



Commentary

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By Bram Ebus, Crisis Group Consultant

Savannah Strife: Brazil's Combustible Border with Venezuela

The frontier between Brazil and its crisis-ridden neighbour Venezuela has become a major migration route, a hotspot for crime and a flashpoint for violence. This is the first of three commentaries on Venezuela's troubled borderlands.

The 2,199-kilometres frontier between Venezuela and Brazil – a sparsely populated stretch of jungle and bush – has been transformed by the political and economic crisis wracking Venezuela into a region scarred by transnational crime, displacement and violence. The potential for bloodshed became real in late February 2019, when a confrontation between a convoy of Venezuelan National Guardsmen and a small group of residents in the town of Kumarakapay set off a deadly series of events that shook the whole region.

According to witnesses, inhabitants of the town, which sits in Venezuela's Bolívar state approximately 50 kilometres north of the Brazilian border, were sound asleep early on 22 February when several armoured vehicles stormed in. The soldiers on board were heading southward to block the humanitarian aid that Venezuela's opposition was planning to bring into the country the next day – part of a campaign supported by the U.S., Brazil and several

Latin American countries to split the military and topple President Nicolás Maduro.

By some accounts, the villagers – who belonged to the indigenous Pemon community that enjoys formal autonomy in their territory – sought to block the soldiers from continuing their journey because they wanted the aid to come in. According to others, the villagers simply wanted to talk to the intruders and ask what they were doing. In any case what happened next is clear: soldiers from the convoy opened fire, killing one woman on the spot and leaving at least fifteen wounded.

The incident sparked six days of lethal skirmishes. Venezuelan security forces and irregular groups clashed with protesters along the border, with seven people reportedly killed and at least 62 detained. Around 70 school buses, filled not only with soldiers but also government-allied paramilitary groups, called *colectivos*, and prison inmates freed so they could enlist in the effort, headed to the border to block the incoming aid, according to a local human rights defender and several locals who fled to Brazil. The full extent of casualties remains unclear. Following her investigation of the February violence, UN High Commissioner for Human Rights Michelle Bachelet cited “reports of a possible mass grave, which warrants further investigation”.

The frontier appears peaceful again, but the political, economic and demographic realities that fuelled the February clashes and related ills persist. These realities extend far beyond the international standoff that sparked the

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Kumarakapay confrontation. The region is a hive of illegal mining ventures and home to brutal, expansionist criminal groups that work in concert with corrupt security forces. Residents facing harassment and extortion by these groups sometimes lash out, but often seek to escape fear and impoverishment by migrating to Brazil, which struggles to absorb them. Human trafficking and other illicit activities thrive. As tension builds between vulnerable civilians and the groups that prey on them, the threat of violence is never far.

A Mining Boom and a Predatory Guard

The recent spike in tensions between Venezuelan security forces and locals near the Brazilian border is partly an outgrowth of the mining boom underway across the Gran Sabana region in Bolívar state – which itself has been driven by criminal groups and the cash-starved government's push to accelerate gold and diamond exports.

The country's armed forces are nominally in control of the mining industry, but they also

work with criminal entrepreneurs, who have aggressively expanded their mining interests with impunity. Venezuelan organised crime groups called *sindicatos* and Colombian guerrillas have become major players in the mines of Bolívar and neighbouring Amazonas state, and often work in volatile alliances with corrupt state forces. As these groups pursue their hostile takeover of mineral-rich land and mines operated by locals, violence sometimes flares. The *sindicatos* violently control mining hot-spots such as El Dorado and Las Claritas.

Indigenous leaders say that criminal groups have high-level political blessing. According to these sources, political representatives across the eleven municipalities of Bolívar state, loyal to the government in Caracas and to the chavista regional administration, turn a blind eye to these groups' criminality and instead share in the mining profits, which in turn provides a financial lifeline for the state and its officials amid Venezuela's economic ruin.

A former Venezuelan National Guard member who deserted and now lives in Brazil



Brazilian villagers of Tarau-Paru border-town maintain that their Venezuelan counterparts will always be welcome. Some of the huts in the village, partly built of plastic, feature the sky blue UNHCR logo. CRISIS-GROUP/Bram Ebus

observed that Brazilian entrepreneurs are also part of the problem. He said they send truckloads of food across the border to feed the Venezuelan military and miners and are paid with often illegally-mined gold. This may explain why the Brazilian border state of Roraima exports more gold than it produces.

