature on the governmental responses to the influx of refugees in island states such as Trinidad and Tobago, Curaçao, and Aruba. However, given their proximity to Venezuela as well as their long history of trade relations and free mobility, it is important to examine how the relatively high number of new arrivals is impacting the islands and their foreign diplomacy.

It would also be of interest to examine whether the activity on these island states, particularly of the challenges and impacts of securing maritime borders, resembles that of the islands in the Mediterranean that are part of EU member states, as arrivals on the Caribbean islands could very well be gateway stops for Venezuelans hoping to reach other locations. For example, as Jones (2021) found, the management approach of Aruba and Curaçao “hinged on containment – detention, deportation and a restrictive entry policy.” Trinidad and Tobago, although signatory to the 1951 Convention, has not recognized Venezuelans as refugees but rather as economic migrants in order to avoid straining relations with the Venezuelan government (ibid). However, they have been more receptive to Venezuelans than Aruba and Curaçao, regularizing approximately 19,000 people in 2019 and thus granting them access to employment, education, and healthcare (Skeete and Juman 2020). Although more research in this area is surely needed, the actions of these island states also point to the idea that the fate of refugees is not necessarily determined by legal instruments in place, but rather the will of state leaders and their foreign policy strategies.

Response Models in the US and Europe

United States Response

Venezuelan refugees who have traveled through North America in hopes of reaching the United States to seek asylum have faced vastly different outcomes than those who have remained in Latin America. At the time of their analysis in 2021, Wolfe et al. reported that since the start of the Venezuelan crisis in 2014, approximately 351,000 Venezuelans have entered the US. Early waves of Venezuelan migration to the US consisted largely of wealthy or middle-class people, and mostly arrived by air with visas. Later waves have largely involved lower class individuals and families with very little resources who make dangerous treks through Central America and Mexico in hopes of reaching the US. Normally, those who traveled by land to seek asylum could do so if they presented themselves to US officials at a port of entry on the US/Mexico border, and would undergo initial screenings to determine the validity of their claims. If their claims were deemed credible, asylum seekers would typically be allowed to remain in the US under parole until their asylum hearings took place.

However, “since January 2019, the Migrant Protection Protocols (MPP) have forced asylum seekers to wait for their US asylum hearings in Mexico” (Wolfe et al. 2021), effectively bypassing the country’s conventional asylum procedures and contradicting its international obligations, while putting asylum seekers in danger by returning them to Mexico. In March 2020, at the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic and under the pretext of protecting public health, the Trump administration closed the border to asylum seekers by invoking the “Title 42” policy (Musalo 2021). These policies affected all asylum seekers reaching the US/Mexico border by effectively stripping them of their right to seek

international protection, and, at the same time, essentially created a humanitarian crisis in the northern and southern border cities of Mexico.

Following the exacerbation of the crisis in Venezuela in 2018, the number of Venezuelans arriving at the southern US border “increased to 49,000 in FY 2021 and almost 188,000 in FY 2022, with nearly 34,000 in September alone” (Bush-Joseph and Chishti 2022). Although the policies mentioned above were implemented during the Trump administration, they have continued during the Biden administration despite the president’s claims to take a different approach than his predecessor. For example, although having actively tried to end Title 42, which enables public health to be used as a pretext for denying access to asylum requests, the Biden administration later expanded the use of this measure of deterrence and returned Venezuelans, along with migrants from other countries, to Mexico (Aleaziz and Subramanian 2023). Most of these thousands of asylum seekers have resided in makeshift camps along the border’s points of entry at Tijuana/San Diego, Juarez/El Paso, and Matamoros/Brownsville.

Given the United States’ stance on Venezuelan foreign policy and its recognition of the situation in Venezuela as a humanitarian crisis, in October 2022 the Biden administration implemented a special parole program that would allow “up to 24,000 Venezuelans who have a financial sponsor in the United States and arrive via airplane” to enter the country (Chishti and Bush-Joseph 2022). In order to be eligible, Venezuelans must not have been forcibly removed from the US in the past five years nor have entered the US, Mexico, or Panama irregularly after the new policy was announced. Logistically, the application process requires that “Venezuelans must have a valid passport and apply for the program online. Accepted applicants will be allowed to travel to the United States by air, paroled in for a period of two

years, and able to apply for work authorization” (ibid). While seemingly a more streamlined process, this new policy nonetheless creates barriers in terms of access and lacks a durable solution for the thousands of Venezuelans who are granted parole once their two-year period comes to an end.

As of May 2023, the Biden administration lifted the COVID-era Title 42, which thousands of asylum-seekers at the US/Mexico border interpreted as an open-door policy from the US government. They are now able to present themselves once again to border officials and identify themselves as asylum seekers, and after they are registered, they are able to remain in the US while they wait for their asylum hearings (NPR 2023). News coverage showed that thousands of asylum-seekers, many of whom were women, children, and elderly individuals, were preparing to cross the border into the US to make their plea for asylum. However, although federal officials are prepared to receive them, the governor of the state of Texas has deployed their state police forces to block and deter entry. Thus, even with seemingly welcoming asylum policies in place, these recent occurrences highlight the tensions and complications that arise as a result of opposing views and decisions of leaders. At this time, in the wake of Title 42, the situation regarding asylum-seekers on the US/Mexico border and in the country is still evolving.

The United States has had a more active role in supporting the displaced Venezuelan population through humanitarian and financial aid provided to states in Latin America and the Caribbean. Wolfe et al. (2021) find that, “since 2017, the United States has provided roughly \$611 million for Venezuelan refugees in Argentina, Aruba, Brazil, the Caribbean, Chile, Colombia, Costa Rica, Curacao, Dominican Republic, Ecuador, Guyana, Mexico, Panama, Paraguay, Peru and Trinidad and Tobago, Uruguay, and Venezuela,” meant to

support the provision of food, shelter, medicine, and other infrastructure needed to aid Venezuelan refugees. Some scholars would argue that offering significant monetary aid to the front-line refugee-receiving countries is a more effective way for countries in the global North to support mass displacement in the global South. Indeed, Betts and Collier (2018, 129) find that “the world spends approximately \$75bn a year on the 10 per cent of refugees who moved to developed regions and only around \$5bn a year on the 90 per cent who remain in developing regions.” They argue that if just some of those funds were reallocated to front-line states, it would have a much bigger impact on support for refugees.

As the amount of funding provided by the US to Latin America and the Caribbean show, there are significant funds available to offer protection to displaced persons – the question is how state leaders choose to utilize them. The US and the EU have also spent a substantial amount of money on their border security and deterrence measures, which could be reallocated more usefully to support front-line states or refugee integration in their own territories. However, as has commonly been the case in the US and the EU, providing monetary support should not mean directly or indirectly closing doors to asylum seekers. While there may not be one perfect solution to the situation of thousands of asylum seekers from Latin America attempting to find sanctuary in the US, comparisons have certainly been drawn between the US approach towards Latin Americans and its approach towards other groups of asylum seekers such as Afghans or Ukrainians, highlighting the differences in receptiveness (Musalo 2021; Bush-Joseph and Chishti 2022). Regardless of country of origin and of other temporary stay permits made available, it is crucial for the US to uphold its international responsibilities as a signatory of the 1951 Convention of providing access to its asylum system in a way that does not endanger or criminalize asylum seekers in the process.

European Union Response

Like the US and in the aftermath of the “European refugee crisis,” the EU’s priorities also seem to be preventing mass numbers of refugees from reaching its borders. As Tsourdi (2021) put it, “the EU’s approach to refugee protection has entailed protection hand in hand with deflection.” The outsourcing of maritime border security and the continued use of detention centers along the Mediterranean as deterrents to irregular migration have long been documented, as have the failures of the Common European Asylum System in ensuring fair responsibility-sharing of refugees among member states (ibid). Nonetheless, dire circumstances in refugee-producing countries such as Afghanistan and Iran (among others) have led to continuous irregular and dangerous journeys to Europe, as is evident in the most recent boat tragedy that left 60 people dead who were bound for Italy (BBC 2023). Yet, as the mass influx of millions of Ukrainian refugees during the last year demonstrates, Europe does have the capacity and resources to offer emergency aid and temporary protective status to people who are fleeing their homes (UNHCR 2023).

Also like the United States, the European Union as a region has mainly addressed the Venezuelan Exodus by providing humanitarian aid to the front-line states. The EU, the EU Development Bank, and individual member states have together contributed more than €600 million as of 2021 (Wolfe et al. 2021). Those Venezuelans who have made it to Europe have mainly headed to Spain, as can be expected given the shared language between the two countries. As of the end of 2022 there were approximately 438,400 total Venezuelans living in Spain (R4V 2023), most of whom have migrated since 2016. However, although Spain acknowledges that there is a humanitarian crisis in Venezuela, Venezuelan nationals living in Spain are treated as economic migrants, and very rarely are asylum claims granted (Godino

and Barrientos 2021). Thus, while Venezuelans who arrive in Spain are not barred from entering the country (most enter as tourists and overstay their permitted duration), their opportunities in the labor market are very limited. Furthermore, since most are not recognized as asylum seekers, they also do not qualify for government or international assistance. While there is not much data available on the specific efforts by the Spanish government to aid and help integrate Venezuelan migrants, this is an area that certainly deserves more attention. Spain is now among the top countries in the world to receive Venezuelans (R4V 2023), essentially shaping a new trans-continental diaspora of Venezuelans.

