

# As Maduro cracks down, aid organisations find it harder to assist and fear worse is to come

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The Chavista regime is a political system named after the late Hugo Chávez, who was president from 1999 to 2013 and mentored Nicolás Maduro. Characterised by generous social welfare programmes, the associated populist movement known as Chavismo used to be incredibly popular among Venezuelans, but it lost its lustre under Maduro’s rule, which has been marked by corruption, economic collapse, and authoritarian drift.

The US deployment of warships in the Caribbean Sea and the Trump administration’s [reported intention to oust](#) President Nicolás Maduro have generated hope – among some parts of the opposition at least – that the end of the Chavista regime is near.

But for many Venezuelans, it has also intensified [fears about what is to come](#), and concerns over the possible use of an external threat as a pretext to reinforce internal repression – further hindering humanitarian aid in a country devastated by hunger and a [lack of access to basic services](#), including healthcare and education.

Since he was proclaimed the winner of the widely contested July 2024 [presidential election](#), Maduro has ramped up his crackdown on dissent, persecuting political opponents, protesters, rights defenders, and NGOs alike – including organisations providing vital [medications and food](#) in low-income neighbourhoods

Coupled with the suspension of US funding for foreign aid, repression has pushed Venezuela's most vulnerable into deeper poverty and left them without access to vital aid, several humanitarian workers told The New Humanitarian. They spoke on the condition of anonymity, as most of this article’s sources did, fearing retaliations.

As [tensions between the US and Venezuela](#) escalate, some experts fear the humanitarian situation will only get worse.

In the past month, US President Donald Trump's administration has hit [at least four](#) Venezuelan boats with military strikes in international waters, killing [about 20 people](#) it claims ([without evidence](#)) were drug smugglers heading to the United States.

Trump has also made repeated public threats against Maduro, to which the Venezuelan president has responded by deploying the National Bolivarian Militia – a civilian branch of the army created by his predecessor Hugo Chávez – by providing weapons to and [training new civilian volunteers](#), and by signing a decree [granting himself special security powers](#) in case of a US invasion.

“The risk is that a government that has amply demonstrated its authoritarian nature could use these legal resources to increase its power and exert greater control and repression over individuals and the political and civil society organisations that still exist in Venezuela,” a sociologist and professor at the Central University of Venezuela (UCV) said, referring to Maduro’s new decree.

## The worst period in decades

In Venezuela, [nearly 82%](#) of the population lives in poverty and nearly eight million people have felt compelled to migrate due to the overlapping [economic](#) and humanitarian crises.

Despite out-of-control inflation, the national minimum wage of 130 bolívares (about \$0.70) per month hasn't been raised since 2022, and even when they receive government stipends to complement their income, Venezuelans can only afford [less than a third](#) of the more than \$500 the basic food basket currently costs.

As a result, [food insecurity](#) is widespread, Venezuelans relying on [public healthcare](#) die of preventable diseases, and the [collapse of the public education system](#) is leaving entire generations without opportunities for the future.

*“Without a doubt, the poorest people will see their already precarious living conditions worsen.”*

As part of the post-electoral restriction of civic space, the regime-controlled Congress passed a law [that requires NGOs](#) to be authorised by the government to operate, causing what the leader of one of these organisations considers an unprecedented crisis.

“I’ve been working in the NGO sector for more than 20 years, and the first months of 2025 have been the worst period I have ever known,” he said, speaking to The New Humanitarian in May.

The purpose of the new NGO law, according to the UCV professor, was “to increase the dependence of the poorest sectors of the Venezuelan population on state handouts”.

“Without a doubt, the poorest people will see their already precarious living conditions worsen,” he said.



Sara Cincurova/TNH

*Nayari, a single mother of three, shows her empty fridge in her Caracas home in May 2025. When she is hungry, she often drinks a glass of water and saves any food for her children.*

In a June [report](#) analysing social deprivation gaps, HumVenezuela – a platform that monitors Venezuela’s humanitarian emergency – confirmed the worsening of the crisis and highlighted that inequalities have turned “more deeply rooted and severe”.

“The operating environment for humanitarian response is deteriorating significantly,” the report reads. “Increasing restrictions on civic space, the politicisation of government assistance, and drastic cuts in international humanitarian funding are limiting the ability to identify, access, and respond to needs, leaving the population increasingly vulnerable.”

Twenty-four-year-old Yuliana (her last name is being withheld for safety reasons), a hairdresser from Petare – Caracas’ largest slum – wakes up every day worrying about how she will feed her children, aged six and seven. Until May, they were reliant on a community organisation that used to provide daily lunches to more than 12,000 children from the *barrios*, or informal urban settlements.