For their part, Venezuelan security forces reap the benefits of mining not only by taking a share of illicit profits, but through a panoply of criminal activities. Along some routes, they even traffic goods across borders. Alongside crime groups that are involved in human trafficking, underpaid guardsmen generate cash by extorting payments for similar cross-border movements. In the months when the Venezuelan government closed the border, from 22 February to 10 May, guardsmen demanded a payment of 150 Brazilian reais (roughly \$36) for each car that passed one of the illegal border crossings, according to the defected officer. Each suspected migrant crossing either by foot or by car was forced to pay between 100 and 150 reais (\$24-\$46), the former guardsman recounted.

But guardsmen do not necessarily get to keep these takings for themselves. According to the National Guard deserter with whom I spoke, rank-and-file members of the Guard themselves live under the constant shadow of extortion. Both at the border and the regional airport in Santa Elena, he explained, a superior demands weekly payments from his subordinates totalling the equivalent of \$2,000.

Fed up with poverty-level wages and the terrible requirements of the job, many guardsmen contemplate abandoning their posts. Sources in the diplomatic community reported that 77 have deserted and fled over the border since February, but many are too afraid to follow suit. The former guardsman I spoke to sent his

family into hiding before crossing the border, and reported that the security forces have already come looking for them. “They are capable of murder”, he said. Recalling with shame the brutality he witnessed from inside the force, he said that on the day violence flared up across Gran Sabana, guardsmen were instructed to shoot at members of the indigenous population without justification. He remembers the order as: “Indio que llegue, indio que le disparamos” (“Indian that arrives, Indian we shoot at”).

Locals confirm that such abuse has fed deepening anger toward security forces across the region. This ill-will is exemplified on a small scale by the occasional capture of a guardsman by indigenous communities, which is often followed by violent military reprisals against civilians. On a larger scale, mounting frustration exacerbates the likelihood of escalating violence of the kind the region experienced in February.

Flight to safety?

Against this backdrop, Venezuela’s border with Brazil functions as an escape valve for Venezuelans seeking safety or greater economic opportunity. Immediately across the border, Brazil’s Roraima state is the point of arrival for most Venezuelans fleeing south. But for too many, flight to Roraima involves trading one set of risks and dangers for another.

In some respects, Roraima is well-suited to be the first port of call for fleeing Venezuelans. Cross-border political, cultural, and business ties between Roraima and Venezuela are extensive and important. Standing physically much closer to Caracas and other Venezuelan urban centres than to Brazil’s capital, Brasilia, Roraima is even connected to the Venezuela electricity grid (although it has not purchased any electricity since Venezuela’s March 2019 blackouts). State governor Antonio Denarium is an admirer of Brazil’s far-right president, Jair Bolsonaro, an ardent enemy of chavismo, but he has been careful not to alienate his neighbours. When asked in an interview to choose between Maduro and National Assembly chair Juan Guaidó, who has asserted his claim to be

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A shelter used by Warao and Eñepa indigenous groups, located in the middle of Boa Vista, has capacity for 590 people but not enough space for everyone. According to aid workers, a nearby square harbors 400 more people. CRISISGROUP/Bram Ebus

interim president, Denarium refused to take sides. Members of the Pemon community in Brazil indeed welcomed hundreds of their fellow Venezuelan tribespeople who fled during the February crackdown.

Nevertheless, Roraima – one of Brazil’s most impoverished regions – has struggled with the Venezuelan influx. According to the Brazilian military, there are now 40-45,000 Venezuelans in the whole of Roraima state, out of a total population of 520,000. Many are highly vulnerable, their needs neglected.

The border town of Pacaraima became notorious after anti-migrant riots broke out in August 2018. A business owner was attacked and robbed by unknown assailants, triggering a violent xenophobic outburst by residents, who suspected Venezuelan migrants were responsible, and targeted the entire refugee and migrant population camping out in the village. Hundreds were chased back across the border.

Now, more than a year later, calm has returned to Pacaraima – where Venezuelan day

visitors and migrants can often be identified by their tricolour backpacks – but it is straining to support the growing Venezuelan presence. The town’s tumultuous main street is crammed with day visitors from Santa Elena, buying basic goods unavailable in Venezuela and exchanging currency. Pacaraima also houses hundreds of migrants and refugees too poor to continue their journeys into Brazil. They sell coffee and cigarettes, and haul luggage for better-off migrants. At the end of the afternoon, many Venezuelans in the town return to their home country with shopping. Those who remain start to gather cardboard from piles of trash to sleep on, as local shelters cannot cope with the influx.