Conclusion

Although the response models of different countries in Latin America to the Venezuelan refugee crisis have yielded varying results, countries have for the most part allowed Venezuelan refugees to remain on their territories, whether legally or illegally, without forcing them to return home, thus upholding the key principle of non-refoulement enshrined in the 1951 Convention and the Cartagena Declaration. What the information presented in this chapter shows is that there is no single, one-size-fits-all approach to addressing the needs of displaced populations, especially when the amount of people displaced reaches millions – nor should this necessarily be the goal. What is crucial, however, is to avoid infringing on the fundamental and internationally-recognized right to seek asylum by implementing physical or legal barriers, and to consistently uphold the principle of non-refoulement. Asylum seekers must be able to at least plead their cases, and then state officials can decide whether or not to grant them refugee status.

On the other hand, as some of the cases in this chapter showed, it can sometimes be more efficient and effective to implement strategies that work best for individual states, while still maintaining communication and coordination with others in the region. The Venezuelan Exodus has demonstrated the positive outcomes that arise when there is consistent will to provide aid to those in need, regardless of which legal mechanisms are used. The response by Colombia, carried out over multiple presidential administrations, has proven to be a success story made possible outside the legal frameworks of existing regional and global refugee regimes. It has demonstrated how a country who itself is recovering from ongoing domestic turmoil is able to provide emergency aid, legal residence status, and integration initiatives for millions of displaced people. Another example of a generally positive response to this displaced population will be presented in the following chapter, which closely examines the response to the Venezuelan Exodus by the Brazilian government. Through an in-depth analysis based on extensive research of existing literature as well as five months of participant observation in the field, I explain how the Brazilian response presents a unique case study as a model that has been coordinated primarily by the Armed Forces, and which redefines the concepts of refugeedom, resettlement, and humanitarianism.

IV. Brazil's Operação Acolhida as a Military-Humanitarian Response

Introduction

Brazil's Operação Acolhida represents a unique way of managing a large-scale migration crisis and offering refuge to thousands of people fleeing their homes in a non-wartime situation. In this strong case of state commitment, Venezuelan refugees were recognized, sheltered, accepted for resettlement in a front-line host state, and a state actor was designated to the task. In 2018, a Humanitarian Logistics Task Force was assembled to launch and manage this operation in response to the thousands of Venezuelans that were entering Brazil's northern border each day, attempting to escape unlivable conditions in Venezuela (Moulin Aguiar and Magalhães 2020). Led by the Brazilian Armed Forces (BAF) as a military operation in response to a humanitarian crisis, Operação Acolhida provides a unique military-humanitarian model for managing a massive influx of refugees in which the armed forces, international organizations, domestic non-governmental organizations, and civil society all work together to provide immediate aid to refugees with the goal of eventually resettling them in other parts of the country.

To contextualize the logic behind Operação Acolhida, the first part of this chapter will trace the trajectory of Brazil's refugee laws, and will then provide information on past instances in which the BAF have been assigned to missions in civilian, peacetime environments. The next section will present a detailed overview of the mission and structure of Operação Acolhida based on five months of field work in Boa Vista, Brazil, in addition to available literature. The final section will assess what I consider to be the gaps in the operation's ability to fulfill its mission of receiving, sheltering, and relocating Venezuelan refugees, as well as the existing challenges to resolving these gaps. Based on my findings, I

conclude that overall, Operação Acolhida has been generally successful in meeting its mandate and that Venezuelan refugees potentially have better opportunities in Brazil in comparison to other countries. However, I also advise that this military-humanitarian model of managing a refugee crisis and its lasting legacy must be more carefully examined before attempting to implement it elsewhere.

Background: Contemporary Refugee Law and Peacetime Military Missions in Brazil

Brazil has traditionally been a country that welcomes refugees from various regions with a receptive approach and favorable policies for protection. The 1997 Brazilian Refugee Act was the first comprehensive refugee law in South America (Fischel de Andrade and Marcolini 2002). Inspired by the 1984 Cartagena Declaration, this legislation expanded the traditional definition of refugee under the 1951 Convention by adding that an individual shall be recognized as a refugee if “due to severe and generalized violation of human rights, he or she is compelled to leave his or her country of nationality to seek refuge in a different country” (Brazil Refugee Act, 1997). At the time of enactment, most of the refugees entering Brazil were arriving mainly from Angola and Liberia. By 2002, “2,700 families from 47 countries currently have legal refugee status in Brazil,” of which most were African, particularly from Angola and West Africa, and also included Iraqis and citizens from the former Yugoslavia (Fischel de Andrade and Marcolini 2002). Therefore, although based on the language proposed in the Cartagena Declaration aimed to offer more protections to displaced people within Latin America, Brazil’s original refugee law offered protections to those arriving from several overseas countries outside the region, keeping in line with Latin America’s long-standing tradition of welcoming foreign refugees.

In the aftermath of a collapsed military dictatorship and a return to civilian democratic rule, the enactment of legislation such as the 1997 Refugee Act can arguably be seen as an attempt by Brazil's government at the time to try to reconcile with its past human rights abuses. This follows a pattern of attempts to rectify past behavior by the authoritarian states in Latin America which we continue to see today, specifically within the context of Colombia. Following the 1997 Refugee Act, Brazil reiterated its commitment to protecting refugees via the 2000 Rio de Janeiro Declaration on the Protection of Refugees, the 2004 Mexico Declaration and Plan of Action to Strengthen the International Protection of Refugees in Latin America, the 2010 Brasilia Declaration on the Protection of Refugees and Stateless Persons in the Americas, the 2012 Fortaleza Mercosul Declaration of Principles on the International Protection of Refugees, and the 2014 Brazil Declaration *A Framework for Cooperation and Regional Solidarity to Strengthen the International Protection of Refugees, Displaced and Stateless Persons in Latin America and the Caribbean* and respective Plan of Action (Fischel de Andrade 2019).

In 2013, due to a high increase in arrivals of Syrians fleeing the conflict, Brazil established a special humanitarian visa that would grant Syrians entry to Brazil and subsequently allow them to apply for asylum through a fast-track process (Calegari and Baeninger 2019). This resolution was renewed and expanded in 2015 and 2017, setting the stage for the adoption of Brazil's most recent Migration Law 13.445/17, which "brings the concept of 'humanitarian hosting' both as one of its principles (article 3, VI) and as a basis for visas to Brazil (article 14, I, c)" (Silva and Jubilut 2018). Passed at a time in which Brazil was starting to see significant increases in Venezuelan immigration, the 2017 Migration Law would provide the framework by which Venezuelans' legal status would be "regularized" via

a fast-track process, enabling them to obtain temporary residency in the country along with the right to work, receive healthcare, and attend public schools.

Separately, particularly during the last two decades, the Brazilian Armed Forces (BAF) became involved with several non-combat missions aimed at peacekeeping and restoring order, namely its peacekeeping mission in Haiti. From 2004-2017, generals of the Brazilian Army led the military component of the United Nations' stabilization mission in Haiti, also known as MINUSTAH, aimed at restoring stability and combating gang control following the 2004 coup d'etat (Schuberth 2019). A vast literature exists that analyzes the benefits and the negative effects that the Brazilian Army brought to Haiti. However, what is certain is that during the extensive time that the BAF operated in Haiti, the institution was able to test and assess strategies for leading non-wartime, humanitarian missions in civilian environments, in coordination with civil society organizations. Indeed, some argue that the BAF used Haiti as a training ground and laboratory that would allow them to gain tactical and operational knowledge which could be implemented at home (ibid). While the primary goal of the mission was to destabilize armed groups that had gained control of certain areas and were perpetuating violence, the BAF also participated in projects such as "food distribution and medical assistance activities, the refurbishing of schools and damaged buildings, and entertainment events in schools and orphanages" (Santos and Siman 2022). These projects were aimed at (re)gaining trust from the civilian population and set precedent for further missions involving civilian-military coordination and cooperation in Brazil.

The other high-profile mission conducted by the BAF in civilian environments is the pacification of gang-controlled favelas (slums) in Rio de Janeiro, particularly those that were conducted starting in 2010 in anticipation of the 2014 World Cup and the 2016 Olympics.

While the responsibility to police urban areas normally falls on the country's military police division, the BAF were deployed to the favelas to take control from violent drug lords and bring stability to the residents, which the military police (not affiliated with the armed forces) had been unable to do. As Savell (2016) summarizes, "Where the police had failed, that is, the army stepped in to provide a pathway for success," with tactical knowledge and better equipment making the BAF better suited to carry out these missions. While the implications of the pacifying missions have been extensively documented and debated elsewhere, the purpose of mentioning them here is to elaborate on the BAF's trajectory in managing crises that would typically fall under the responsibility of civilian bodies. This has helped them create an image of themselves as humanitarian actors while distancing themselves from the violence of the past dictatorship and the abuses of the current police bodies. One example of the BAF's attempts to build this image is the use of blue baseball caps in the favelas, which were "the color of United Nations (UN) blue helmets, suggesting their presence was akin to Brazil's UN peacekeeping mission in Haiti" (ibid). The BAF have also been deployed for missions to secure elections, provide disaster relief, and fight fires in the Amazon (Santos and Siman 2022).

Given this context, it should be of little surprise that the BAF were tasked with managing the large-scale refugee crisis that manifested on Brazil's northern border. The BAF's tactical and operational experience in civilian missions paired with Brazil's historically progressive refugee and migration laws have resulted in a relatively successful response to the unprecedented numbers of Venezuelans refugees who have fled to Brazil. Brazil was the first country in South America (and second in Latin America after Mexico) to employ the Cartagena Declaration to extend refugee protections to Venezuelan citizens, and

also followed the model of simplifying and fast-tracking the process for determining refugee claims that had been previously implemented for Syrian refugees. In continuing its tradition of being a leader in establishing comprehensive refugee legislation and good practices, Brazil has earned praise for its efforts in welcoming and integrating Venezuelan refugees into its society and labor force.

