

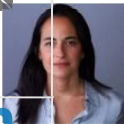
HUMAN
RIGHTS
WATCH

May 8, 2019 10:15AM EDT

Available In English Español



Venezuela: The Defection That Turned into Exile

Published in *Caracas Chronicles***Tamara Taraciuk Broner**

Acting Deputy Director, Americas Division

@TamaraTaraciuk



Chest vests belonging to defected members of Venezuela's Bolivarian National Guard sit in room where they are sleeping at a shelter run by a priest in Cucuta, Colombia, Monday, Feb. 25, 2019. © 2019 AP Photo/Christine Armario

Colombian authorities say that more than 1,400 members of Venezuela's security forces have arrived in their country, fleeing Venezuela. Most arrived on, or since February 23rd, the day that Juan

Guaidó, National Assembly president challenging Nicolás Maduro, said he would deliver humanitarian aid to **Venezuela**. He called on the military to “put themselves on the side of the Constitution” and rebel against the Maduro government.

I’ve been talking with these former officers, and they have offered a glimpse into life inside Venezuela’s security apparatus.

First, their superiors issued explicit orders to repress anti-government demonstrations, or ordered them to “be tough, without pity or compassion” toward those trying to bring humanitarian aid into Venezuela. Two of them said that their superiors were involved in drug trafficking or had helped stall investigations into such crimes, allegations consistent with **ongoing investigations**

 **abroad and research by independent groups.**

 Several officers reported that their families in Venezuela are being harassed after they fled and that armed pro-government thugs, *colectivos*, marked some of their homes by drawing a circle with a line through it on the wall, as though canceling them. One said that a family member of his had been  detained. More than 670 of the deserters’ family members have joined them in Colombia, according to official sources.

 During our interview in a hot, windowless office in the border town of Cucuta, in Northern Colombia, a former sergeant in the Bolivarian National Guard told me that fear of being labeled a  traitor had kept him in line, but he got sick of “not being able to say anything” about the corruption and cruelty of the Maduro government. It was the so-called “Delay Operation” that the National Guard began on February 22nd—to keep humanitarian assistance out of Venezuela—that finally  prompted him to flee.

 The 15 people we interviewed said that when they lived in barracks, in Venezuela, they went for several months without three full meals a day. Like many Venezuelans during the crisis, they said, they lost a lot of weight. All of them said the money they earned wasn’t enough to buy food and other necessities for their families.

But they also said that life after they defected hasn’t been what they had hoped for. In fact, this exodus highlights the complexity of Venezuela’s protracted crisis. For the first time in over two years that I’ve spent interviewing fleeing Venezuelans in Latin America, I heard several of these men and women say they were better off in Venezuela than in Colombia. This is noteworthy, even though they probably had greater access to food and services than the average Venezuelan, now suffering a **devastating humanitarian emergency**.

Most have sought refugee status in Colombia. However, international standards allow members of the military to be considered asylum seekers only when they have “**genuinely and permanently renounced military activities**” and the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) only considers refugee claims from civilians. So these men and women seeking asylum need to sign a document saying they had given up arms, but some have publicly declared that they would take up

arms to “overthrow Maduro,” posing a quandary for Colombian authorities and the UN refugee agency. In addition, some of the former soldiers may be implicated in abuses, which could disqualify them for refugee status.

But many have a well-founded fear of persecution if they are returned to Venezuela. On February 27th, an executive decree **expelled 116 people from the Armed Forces—including several of those I interviewed—and accused them of treason**. If they return, they’ll most likely be arrested and prosecuted for treason. In a country where the judiciary lacks even a semblance of independence, there would be no credible guarantees of due process **and they would risk torture**.

Meanwhile, the former security force members are trying to rebuild their lives in a border city where Venezuelans arrive by the thousands. Hundreds of these former officers are housed in seven hotels in Cucuta, where they receive three meals a day, but the continuity of such aid is uncertain. They also receive support, personal items, and care from a medical doctor who is part of a network of Venezuelan volunteers called Movement of Those Born on the Pavement. Another 40 officers live in a church shelter, which was designed to accommodate just 10, so some sleep on mattresses on the floor.

Although Colombian authorities told us that these former security forces members have permission to work, none of those we interviewed were aware that they could, and all said prospective employers routinely tell them that they cannot hire them with their papers saying they’re seeking asylum.

Some are working illegally. Most spend their days watching time go by and worrying about how long the aid they receive will last. The Colombian government should carefully evaluate individual cases of former soldiers who have renounced military activity and ensure that Colombian employers know it’s legal for these women and men to work, issuing them an ID that explicitly says so, if necessary.

In reality, their situation is not unlike the life of asylum-seekers in other parts of the world who struggle to rebuild their lives away from home, but it is certainly different from what many of them expected when they were welcomed as heroes, after crossing the border.

\$50 \$100

\$500 \$1,000 Other



Region / Country Americas, Venezuela

MORE READING



May 3, 2019 | News Release

Venezuela: Violent Response to Demonstrators



April 9, 2019 | News Release

UN Security Council: Support Venezuela Emergency Declaration



REPORTS



August 8, 2019

The War in Catatumbo

Abuses by Armed Groups Against Civilians Including Venezuelan Exiles in Northeastern Colombia



June 19, 2019

Crackdown in Nicaragua

Torture, Ill-Treatment, and Prosecutions of Protesters and Opponents

MORE READING



May 3, 2019 | News Release

Venezuela: Violent Response to Demonstrators



April 9, 2019 | News Release

UN Security Council: Support Venezuela Emergency Declaration