One consequence of the need, misery and lawlessness along the border is an alarming surge in human trafficking. “The streets are showcases of people”, says Socorro Santos, an expert on the issue based in Roraima’s capital city of Boa Vista – three hours by car from the border. She explains that organised crime groups, formed by Venezuelan and Brazilian

nationals, lure poor and desperate women in Venezuela to Brazil with false promises of employment. She and other experts also express deep concern about Venezuelans employed in food-for-work deals in rural Roraima, where migrants and refugees are forced to work on large estates in slave-like conditions and paid only in meals.

The Brazilian borderlands expose refugees to other risks as well. An estimated 2,400 Venezuelans sleep rough in Boa Vista, a town of some 330,000 people. And the city's eleven shelters, which according to the Brazilian army now host 6,500 people, have become dangerous places.

A big part of the problem is lack of resources. The army, which is in charge of the shelters alongside the Office of the UN High Commissioner for Refugees, has money for food, but not enough to cover most education or health needs, or leisure activities. Informal employment is simply unavailable for most. While about 2,500 Venezuelan youngsters are enrolled in local schools, teachers often do not speak Spanish. Bored and restless, Venezuelan

youngsters in Boa Vista and elsewhere in Roraima are an attractive target for gangs and other criminal groups, which can use them as mules to slip unobtrusively across the border with contraband and arms. These criminal groups cast a large shadow over the community: former gang members living in Boa Vista comment that three of Brazil's most prominent networks (Comando Vermelho, PCC, and Família do Norte) now have a local presence.

Problems with the refugee and migrant shelters are no secret. A young Venezuelan migrant – one of the lucky few who obtained a residency permit, apartment and job – spoke fearfully about the refugee shelter across the street from where she lives. She believes its residents are involved in local street crime and has observed Venezuelan minors, some aged under ten, dealing drugs at the bus stop she uses in the morning. A representative of the army-led “Operação Acolhida” (“Operation Welcome”), in charge of receiving Venezuelans migrants and refugees, downplayed the problems, but did not deny reports of violence, robbery, sexual abuse and



Venezuelans and their tri-color backpacks dominate the scenery in the Brazilian bordertown Pacaraima. Main streets are full of visitors buying basic goods absent in Venezuela but also roamed by hundreds of refugees that lack the funds to continue inwards. CRISISGROUP/Bram Ebus

drug use in the shelters. He complained that Venezuela does not share the names of former or wanted criminals with Brazilian authorities, making it impossible to control who crosses the border and enters the shelters.

The Brazilian government has tried to help relieve some of the pressure on Roraima created by the growing Venezuelan population. It has already arranged air transport for thousands of the displaced in an effort to spread migrants and refugees more evenly across the country. But the effect of these efforts on migrant numbers in the state is limited. More people are arriving than being ferried to alternative destinations, and many Venezuelans would prefer to stick close to the border for a possible return home or so they can visit their families. International humanitarian support for shelters and social services for new arrivals will remain essential for some time to come.

Remedies for the Frontier

Surveying both sides of the Venezuela-Brazil border, it is now easier to see how the situation could get worse than to imagine how it might get better. Deteriorating relations between Venezuela's government and opposition as well as galloping economic decline – with the country's GDP expected to fall 23 per cent this year, according to the UN – seem poised to intensify

migration at the Venezuela-Brazil border, boost the quest for mining riches, spur the expansion of non-state armed groups and perpetuate bilateral tensions.

The most hopeful path forward for the region lies with the negotiations between Venezuela's government and opposition, however great the obstacles they face. If the arrangements that emerge from those negotiations recognise the challenge on Venezuelan southern border, the importance of meaningful protections for the communities ravaged by the mining boom, and the need for cross-border cooperation to counter illicit groups that prey so many innocents, that would be a good beginning.

Without these changes, the border with Brazil will remain unstable and the region's residents subject to violent and criminal activity even if the struggle for control in Caracas relents. For the thousands of displaced Venezuelans afraid to return home but facing bleak prospects in Brazil, this is a tough scenario to contemplate. On a recent rainy day in Pacaraima, a Venezuelan father tried to ease the painful situation with a joke. He slapped his hand on a stack of cardboard on his lap and declared, "These are our mattresses". But his son sitting next to him, who abandoned his studies in Venezuela to migrate to Brazil, had no smile on his face.