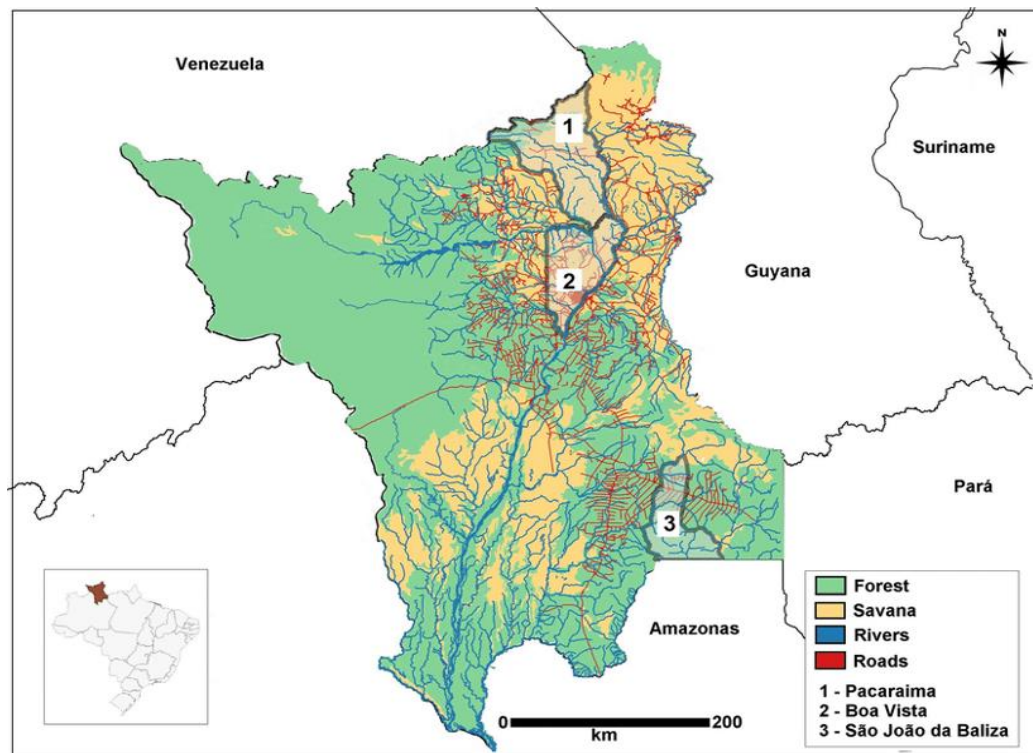
As of 2022, Brazil was hosting about 439,395 Venezuelans, making up 78% of Brazil's refugees, asylum-seekers, and "others needing international protection" (UNHCR 2022). Venezuelans made up the largest "population of concern" for UNHCR in Brazil, followed by Haitians (37,235), Cubans (15,884), and Syrians (7,803). Brazil's integration efforts through Operação Acolhida have been noteworthy, particularly in relocating Venezuelan refugees from the border region to one of various cities across the country, thus alleviating the burden from the region alone of providing already limited resources to new refugees. Led by the BAF, Operação Acolhida is formally described as a "large-scale humanitarian task force," executed and coordinated with the support of UN agencies and more than 100 civil society entities (Moulin Aguiar and Magalhães 2020). The following section will provide a detailed overview of Operação Acolhida based on existing literature and on field research conducted in Boa Vista, Roraima between August - December 2022

Operação Acolhida - Mission and Structure

Venezuelans were already exiting their country en masse by 2016, fleeing to neighboring countries to escape economic instability and political persecution (Moulin Aguiar and Magalhães 2020). Although Brazil is the fifth-highest destination country for Venezuelan refugees, the number of people entering Brazil through its northern border, in the

state of Roraima, began to put a great strain on the relatively low-populated region with limited economic resources (Freier and Doña-Reveco 2022). In the capital city of Boa Vista, which is about 213 km south of the border city of Pacaraima (shown in Figure 1), homelessness became rampant and easily visible on its city streets, and crime reportedly increased significantly (de Oliveira 2018). There was no initial government response to this unfolding crisis in Boa Vista, and religious organizations were the ones providing whatever limited aid they could to refugees who made it to their doorstep. I was told in an informal interview that it was those religious organizations who began to sound the alarm and contact their counterparts in other cities around the country to push for a coordinated government response to Venezuelan refugees in the northern border region (Interview with humanitarian worker, August 20, 2022). UNHCR began operating in Boa Vista in 2017, carrying out the first missions of opening shelters and beginning talks with federal entities (UNHCR 2022).

Figure 1: Map of Roraima including cities and landscape. Source: Malaria Journal, January 2022



During the initial years of the crisis from 2016-2018, Venezuelans in Roraima suffered from acts of violence as a result of xenophobia (de Oliveira 2018). As the crisis in Venezuela worsened and more people fled to Brazil by the thousands, Brazilians reportedly began to have less tolerance for these migrants, seeing them as the reason for scarcity of resources and work opportunities. Because of these acts of violence that demonstrated the vulnerability of the Venezuelan migrant population, and due to the pressure by religious organizations calling for a coordinated government response, in March 2018 the Brazilian government established the military-based Humanitarian Logistics Task Force, charged with overseeing all aspects Operação Acolhida (de Oliveira 2018). Best translated as “Operation Shelter” and often referred to simply as “the operation,” Operação Acolhida is the coordinated military operation launched in response to the Venezuelan refugee crisis led by the Brazilian Armed Forces (BAF), primarily the Army but also including members of the Brazilian Airforce and Marines. In partnership with UNHCR and other international organizations, federal agencies, domestic NGOs, and other civil society groups, the BAF assumed leadership in managing all logistics of receiving Venezuelans at the border in the city of Pacaraima, providing immediate aid and shelter in the cities of Pacaraima and Boa Vista, and working to eventually relocate Venezuelans on a voluntary basis from these border cities to other cities across the country.

My experience in the field as a participant observer provided me with first-hand insights into the structure of Operação Acolhida. I spent four months volunteering for the organization Refúgio 343, which works to help relocate individuals and families to other parts of the country through work opportunities, family reunifications, social reunifications, and volunteer sponsors, while also providing educational opportunities such as language,

skill-building, and technical courses. During my time as a volunteer, I mainly helped with the administrative procedures of relocation for individuals and families. Refúgio 343's field office is located at the Posto de Interiorização e Triagem (post for interiorization and triage), more commonly referred to as the PITRIG, in Boa Vista. This opportunity not only enabled me to have direct contact with Venezuelan refugees, but also provided opportunities to speak with members of other organizations (both international and domestic) and with military officials, allowing me to view the operation from various perspectives. To provide an analysis of the strengths and shortcomings of Operação Acolhida based on my experience on-site, the following is a brief overview of the flow of operations that takes place from the moment Venezuelan migrants cross the Brazil/Venezuela border at Pacaraima.

Operational Flow

During my visit to the small border town of Pacaraima, I saw first-hand the flow of operations that takes place in response to migrants arriving from Venezuela. Under the guidance of the Army Colonel responsible for all aspects of Operação Acolhida in Pacaraima, I visited the Reception and Identification Post (PRI), the PITRIG, and shelter BV-8, all of which are located about 500 feet from the border along the BR-174 highway. Once migrants approach officials outside the PRI, and before they enter the facilities, they are assessed for nationality, purpose of entry, and vaccine status. Those who enter Brazil and are not Venezuelans seeking refuge are directed either to Federal Police (for temporary/tourist permits) or to UNHCR (for those of other nationalities seeking asylum). Venezuelans who are seeking refuge are then assessed for vaccinations required for entry and are provided with the vaccines at that moment if they do not have them. After this, they are allowed inside the

PRI for assistance with documentation. At this step, if any children or adolescents have arrived unaccompanied by parents, UNICEF officials are assigned to guide them through the entire process of documentation and finding shelter or family reunifications.

Once Venezuelans arrive in the PRI, they are provided with a temporary identification called the *Protocolo* so that regardless of documents they arrived with or which they lack, they have valid identification in Brazil for all future purposes. Here, they are also assisted with creating a SUS (*Sistema Único de Saúde*) account, which gives them access to the Brazilian national health system and a temporary card showing their identification number. Once registered with SUS, anyone can go to a public health clinic or emergency room to receive care at no cost. Other steps that are taken at the PRI are to provide Venezuelans with any other vaccines not necessarily required for entry, to provide any other immediate care or medications that they may need, and to identify those who are Indigenous refugees from Venezuela and advise them accordingly, as some procedures and shelter options differ for them. For example, they may need a translator if they do not speak Spanish and their process may be delayed, they are directed to shelters which only house Indigenous refugees, and they are provided with information about organizations in Boa Vista that specifically assist Indigenous communities (both local and migrant).

After concluding the arrival procedures at the PRI, which correspond to the first pillar (border management & reception) of the operation (Silva & Fontenele 2021), Venezuelans are directed to the PITRIG of Pacaraima located in the same vicinity. The PITRIG in Pacaraima and the PITRIG in Boa Vista, where I worked, serve as the main hub for assistance for most of the things that Venezuelans could need after their initial arrival. Both PITRIGs are coordinated and staffed by the army and have field offices for other government

agencies such as the Federal Police and the Federal Revenue Service, as well as field offices for international organizations such as UNHCR, IOM, Red Cross, UNICEF, and UNFPA. In addition, several domestic Brazilian NGOs also have field offices at the PITRIGs and these could vary between the two locations, but the most common ones were the Association of Volunteers in International Service (AVSI-Brazil), the Pan-American Development Foundation (PADF), World Vision Brazil, Refúgio 343, and others. A full list of the partner organizations who work with Operação Acolhida is provided in the appendix.