“When I had no food at home, they would give me leftovers from lunch, and we would keep them for the next day,” she told The New Humanitarian.

But the NGO closed down that month due to repression against some of its workers and beneficiaries, and Yuliana now has almost no food for her family. “When I have no clients, I have no money, and we simply don’t eat,” she said.

In La Vega, another economically disadvantaged neighbourhood in Caracas, Nayari, a 40-year-old single mother of three, said she now drinks a glass of cold water whenever she feels hungry. “I cannot work, as I take care of one of my sons who suffers from a face abscess,” she said. “So I drink water while my children eat.”

A member of a humanitarian team working in Venezuela, who refused to be identified in this article due to the fear of repercussions, said that although malnutrition hasn’t reached the acute levels of 2017-2018 – when the hunger crisis was at its highest – she has noticed a worsening since last November.

*“People here either eat or buy necessary medications.”*

“Malnutrition has been registering a sustained deterioration again, with levels surpassing those we had in 2016 by 3 to 4%,” she said.

Katiuska Camargo, the founder of “Uniendo Voluntades”, a local NGO that supports children and young people in Petare, told The New Humanitarian that Venezuelans are increasingly forced to make impossible spending choices because many aid programmes have been cancelled in vulnerable areas due to funding cuts.

“People here either eat or buy necessary medications,” she said.

In late August, the World Food Programme (WFP) announced it would [reduce](#) its assistance by half in 2025 due to [lack of funding](#), and [only 13%](#) of the UN’s Humanitarian Response Plan for this year has so far been funded.

## **A climate of fear**

Other needs are growing too. The climate of fear has caused a cascade of mental health issues.

Yuliana and Nayari said people in their *barrios* are constantly scared.

In the wake of the 2024 presidential election, at least [25 people](#) – most from disadvantaged backgrounds – were killed during protests, and [thousands more](#) were detained. In the months since, [arbitrary detentions](#) of protesters, rights defenders and [humanitarian workers](#) have been regularly

documented. A 22 September [report](#) by a UN fact-finding mission states that they registered 200 detentions of individuals attending protests or identified as opponents between January and August 2025.

*“We see police and patrols every day.”*

But Maduro's security forces – and the government-led armed groups he relies on to quell dissent, known as *colectivos* – don't only go after opposition figures or rights activists; they are terrorising entire low-income communities.

“We see police and patrols every day,” Yuliana's neighbour, Leandra, told The New Humanitarian.

Leandra recalled how a close friend of hers was imprisoned for around six months after attending a street protest.

“He was an example chosen by the government to show other people in the *barrio* what will happen if they attend demonstrations,” she said. “I am now afraid for all my children and grandchildren.”

Acts of political violence perpetrated in the *barrios* have long been used as a tool to silence the poorest populations, but experts and local aid workers say they have become more brutal since the 2024 election.

“Along with the political conflict and bad economic situation... the toll [of repression] on people's psychological state is enormous,” said a humanitarian health worker who asked to remain anonymous, adding that he has recently seen an increase in programmes focused on donating medicines and other treatments for depression.

## The barrier of repression

Rising repression affects humanitarian organisations too. Aid workers say that due to the [criminalisation of their work](#), they are now frequently unable to access those in need – not because of crime, but because state and police forces stop them.

“Accessing [the city's] most vulnerable sectors has become an odyssey,” said Camargo. “As community leaders, humanitarian workers, and volunteers, we are exposed to being detained; [we are persecuted and threatened](#) for the single reason of helping the most vulnerable. It is a challenge to be agents of positive changes.”

She added that *colectivos* also prevent community leaders from reaching places where the people most in need live. NGO workers consulted by The New Humanitarian said these barriers have forced aid programmes to close in many marginalised areas.

According to the NGO leader who sees this as the worst crisis in the past two decades, rural areas are the most affected, including poor sectors outside of Caracas controlled by Maduro's forces and supporters. There, carrying out any type of intervention requires authorisation from those acting as the local authority, and “that is impossible to obtain”, he said.

To survive, many Venezuelans are now left with no choice but to rely on the so-called *bolsas CLAP* – government-funded food boxes delivered to the poor. But Nayari from La Vega said they “are often full of insects and the food they contain has expired”.

Other Caracas residents interviewed by The New Humanitarian confirmed that rotten meat and fish are frequently delivered in the boxes, but said many people have no other option than to eat the contaminated food.

Adriana, a 37-year-old single mother of five, said her children don't even ask her for food anymore. "They know I have no food to give them," she said. "They got used to being starved."

*Edited by Daniela Mohor.*