At the PITRIGs, there are daily “chats” that take place first thing each morning where members of IOM, UNHCR, or AVSI present on what it means to apply for residency under Brazil’s migration law 13.445 of 2017 (Silva & Fontenele 2021), and what it means to apply for asylum and obtain refugee status. They are then assisted by either IOM for residency procedures or UNHCR for asylum procedures. During these chats, Venezuelans are also advised on how to obtain a CPF (national taxpayer number), how to obtain an employment record card, how to obtain a long-term spot in a shelter, how to begin a relocation process and the different types of relocation procedures available, and other topics that help introduce refugees to life as residents in Brazil. Providing meals, housing in a shelter, and assistance with documentation needed for integration corresponds to the second pillar (sheltering) of the operation (ibid). It should be noted that shelter in Pacaraima is meant to be only temporary, and there is a 30-day limit on the time Venezuelans can be housed in one of the two shelters before they either leave voluntarily or are relocated to one of the shelters in Boa Vista. The shelters in Boa Vista, currently five of them but initially including up to nine) provide long-term accommodations. The one exception is the Post for Reception and Shelter (PRA), which serves only as an immediate and temporary place for lodging and meals where bed spaces are

assigned on a nightly basis and Venezuelans are required to leave during the day, returning only for lunch and at night for sleep.

Not all Venezuelans who enter Brazil at Pacaraima move through the operation's flow there, however, and many instead travel directly to Boa Vista to handle all matters. Many Venezuelans entering for the first time may already have family or friends living in Boa Vista and have the means to travel directly to the capital to meet them, bypassing the aid provided in Pacaraima. Others who arrive in Pacaraima late in the day may stay there for lodging and meals their first night, but head to Boa Vista the next day after receiving their required vaccines and initial identification (Protocolo), planning to take care of the rest of their documentation in Boa Vista. In yet other cases, Venezuelans may have family members living in or near the city of Manaus in the neighboring state of Amazonas, which also shares a border with Venezuela and where there is also a PITRIG, and may choose to travel directly there to handle their documentation procedures. Venezuelans could technically also enter Brazil through the Venezuela/Amazonas border, but this is significantly less likely as the route from Venezuela to Amazonas is much more difficult since it is located in the Amazon rainforest. Nonetheless, Operação Acolhida has facilities set up in Manaus since it is the next-largest city that Venezuelans could reach after they enter Brazil. Therefore, it is not required to go through every step of the operation at the border in Pacaraima, and Venezuelan refugees have some autonomy in choosing how, when, and where they receive assistance.

Relocation (“Interiorization”)

The third and final pillar of the operation is relocation (Silva & Fontenele 2021), in Portuguese translating to “interiorization” and sometimes also referred to as resettlement. Due to the high number of Venezuelans arriving in Boa Vista in the early years of the crisis, the Brazilian government included this pillar in its mandate and considers it crucial to the success of the operation, relieving the northern region of Roraima from having to alone handle the burden of such an increase in population without sufficient resources or economic opportunities (Moulin Aguiar and Magalhães 2020). The relocation aspect of Operação Acolhida relies on the voluntary participation of Venezuelan refugees, again giving them autonomy as to whether they want to remain in the northern region of Roraima or if they want assistance in relocating to another city in Brazil. The operation oversees five different types of relocation procedures:

- **Family Reunifications (RF):** in the cases where individuals or families in Boa Vista or Pacaraima already have immediate family members in another city, and in which the family members are able to show proof that they can sponsor them for at least 3 months providing lodging, meals, and assistance finding work and school vacancies, the operation will provide transportation to get the individuals or families from Roraima to the new city.
- **Social Reunifications (RS):** logistically functioning the same as family reunifications, social reunifications represent those cases in which individuals or families in Boa Vista or Pacaraima have extended family members or friends in other cities who are

able and willing to host them. The documentation needed from the sponsors in order for the operation to assist is basically the same as that of family reunifications. The only difference here is the categorization of cases for administrative purposes, and perhaps in some cases family reunifications may be prioritized over social reunifications.

- **Employment Opportunities (Vagas de Emprego Sinalizadas or VES):** in the cases where a company that has partnered with the operation has employment opportunities available, they will inform their contacts in the Center for Coordination of Interiorization (CCI) at the PITRIG in Boa Vista. Relocations for employment opportunities are only conducted out of Boa Vista and not Pacaraima due to the extended logistics that they require. The companies will inform staff in the CCI of the number of openings available, the profile for the type of employees they are looking for, and the deadline by which they hope to hire for these positions. Staff in CCI will then either take on the case themselves or hand it over to one of the NGOs that also work with relocation. Refúgio 343 was one such NGO, and as such while I volunteered there, I was able to participate first-hand in the recruitment of employees, in job interviews with company representatives, in discussions regarding selection of employees, in the collection and organization of documentation needed for hiring, and in the pre-departure orientations given to new hires at the PITRIG.
- **Institutional Relocation:** in these cases, the Brazilian Armed Forces help relocate individuals and families from shelters in Boa Vista to shelters or halfway-houses in

other cities that they partner with. The refugees leave Boa Vista without a job guaranteed and without known hosts willing to sponsor them, but they volunteer for institutional relocation to try to find better opportunities themselves once in their new cities. Many of these refugees may have not had any luck with VES opportunities and do not have any family or friends in other cities, but still wish to leave Boa Vista in search for better opportunities, especially if they also have not had luck finding non-shelter housing and work opportunities in Boa Vista. Army officials typically wait until there is a designated number of refugees volunteering for institutional relocation and will then pay for transportation on full buses or on chartered flights. In some cases, the Brazilian Air Force also provides transportation on its transport planes.

- **Voluntary Sponsors:** in these instances, although much less common than the other relocation options, private citizens across Brazil can volunteer as hosts for Venezuelan refugees and offer to sponsor them in their cities for six months. Sponsors are responsible for finding adequate housing for the refugees they are receiving and to pay for their housing and meals for the first three months. They are also responsible for assisting the refugees with finding employment, registering children in schools, helping them get to know the city, and generally serve as a resource and first point of contact for their needs. After the first three months, the refugees are responsible for paying for their own housing and meals, as it is expected that they would have found employment by this point. However, the sponsor is still responsible for providing assistance for the remainder of the six-month period. The CCI in Boa Vista typically does not take on these cases, but Refúgio 343 does work

with voluntary sponsors and thus I was able to witness two cases of families who were being relocated to cities with the assistance of sponsors.

In each of these types of relocation procedures, regardless of which unit or organization works with the refugees in question and regardless of where they are being relocated to, it is the Brazilian Army who eventually approves the relocation and who organizes and pays for the transportation. At least one member of the army will accompany refugees during any travel by land and to their boarding location for their flights. Upon arrival in their new cities or in a connecting city where they will switch to ground transportation, members of the army who are stationed in these areas will greet the refugees and accompany them to their next location, until they arrive at their final destination. The army also provides any meals needed along the way during long journeys and a transportation kit with hygiene products and throw blankets prior to departure. The role of the Brazilian Army in coordinating all logistics for relocation ensures that refugees in transit are provided with assistance if needed and that the army officials can work quickly to resolve any potential logistical issues encountered along the way.

Although the idea of members of the armed forces being present in every step of the operation and specifically in the stage of relocation could raise concerns, it should be noted that officials assigned to work with Operação Acolhida, regardless of where they are stationed, are always unarmed and have been trained specifically in how to work on a peacetime humanitarian mission (Interview with Refúgio 343 member, December 14, 2022). Thus, from my observations and from interviews with NGO staff and refugees themselves, there have been few issues of safety or security between refugees and members of the

military. Refugees who expressed safety-related concerns due to the presence of the armed forces were those of Indigenous ethnicities, which I will describe more in the next section.

Operação Acolhida - Challenges and Observations

Although there were significant difficulties affecting Venezuelan refugees as well as the population of Boa Vista in the early years of the refugee crisis, both before Operação Acolhida and during its initial period, I believe that the operation has evolved significantly to adequately address most of those challenges. Much of the early literature written about the Brazilian response to Venezuelan migration reported many instances of violence by local police and civilians, discrimination in hiring, exploitation in the workplace, and people living on the streets which, particularly at the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic, led to heightened concerns about health and sanitation. Several of the Venezuelans I spoke with did mention issues related to obtaining jobs, working conditions, and unfair employer practices. However, these are jobs that are obtained independently by Venezuelans in Boa Vista, over which the operation does not have any jurisdiction. While Venezuelan refugees still, of course, face many difficulties on a daily basis, at the time of my fieldwork I observed that Operação Acolhida works to ensure that they are at least treated with dignity and respect by government officials and NGO staff, and that at the least their basic needs such as shelter, nutrition, and health are provided for.

Some of the issues that refugees still experience include the lack of long-term housing for those who have not been able to secure a spot in one of the shelters in Boa Vista. For these refugees, nightly accommodations are still available at the Post for Reception and Shelter (PRA), but many who I spoke to mentioned security concerns as well as logistical

aspects that hindered their ability to find daily work in Boa Vista. For example, regarding security, several refugees spoke about being worried that their young or adolescent children would experience aggression or sexual assault, especially if they were new to PRA. Because the PRA has beds set up in a covered, but not closed or divided, outdoor space, refugees sleep in close proximity to others and thus these concerns arise. Additionally, during one interview with the mother of a teenager, she shared that upon arriving at the PRA, a small group of other Venezuelans who saw them arrive made inappropriate and seemingly threatening comments as the mother and her daughter walked by. Other refugees who were staying at the PRA also mentioned concerns they had of fellow Venezuelans, such as having their belongings stolen or encountering violence from those who had been known criminals in Venezuela while they were outside the PRA. Thus, from most of my conversations with refugees regarding safety and security, I concluded that most of the issues that they had experienced were with other Venezuelan refugees and not Brazilian officials or private citizens.

There have also been several articles written reporting on labor exploitation that Venezuelan refugees have faced, going as far as comparing their working conditions to slave-like labor. A 2021 investigation conducted by the Thomson Reuters Foundation found that several companies that had hired Venezuelans refugees through Operação Acolhida were being investigated for violating workers' rights. In a statement by one refugee previously employed by a trucking company, he shared that he "and other Venezuelans were forced to work illegally long hours, up to 18-hour days, denied time off and made to sleep in their trucks" (Thomson Reuters, 2021). Several other types of violations were documented and

although Operação Acolhida has a vetting process for hiring companies, it can be difficult to monitor their practices once refugees have been relocated, as Professor Jarochinski Silva from the Federal University of Roraima noted (Interview, September 29, 2022).

Separately, Custódio and Cabral (2021) have written about child labor among Venezuelan refugees. They cite a study conducted by the IOM in 2018 in which they found that, out of 425 adults who were responsible for children or adolescents, 16 responded that at some point the child or adolescent had worked informally (keeping in mind that these individuals could have several children). Some of the informal work that was done by these children included masonry, gardening, or kitchen help, street vending, housekeeping, and mechanics (Custódio and Cabral 2021). It was common for those who were interviewed to report that they or their children had experienced insufficient compensation or withholding of payments altogether, as well as bad treatment and xenophobia. However, this research was focused on child labor that occurred outside of Operação Acolhida's scope of control, as the interviewees were people who were living outside the operation's shelters in places of transit or informal settlements. The authors also documented all of the legal tools utilized by the Brazilian government to help combat child labor and labor exploitation of those living in refuge. Some of these policies involve adherence to international conventions on child protections such as the 1989 Convention on the Rights of the Child, while children and adolescents are also protected by Brazil's constitutional rights and current labor rights legislation, as well as other recent domestic initiatives such as The III National Plan for the Prevention and Eradication of Child Labor and Protection of Adolescent Workers (2019-2022).

By the time of my fieldwork, my observations showed that those working for Operação Acolhida on relocation, including government agencies and NGOs, made significant efforts to vet the companies they were partnering with to recruit for employment opportunities, and that they ended partnerships with those they deemed not suitable for the operation's mission. The companies that I observed Refúgio 343 working with, in particular, were companies that the organization had already worked with for some time and had built close relationships with. Furthermore, part of Refúgio 343's work is to continue monitoring the integration of relocated refugees in their new cities for three months after they departed through periodic calls with them. Prior to departure, refugees are also given orientations to explain the expectations of workers in Brazil as well as workers' rights and benefits, striving to ensure that refugees are familiar with their rights before they arrive at their place of employment. At times, there are also site visits that occur to enable members of NGOs to visit the places of employment where they are sending refugees, in an effort by the companies to be transparent about their working conditions. I was shown video and photo content of one such visit made by Refúgio 343 staff earlier in 2022 to a food processing facility, VIBRA, in southern Brazil, which is one of the main companies that the operation partners with.

While the Army's role in relocation procedures is mainly to approve individual and group relocations and organize all of the transportation logistics, they do also have a role in vetting the companies that the operation partners with. I do not have all of the specifics on initial screening, but I know that companies are required to submit documents and records to the Army that show overviews of their operations, data on employees including rates of

retention, and tax information. From what I understand, once communication between members of the operation (either NGOs or Army) and a company is established, a representative from the hiring company must travel to Boa Vista at least once to meet with members of the Army and other key leaders in the operation, both for the Army to get to know more about the company and for the company to learn more about the situation of Venezuelans in Brazil. Sometimes, a representative of a company may be stationed in Boa Vista for an extended period of time if they anticipate hiring more groups of refugees, in which case they work alongside members of the Army at the PITRIG. In the pre-departure stage, an Army Captain is responsible for ensuring the legitimacy of contracts being signed between the employer and employee, ensures that employees are being offered compensation that is at least the federal minimum wage, and verifies that employees will indeed have temporary room and board provided by the company upon arrival (as is the arrangement in most cases). Once refugees have been relocated, NGOs or other government agencies who worked on each case provide the Army with reports once they conduct their follow-up calls with the refugees and company leadership. Lastly, the Army takes recommendations from the NGOs who work on relocation for work opportunities should they deem a company is no longer suitable as an opportunity provider for Venezuelan refugees.

Finally, there are issues of integration specific to Indigenous refugees who have migrated from Venezuelan territory, which stem both from Operação Acolhida as well as Brazilian society. Yamada et al (2018) explain that Indigenous migrant groups from Venezuela, and particularly the Warao people which make up the largest Indigenous migrant group in Brazil, embody the two unique characteristics of being Indigenous migrants and being Indigenous peoples living in urban contexts. These two characteristics place

Indigenous migrants in an exceptionally challenging position in Roraima, as they would typically not be legally differentiated from non-indigenous Venezuelan nationals, and as the humanitarian aid provided to them is only available in the urban center of Boa Vista – two arrangements which greatly differ from their traditional ways of living. Furthermore, since Indigenous migrants live, migrate, and make decisions as communities, they typically do not desire to participate in Operação Acolhida’s opportunities for relocation, as those opportunities are usually for individuals or small families and as those opportunities would put them at a great distance from their communities. Therefore, Indigenous refugees from Venezuela face discrimination from much of the society in Roraima since they are perceived to be unwilling to work and draining resources from this impacted area, yet there is nowhere else for them to go.

While the operation has worked to ensure that Indigenous refugees are provided with separate shelters from non-indigenous Venezuelans, this benefit was only conceded after much demand and pressure from Indigenous populations. In these separate shelters, Indigenous refugees have some space to plant their own small gardens, they sleep in hammocks instead of mattresses as is customary for them, their small housing units are built with higher ceilings than usual to allow for more ventilation, and they are able to sell their artisanry from the shelter. However, these accommodations do not extend far enough in addressing the unique needs of Indigenous groups for maintaining their cultural customs, diets, and other aspects of their communal living. For example, Indigenous refugees shared with me during informal interviews that they often lack the time and space to perform their cultural ceremonies, rituals, or dances, stripping them of their right to uphold traditional customs. Additionally, because no guests are allowed in the shelters, Indigenous refugees are

unable to hold important cultural events with members who do not reside in the same shelter. Another issue that an Indigenous leader, who does *not* live in a shelter run by Operação Acolhida, expressed to me was that in their culture of living communally in rural territories, it was never the norm to be surveilled at all times and much less to have the members of the armed forces always present in their lives. In his view, this was one of the most serious issues they faced, and they feared for their safety because of it. Thus, although technically providing Indigenous refugees with protection and aid, the Brazilian government has been unable to do so in a way that these communities consider to be respectful of their Indigenous identity.

Conclusion

Brazil's Operação Acolhida presents a novel case of a government's management of mass migration following a humanitarian crisis. While a country's armed forces are typically deployed to control and secure borders, it is uncommon for armed forces to lead an entire operation involving border management, documentation and shelter, and resettlement within the country's territory. Initially launched as an emergency response, Operação Acolhida has now been active for nearly five years, making it a particularly unique model for upholding refugee rights and providing refugee protections. On one hand, this model raises concerns about the militarization of humanitarianism, with potential tensions between the military's strategies and those of experienced international organizations and civil society actors. Within the Brazilian context in particular, the lingering impact of the brutal military dictatorship makes the military's unwavering benevolence towards such a large group of foreigners questionable.

On the other hand, given the Brazilian Armed Forces' experience in peacetime missions involving collaboration with civilians, it should not be much of a surprise that the military would apply the skills acquired in Haiti and in Rio de Janeiro to this case of mass migration in Roraima and, to a lesser extent, in Amazonas. Specifically because of the legacy of the dictatorship, it can be argued that the military's leadership in this operation is yet another attempt to distance themselves from that dark past and restore trust and respect for the military institution. What is undeniable is that hundreds of thousands of Venezuelan refugees and migrants have benefitted from Operação Acolhida in some way, and that the absence of barriers, both physical and legal, have provided countless individuals and families with a chance of survival. However, the lasting impact of the operation on Venezuelan refugees and the full potential of their development in Brazil is yet to be seen.

V. Conclusion: Analysis and Best Practices

The Brazilian Approach to Refugee Recognition

This project aims to analyze the factors that affect the lives of refugees, particularly those who have been forcibly displaced. Using the Venezuelan refugee crisis as a case study, I examine the policies and actions taken at the global, regional, and state levels that shape the opportunities and challenges that refugees face. Specifically, I explore Brazil's unconventional military-humanitarian approach to refugee displacement from Venezuela and assess how it fits within the broader global refugee regime. The central research question of this thesis is whether such a military model could be feasible in other highly impacted areas, what benefits it could deliver, and whether there are any trade-offs or deficits. The findings of this research identify best practices for refugee reception and integration, particularly from Latin America, and contribute to contemporary debates about refugee recognition and the relevance of a global refugee regime.

Methodologically, I approached this project as an analysis of governmental policies and laws related to refugees and asylum seekers. I chose to study Brazil's response to the mass arrival of Venezuelan refugees in its border cities because it is both innovative and concerning. The use of the military to provide long-term humanitarian assistance is a unique approach, but it also raises concerns about the militarization of humanitarian work and the potential impacts on refugees. Globally, in cases of mass refugee migration, military bodies are typically deployed solely for the purpose of securing borders and are most often viewed as forces that pose a threat to refugees attempting to enter a foreign country. Thus, I was interested in understanding how this approach has been effective in helping Venezuelan refugees in Brazil, and what the potential risks and challenges are. Analyzing this experience

will contribute to debates on military-humanitarianism, management of mass forced displacement, and frameworks for refugee protections.

The intention of this project was to identify best practices in the current global refugee regime and theorize as to whether there was a more practical framework that could be utilized globally to address the specific issue of mass displacement. The first part of this thesis provided an overview of how the refugee system functions globally, what its current gaps and challenges are, and a description of alternative models that experts have proposed. The second part presented a selection of state responses to mass displacement particular to the case of Venezuelan refugees in order to look at whether global, regional, or domestic frameworks were being utilized as tools to address the asylum seekers arriving on foreign territories. The third part of this thesis focused on the distinct method implemented by Brazil of deploying its armed forces to coordinate the response to the mass arrival of Venezuelan refugees in the state of Roraima. What the research for each of these sections showed is that states most typically utilize existing domestic policies, or create new ones, to address new refugee migration – bypassing the policy frameworks outlined in global and even regional agreements. This raises two important questions: 1) is a global framework for addressing the needs of refugees needed at all? and 2) what can we learn from Brazil’s unique experience?

Findings: Political Roots, Coverage, Impact, and Trade-offs of the Program

One of the main questions I investigated specifically in my field work in Brazil was whether a state-based refugee program that mobilizes civil society actors could replace the global refugee regime that relies on international agencies and organizations. Another question I hoped to answer through this field work was whether Operação Acolhida was

actually providing positive opportunities for Venezuelan refugees, as claimed by the Brazilian military's public relations and much of the published articles, or whether the military posed a threat to the wellbeing of refugees and the work of humanitarian agencies. I also wanted to understand whether the assistance provided to Venezuelan refugees through this large-scale and enduring operation would change depending on the political situation in Brazil, particularly the views of local and national political leaders - which occurred in other receiving countries.

Positive Elements of the Operation

I expected to confirm critiques of the military-humanitarian approach to the refugee crisis, especially given the significant tensions that arose at the onset of the crisis between Venezuelan refugees and Brazilian Federal Police as well as citizens. However, in actuality I found many positive aspects of the operation that, in turn, seemed to be having a generally positive impact on Venezuelan refugees. The first clear strength of Operação Acolhida was its well-organized logistical and procedural framework, which I described in detail in the previous chapter. This level of organization, in the midst of chaotic circumstances involving many moving parts, was very impressive. I also expected to find the strong presence of military personnel at Operação Acolhida's facilities very unsettling, and although it could be intimidating, I was relieved to find that they did not carry arms at any of the facilities. NGO staff members I spoke with at the PITRIG said that the presence of unarmed military personnel made their work environment more positive and that refugees have expressed that they do not feel threatened when seeking assistance. However, it is important to note that the sentiment of refugees living in the shelters may be different. Some refugees may feel

comforted by the presence of the military in their place of residence, while others may feel intimidated or even threatened. Furthermore, I would like to share some observations and responses to interview questions that provided insight into the operation's focus on humanitarianism and long-term solutions for Venezuelan refugee migration versus simply crisis management:

1. First, from my observations, the relationship between humanitarian agency workers and members of the Army at the PITRIG appeared to be a positive one of mutual respect. The goal of both seemed to be to work with as much efficiency and care as possible. When I asked one of the Refúgio 343 staff members who had been working there for three years whether there are ever issues between the agencies and the Army officials, she shared that she was not aware of any. She mentioned that she was sure there were strong differences in political views and ideologies, but that everyone in the operation kept politics out of their work and focused on their missions.
2. Speaking informally with off-duty Army officials outside of the work facilities, they shared that many of them who were stationed in Roraima to work in Operação Acolhida had ranked this mission as their top choice for deployment. They shared that most of them wanted to be there specifically to work on a meaningful mission that would allow them to concretely help people with whom they would be interacting. I do not have other data to support this claim, but these anecdotes reflected the positive attitudes I would see in the Army officials when they were on duty at Operação Acolhida's facilities.
3. In an interview with a high-ranking officer responsible for communications for Operação Acolhida, I asked what he thought was a challenge in the operation that, if

resolved, would help improve the work they do. He stated that a big challenge he saw was that much of Brazilian society outside Roraima and Amazonas was not aware of the work they were doing in these regions to help Venezuelan refugees, nor did they understand the true level of vulnerability and need faced by the thousands of Venezuelans seeking help. If they were more aware of this, he stated, they would perhaps be more inclined to help refugees who were relocated to their cities or even sponsor them (Interview with Army official, Dec. 9, 2022). In his perspective, if the greater Brazilian population was more aware of and sympathetic to this cause, it would generate more relocation opportunities, which would reaffirm and ease the work the Brazilian Armed Forces conduct.

4. When speaking with a high-ranking officer responsible for Operação Acolhida's work at the border town of Pacaraima, I asked him how he would respond to Brazilians who accuse the Brazilian government of spending too much money and resources on Venezuelan refugees and not enough on Brazilian citizens who are also in need. He responded, while shaking his head, that those Brazilians do not know the realities of Venezuelans arriving at the border. “What would they do? See a child at the border who hasn't eaten and whose parents don't have means, and just leave them? No, we are here because this is a humanitarian crisis and we can't just leave all these children to starve.” (Interview with Army Colonel, Dec. 14, 2022). In this response, an emphasis was placed on the well-being of Venezuelan children, which was something that came up in conversations I had with others. Both refugees and NGO staff described a special affection that many military officials developed towards Venezuelan children which became especially apparent in the shelters. The care and

concern, particularly towards children, described by these sources stands in stark contrast with the images we see of children dying in boats in the Mediterranean Sea or those who are living in makeshift camps along the Mexico/US border with little to no resources.

Overall, Operação Acolhida seems to have had a positive impact on many of the refugees it has served over the last five years. Several Venezuelan refugees I interviewed in Boa Vista and have followed up with have expressed their immense gratitude to Brazil for providing them with these opportunities and their desire to contribute to Brazilian society. I believe that these individuals are speaking sincerely because I am no longer affiliated with Refúgio 343 or the operation and am now back in the United States, and they would have no reason to fear repercussions for speaking genuinely. One individual in particular, whom I will call Enrique, was relocated to the southern Brazilian state of Paraná for an employment opportunity when I was in Boa Vista. When I followed up with him, he shared that the company he worked for informed him that if he wanted to bring his adult family members with him, they would all be offered a job. He informed his sister, brother-in-law, and cousin—who were all still in Venezuela—about this opportunity, and that they could receive help through Operação Acolhida to get there if they went to Boa Vista. They then migrated from Venezuela to Boa Vista to begin the process, and within a short time, the military provided transportation from Roraima to Paraná, where the three of them would reunite with Enrique.

Enrique tells me that they are all doing well and have rented a house from a Brazilian family who, upon learning that he and his family did not have possessions other than their

personal belongings, also gifted them furniture, appliances, and other necessities such as blankets. While this sort of benevolence towards Venezuelans is certainly not universal in Brazil, Enrique expressed that the support he has received from Operação Acolhida, the company he works for, and the Brazilians he has met in Paraná “have been a gift from god” (text conversation, May 9, 2023). Enrique’s case highlights two important qualities of Operação Acolhida (not just the military but also the agencies and NGOs) - continuing to work with partner companies even when formal recruitment of employees is not underway, and the operation’s efforts to not only avoid separating immediate families, but to also help reunite families in a timely manner.

Concerning Elements of the Operation

While Operação Acolhida has had positive impacts, this does not mean that a military-humanitarian approach to refugee assistance can be applied everywhere, nor that Operação Acolhida is without its own areas of concern. Firstly, one question that remains with me is whether Brazil would have taken the same military-humanitarian approach to the Venezuelan refugee crisis if the geopolitical situation between the two countries had been different. It initially struck me as strange that a large and enduring operation led by the Brazilian Armed Forces to help refugees was being conducted under the right-wing administration of former president Jair Bolsonaro. Bolsonaro did not initiate Operação Acolhida, but continued supporting it throughout his presidency. It quickly became clear that the political tensions between Venezuela and Brazil, as apparent by Bolsonaro’s strong condemnations against the Venezuelan regime, perhaps had much to do with the operation’s successful endurance. It could be argued that Brazil’s receptiveness and benevolence towards

Venezuelan refugees was in reality part of continued efforts to denounce the socialist regime in Venezuela and undermine the legitimacy of its leadership for the benefit of the Brazilian right-wing's political agenda. When speaking with a high-ranking officer in Pacaraima in December, he hinted at concern that the incoming government of Inacio Lula da Silva would bring an end to the operation given the two leftist leaders' friendly diplomatic relationship. At the time of this writing, Operação Acolhida is still fully operational.

Secondly, it is also noteworthy that the operation – having all of the capabilities to do so – does not support asylum-seekers from other nationalities even if they can demonstrate the same, if not more crucial, needs as Venezuelans. Non-Venezuelan asylum-seekers entering Brazil still receive legal assistance from UNHCR in order to initiate the asylum petition process, and are afforded all of the rights for migrants outlined in Brazil's constitution and migration laws. However, they do not benefit from the fast-track process of issuing documents, which bars them from formal employment opportunities. They also do not have access to the long-term shelters, daily meals, assistance with job searches, or assistance with relocation. Domestic NGOs, such as Refúgio 343, are thus not permitted to assist refugees who are not Venezuelan. At the PITRIG, I observed that (few) refugees of other nationalities who sought assistance were directed only to the UNHCR field office. As the case of Operação Acolhida shows, people fleeing a situation that is formally described as a "humanitarian crisis" by foreign political leaders and international organizations are more likely to receive assistance and resettlement opportunities as refugees than people fleeing a situation that is not classified as such, even if the conditions in their home countries are equally uninhabitable.

Thirdly, another concern of this operation is that military officers may view Venezuelan refugees as a vulnerable but inherently troubled population to be managed and supervised, instead of as diverse individuals with their own subjectivities, as I sometimes observed in the daily operations of Operação Acolhida's facilities in Boa Vista. In one particular instance, this sentiment came across during my visit to one of the shelters in Boa Vista as the officer in charge was giving me a tour. While I was not allowed to record or make notes verbatim, I recall three comments the officer made that alluded to Venezuelans being from a "different," potentially disorderly culture. The first was when he was explaining that the small units where Venezuelans were housed did not have access to electricity. He said that as a rule, they were not allowed to have food in their units because this would lead to cockroach infestation in the entire shelter, and thus the lack of electricity was a means to prevent cooking. What he said was simply that Venezuelans were from a different culture and that officials wanted to keep things "orderly" to avoid bug infestations at the shelter. His tone, however, gave the impression that he thought Venezuelans were dirty, perhaps already used to living in those conditions, and that without these rules in place they would not take care of their living spaces. Notably, lack of electricity in the housing units also means that refugees could not use fans to help cool down in very hot weather which typically would be between 85-95 degrees.

The second reference the officer made to Venezuelans coming from a "different culture" was when he was explaining that alcohol is not permitted in the shelters. Among other safety reasons, he cited domestic abuse as something they were trying to avoid. His words were simply that domestic abuse is more accepted in Venezuela which officials were trying to avoid in the shelters while teaching them about Brazilian laws against domestic

violence. However, his tone and body language gave the impression that he thought Venezuelan men were very violent, perhaps uncontrollable at times, and that this behavior significantly differs from the norms in Brazil.

The third time the officer made reference to the "different culture" was when he was explaining that officials heavily strived to get the children and adolescents into school as soon as possible in order to avoid interruption in their learning but also to teach them Brazilian norms. He proceeded to say that young adolescent Venezuelan girls came from a culture where they get pregnant at a very young age, and that they wanted to educate against that. His tone and body language, however, gave the impression that he thought Venezuelans were sexually out of control and that they did not receive sex education in Venezuela the way they do in Brazil. He then shared that many of the girls who had arrived as children aged 10-12 in the early stages of the operation were now adolescent mothers or were pregnant. It is undeniable that these patterns do exist, but the officer's comments gave the impression that these same patterns do not exist in Brazil, and that Venezuelan culture was not modern. His comments and attitude were just that of one person, but perhaps shed light on how military officials in this humanitarian operation perceive their roles as corrective figures of modern society, who are there to restore order among the incoming refugee population.

Contribution to Debates and Further Research

According to the findings of this study, most states in Latin America that responded to the Venezuelan refugee crisis did so by utilizing existing migration policies not specific to refugees, or creating new temporary protection programs specifically for this population – both methods which neglected to utilize refugee status determination as a primary way to

offer protections. There were certainly Venezuelans who did go through the formal asylum petition process with the assistance of UNHCR, but this is a significantly smaller population. As of June 2022, there were only 211,944 recognized refugees in Latin America, the Caribbean, North America, and Europe, and only 1,039,207 pending asylum claims in the same regions, out of nearly 7,300,000 Venezuelans currently displaced abroad (R4V 2023).

Although the emergency aid that UNHCR provides for mass displaced populations is invaluable, it would appear the UNHCR has evolved to more of a humanitarian organization whose primary role is providing emergency aid in times of crisis, versus an agency specifically designed to protect and relocate refugees - a role fulfilled today by individual governments on a case-by-case basis. Given that countries in several parts of the world are not party to the 1951 Convention, which guides the work of UNHCR, and given that many countries who *are* signatories infrequently invoke the Convention as a legal instrument in cases of mass displacement, it remains unclear what the relevancy of the 1951 Convention and the role of UNHCR are today. Undoubtedly, some sort of international support is needed to assist those individuals or families who apply for asylum because they are being *personally* targeted, and the core principle of non-refoulement enshrined in the 1951 Convention is a key element that should always be considered when drafting and implementing individual state policies. However, given that most asylum-seekers today are people who are forcibly displaced en masse for a myriad of reasons outside the parameters established in the Convention, it appears that the best course of action is for receiving states to design frameworks and implement policies regarding refugee resettlement that make the most sense for them according to their economic capabilities and domestic sociopolitical contexts. Continued advocacy for a standard global model does not seem to be the answer to

the issue of mass displacement, and perhaps it would prove more effective for states to utilize best practices learned from their own past experiences as well as the examples of others, rather than to have masses of people attempting to go through the highly bureaucratic and potentially exclusionary processes of the global refugee regime.

The issue, then, is the same core issue faced today – how to incentivize individual nation-states to contribute solutions to this global problem. Betts and Collier (2017) advocated for a system based on mutual benefit between refugees and receiving states, rooted in development opportunities led by private actors which would be profitable both for them and the state. Thus, development projects and new capital flows could be an incentive for states to allow large groups of refugees to live within their territories. However, this approach is based on the profit-driven values of capitalism, and while it may indeed provide more opportunities for refugees, it also risks commodifying them as "human capital" who are only valuable if they can be seen as profitable. This could lead to a situation where refugees are only given assistance if they can be seen as contributing to the economy, rather than simply being helped because it is the right thing to do. Furthermore, only one approach to this issue is not sufficient, and more research is needed on innovative ways to utilize soft power as a means to incentivize states to maintain receptive stances. Crucially, states must do what they can to avoid actions that will lead to conflict or instability in other regions and remain committed to promoting peaceful resolutions to regional and global conflicts.

Throughout the trajectory of this project, I encountered many more questions related to this topic that I unfortunately did not have the capacity to include. There are two core areas that are growing themes for future studies. The first is the concept of military-humanitarianism as it pertains specifically to the topic of refugee displacement and crisis

management. I found the case of Operação Acolhida in Brazil to be relatively successful, even given its flaws. I believe Brazil's past experience in establishing military-civilian operations made its military better suited to manage the Venezuelan migration flows, and were perhaps more motivated to do so considering this operation did not involve entering conflict zones (either international or domestic) but rather was a fully peaceful humanitarian mission. However, I do not think that this model would work well in other places where a state's armed forces did not have a background in working military-civilian missions. Thus, it is important to further analyze the lasting impacts of Operação Acolhida on the Venezuelan displaced population in Brazil, as well as the state's perceptions of the role of its armed forces, in order to assess the transferability of this case to a broader global context. The concept of military-humanitarianism has now been largely studied, but mostly in the context of individual states' own societies. Studies focusing on the military-humanitarian model in relation to refugee displacement and migration management are needed.

The second significant area for further research is the intersection of forced displacement and indigeneity. The Venezuelan Exodus involved the largest displacement of Indigenous communities in modern times. These specific cases are now being widely studied by Brazilian scholars, but with growing global uncertainties and environmental disasters, it is likely that other Indigenous communities in settler-colonial states will also face displacement at some point, including over international borders. Legally, this is an important area of study, as Indigenous communities in this situation are, in theory, thrice protected under the global governance regime: by international human rights law, international refugee law, and the universal rights of Indigenous peoples. Socio-culturally, displacement of Indigenous peoples is important to examine particularly in relation to state integration practices. As I

clearly learned in my case study, the social and cultural needs of displaced Indigenous peoples greatly differ from those of non-Indigenous displaced populations. Therefore, it is important to understand state efforts – if any – to respect and enable those needs, and how states work to integrate Indigenous communities without forcing assimilation on them.

Best Practices: What Brazil’s Approach Can Offer a Global System

The Brazilian model for responding to refugee displacement is not perfect, but it has several positive elements. These include a focus on integration, respect for human rights, and a commitment to providing refugees with tools they need to rebuild their lives in Brazil. The best practices learned through the implementation of this model could be replicated in other highly impacted areas that encounter mass displacement, helping to improve the lives of refugees around in other parts of the world. Some of these best practices include: mobilizing a state entity that can provide continuity in its presence and consistent funding; establishing several options for relocation with transportation funded by the government; providing specific accommodations for Indigenous refugees; reducing the amount of policies used to offer legal status to refugees in order to avoid confusion and improve access; and setting a norm of referring to displaced groups as “refugees” even if legally they are not.

One key factor that made Operação Acolhida functionally strong was that the military offered a means for continuous personnel presence in Roraima and Amazonas to administer refugees. This consistency in personnel, in an area geographically disconnected from most of Brazil, ensured that there would always be officers there to manage the operation. In a conversation with Professor Jarochinski in Boa Vista, he stated that it would have been difficult to maintain non-military personnel in the long-term to work on a massive operation

like this, particularly in the very small and remote town of Pacaraima, given the lack of incentives for workers to relocate (Interview, September 29, 2022). Additionally, the consistency in funding available for Operação Acolhida, which was allocated primarily from Brazil's Ministry of Defense, ensured that operations could continue to run and even expand in capacity. Finally, what largely made the Brazilian military well equipped to carry this out was its precedent in conducting this type of work. In other highly impacted refugee areas, this model could be replicated by deploying a state's national guard or military reserve force if a long-term approach for integration is needed. However, I would be skeptical about implementing this approach in countries who have never or rarely mobilized their military for non-conflict or humanitarian missions.

Furthermore, the relocation pillar of Operação Acolhida represents a best practice that should be replicated in host-countries that have the capacity to implement this. Some high refugee-receiving countries in the Middle East such as Jordan or Lebanon provide aid that is limited to refugee camps. In the United States, asylum-seekers who are awaiting their hearing dates may be transported from the southern border region to other states, but they are not guaranteed employment or family reunification opportunities. Brazil's model addresses both the issue of sheltering and providing aid for refugees in the border region, and reducing the impact on the border region by relocating Venezuelan refugees, but only once they have guarantees of employment, family/social reunifications, or transferring to another shelter. This crucial element is also missing from the refugee integration frameworks of the other high-receiving countries in Latin America that were included in this study. It may not always make sense to implement such a strategy if, for instance, refugees are in a country that is

significantly smaller geographically. However, when possible and logical, this hallmark of Operação Acolhida provides a great example of a strategy for integration.

As mentioned before in this thesis, the mass displacement of Indigenous communities in modern times is a unique phenomenon that warrants further study in the field of refugee migration. Brazil's Operação Acolhida has been criticized by Indigenous leaders of displaced communities, Indigenous communities in Brazil, and scholars in the field for its shortcomings in addressing Indigenous refugee communities' unique needs. My observations at three locations where Indigenous refugees live—a military-run shelter, a former shelter where Indigenous families live informally, and an autonomous rural settlement—indicate that the conditions in these communities are not conducive to preserving their culture and traditions. However, it is important to note that Brazil's Armed Forces have at least acknowledged the unique needs of Indigenous refugee communities and made some efforts to address them, which is something I did not come across in my research of responses to refugee migration in other countries. These efforts were not ideal, but they set a precedent that future approaches to Indigenous displacement can build on. In the case of Brazil, NGOs and faith-based organizations have played a much larger role in providing aid to Indigenous refugee communities, who are largely navigating their new lives without the help of the operation.

Another best practice that can be taken from Brazil's model is the implementation of one cohesive approach that enabled the whole operation to work effectively. Prior to 2018, there was no government response to the Venezuelan refugee crisis in Roraima. Local and state agencies were attempting to mitigate the situation, but they were not successful due to the magnitude of the crisis. However, once the federal government got involved and created

the Humanitarian Logistics Task Force, their strategies for refugee recognition and integration in Brazil did not really change. Brazil's Migration Law 13.445, passed in 2017, enabled the government to universally regularize the migration status of all Venezuelan refugees due to the humanitarian nature of their flight. This singular approach – combining the rights provided by Law 13.445 and the logistical expertise of the Humanitarian Logistics Task Force – ensured access to aid and services, and reduced the level of confusion regarding rights and policies. In contrast, Colombia, the host-country receiving the majority of Venezuelan refugees, experimented with several Temporary Protection Programs, each with their own eligibility criteria and application window, before finally implementing a policy to offer ten-year temporary residence to all Venezuelans in 2021. Brazil's ability to plan for the long-term early on and maintain the federal response that they implemented in 2018, while adapting internal logistics to provide more efficiency, has provided Venezuelan refugees with clarity about procedures and easy access to services over the last five years.

Finally, one positive factor of less importance but which I found to have a significant effect was the consistent use of the term “refugee” to refer to displaced Venezuelans in Brazil. As discussed throughout this thesis, most of the nearly 450,000 Venezuelans in Brazil are not recognized as refugees but rather have the status of temporary/permanent residents. Yet, all members working in the operation consciously referred to them as refugees, which I believe is an attempt to shape popular discourse in favor of this displaced population. I think that this approach of not necessarily recognizing displaced persons as refugees legally, but treating them as such in practice, is an approach that not only has a positive impact on refugees themselves but can also make citizens of the host-country more receptive towards them. The Brazilian Army also has a relatively strong social media presence through which

they share many refugees' stories, provide updates on any new initiatives, and reinforce their consideration of Venezuelans as "refugees" who are welcome in their country. This is a good practice that I believe can certainly be replicated elsewhere, especially in cases where large groups of displaced persons do not meet the criteria to be legally recognized as refugees under the scope of the 1951 Convention, regional agreements, or state-specific refugee laws.

Conclusion

Forced mass displacement is proving to be a key characteristic of the early 21st century, and the factors contributing to such displacement globally do not seem to be significantly improving. It is important to continue to study the relationship between forcibly displaced persons who become asylum seekers, the global refugee regime which is not designed to address displacement from non-war settings, and state sovereignty as expressed in the decisions of political leaders. This will help us to better understand the factors that determine the fates of refugees and how those factors can be improved. This project aimed to shed light on this relationship by tracing the origins of the global refugee regime, examining how it has evolved over time in a constantly changing global context, and focusing on how this relationship has played out in relation to one specific contemporary mass displacement crisis. The case of the Venezuelan Exodus demonstrated that states employed a variety of protection measures to address this crisis, including existing global mechanisms, existing and ad-hoc state policies (including exclusionary ones), and a military-humanitarian model. Given my findings, I conclude that there is not one ideal solution to mass displacement and that goals to address this growing issue should not involve the implementation of solely one standard global model. Instead of adopting a universal approach to refugee recognition and

assistance, individual states should carefully consider their own economic capacities, governmental and civil society strengths, and sociopolitical circumstances when developing long-term assistance programs. This will allow them to create programs that mobilize their resources to best address the needs of refugees and that are sustainable in the long term.

Brazil's assistance program for Venezuelan refugees, known as Operação Acolhida, has been praised domestically and internationally for its scale, scope, coordination, and efficiency. While far from perfect, this model has provided several benefits that we could aim to implement elsewhere. The operation's comprehensive approach to refugee assistance – in which recognized legal status, shelter, food, medical care, education, and employment are all deemed critical to their well-being – helps refugees to rebuild their lives and become self-sufficient. The immediate provision of legal documentation to refugees reassures them that it is possible to start rebuilding their lives with autonomy, while knowing that there is still basic assistance provided to them for as long as needed. Operação Acolhida's inclusion of certain job-training and capacity-building programs in their comprehensive model can provide refugees with useful tools that will help integrate them into the labor force.

Furthermore, Operação Acolhida's key pillar of assisted relocation provides refugees with opportunities to leave potentially liminal conditions, which commonly characterize border regions, in search for other possibilities of societal integration. At the same time, the legal status of most of this displaced population as temporary or permanent residents in a frontline state allows them to return home if they wish, for any length of time, knowing that they can return to Brazil. This is a key difference between the Brazil model, in which displaced persons are not legally recognized as refugees but are treated as such in practice, and the global system that helps displaced persons receive refugee status. As recognized

refugees, they would not be able to return to their country of origin without losing the legal status and protections of the host country.

Finally, the partnership between the Brazilian Armed Forces, federal agencies, and a number of NGOs that forms the framework of Operação Acolhida provides not only logistical leadership for the continuity of refugee assistance, but it can also serve as a means through which Brazilian civilians and the military build a stronger sense of trust and cooperation. This would, in turn, be beneficial to a country still trying to heal from past political traumas. It is still too soon to know whether this will be a residual result of this operation, but if so, it can certainly be a model to consider in other countries with similar histories of turmoil who are addressing mass refugee displacement.

This project has provided a detailed analysis of some of the challenges faced by refugees today, who are forced to flee their homes due to a growing list of factors. Through certain case studies, particularly from Latin America, I have identified best practices and practical solutions that can be implemented in the future to improve the lives of these individuals and families. With over 100 million globally displaced persons living in precarious conditions today, it is clear that the conventional global frameworks for refugee recognition and integration have failed to adequately support many refugee communities. As Hannah Arendt (1943) wrote, "The refugee is a reminder that we are all human beings, and that we all have the right to live in peace and security" (Int'l Refugee Law 2017). As a global society, we must find effective local solutions to the global problem of mass displacement, which can restore dignity and autonomy to the lives of refugees.

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Appendix 1

Operação Acolhida Partner Organizations

Adventist Development and Relief Agency - ADRA
Association of Venezuelan Refugees in the State of Amazonas - ASOVEAM
Brazilian Association for the Defense of Women, Children and Youth - ASBRAD
Caritas Archdiocese of Rio de Janeiro
Caritas Archdiocese of Sao Paulo
Caritas Brazil
Caritas Brazil, Region of Paraná
Caritas Manaus
Caritas Switzerland in Brazil
Center for Migration and Human Rights of the Diocese of Roraima - CMDH/RR
Children's Villages SOS Brazil
Compassion Association
Coordination for Special Resources - CORE
Educational and Charitable Association Valley of Blessing - AEBVB
Fireflies Institute
Fraternity - International Humanitarian Federation
Fraternity Without Borders
Good with Life Association – ABV
I Know My Rights, Brazil - IKMR
IMPACT (Reach)
Integrated Center for Sustainable Development Studies and Programs - CIEDS
International Committee of the Red Cross, Brazil
International Institute of Education in Brazil
International Labor Organization - OIT
International Network for Community Action
International Organization for Migration - OIM
International Plan Brazil
Jesuit Service to Migrants and Refugees - SJMR Brasil
Joint United Nations Programme on HIV/AIDS
LGBT+ Movement
Little Brothers Association
Migrant Service Center
Migration and Human Rights Institute - IMDH
Mission Peace
Museum of the Brazilian Object - A CASA
National Pastoral Service for Migrants - SPM
Northeastern Pastoral Service for Migrants - SPM-NE
Panamerican Development Foundation - FUPAD
Panamerican Health Organization - OPAS/OMS
Recife Bath
Refuge 343
Salvation Army

Sister Institute

Social Action Brotherhood Without Borders

The Association of Volunteers in International Service Brazil - AVSI

UN Women, Brazil

United Nations Children's Fund - UNICEF

United Nations Development Program - PNUD

United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization - UNESCO

United Nations Environment Program

United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights - ACNUDH

United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees - ACNUR

United Nations Office for Project Services - UNOPS

United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime - UNODC

United Nations Population Fund - UNFPA

Venezuela Global

Venezuela Home

World Vision Brazil