

THE BROOKINGS INSTITUTION

BROOKINGS CAFETERIA PODCAST

INTERVIEW WITH COLOMBIA'S TOP OFFICIAL FOR THE VENEZUELAN
REFUGEE CRISIS

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PROCEEDINGS

DEWS: Welcome to the Brookings Cafeteria, the Podcast about ideas and the experts who have them. I'm Fred Dews and I'm joined today in the Brookings Podcast Network studio by Dany Bahar, a fellow in the Global Economy and Development program at Brookings. Dany is here to share his interview with the Colombian government official in charge of managing his government's response to the humanitarian crisis of Venezuelan refugees. Dany, welcome back.

BAHAR: Thank you, Fred. I'm glad to be here.

DEWS: I went back, and I counted at least six times that you've been on Brookings' Podcasts in the last three and a half years to talk about this issue, so it's a continuing crisis. Can you remind listeners how the crisis began in Venezuela?

BAHAR: Yeah, well, the crises are a result of 20 years of mismanagement in Venezuela, from the economic point of view and political, but a crisis that has really become much stronger in the past four or five years. Venezuela, now, is going through one of the worst humanitarian crises that the hemisphere has seen. It's comparable, really, to countries undergoing war conflict. People are losing weight entirely; people are dying from preventable diseases. That has resulted in a huge refugee crisis; the largest refugee crisis the hemisphere has seen, and in a few months is going to be the largest ever in the past decades.

DEWS: Tell listeners who they are going to hear from in your interview today.

BAHAR: I'll be talking to Felipe MUÑOZ. Felipe MUÑOZ is a special

advisor to the President of Colombia, Ivan Duque, to the border between Venezuela and Colombia. Meaning, he really oversees and manages every aspect of the government and all the coordination between agencies in their response to the Venezuelan refugee crisis. As of today, Colombia is the largest recipient of Venezuelan refugees and they have, at least, 1.5 million Venezuelans that have arrived mostly in the past three or four years.

DEWS: Now, I know your conversation with MUÑOZ covers a lot of ground about the crisis; how it affects both his country of Colombia, how it affects Venezuela and all the various issues and ideas for solving the problem. But, what's the most important thing that you want listeners to take away from this interview that they're about to hear?

BAHAR: I think that when we look at Colombia, and also other countries in the region but mostly Colombia, what is really interesting and fascinating is how, in spite of being a developing country that is struggling on its own, in terms of provisions of public services, their own society, et cetera. They are facing a refugee crisis that is, as I said before, one of the largest that the hemisphere has seen or that the world has seen, and they still look at this in a positive way.

There is an opportunity here for them to grow economically but also a moral responsibility given the ties that are between the two countries, Venezuela and Colombia, the historic ties. So, this is very different than what we've seen in other parts of the world where usually countries are closing the doors to migrants and refugees. The United States itself, it's in the lowest level of admissions of refugees

in its history. But yet, we see Colombia that is, if anything, they're opening their doors more and more.

DEWS: Well, Dany, I want to thank you for bringing this interview to us, and also for your continued attention to and analysis of this very important issue. Thank you.

BAHAR: Thank you, Fred.

DEWS: And now here's Dany Bahar with Felipe MUÑOZ, the Advisor to the President of Colombia for the Colombian-Venezuelan border.

BAHAR: Hi, Felipe, and welcome to the Brookings Cafeteria.

MUÑOZ: Hi, Dany. It's my pleasure to be here with you.

BAHAR: So, Felipe, you are managing, on behalf of the Colombian government, one of the biggest crises that the hemisphere has seen in the recent years and it's the Venezuelan migration and refugee crisis. And, as of now, we know that there are at least 4.5 million Venezuelans that have fled in the last four or five years. How many of them are in Colombia?

MUÑOZ: Dany, more than 33 percent of the migrants that have fled Venezuela in the last three years are coming to Colombia and stay in a permanent way. But, on top of --

BAHAR: That's about 1.5 million.

MUÑOZ: Yes, that's about 1.5-1.6 million according to the latest data provided by Migration Colombia, which is the entity in charge of control of the migration process in Colombia. But, on top of that, you have also the Colombian

returnees. You have to remember that so many years ago there were a lot of Colombians that had fled to Venezuela due to internal conflict that are now returning in the last three years. We calculate that we have received more than half a million Colombian returnees, and on top of that you have migrants in transit.

Colombia is the main exit point for Venezuela then the people that want to go to Ecuador, to Peru, and to other countries in South America cross Colombia. The last year we finalized the year with near one million Venezuelans that have crossed through Colombia to the other countries. And to complete the picture, you have the pendular or cyclical migration around the border. Just in Cucuta and Villa del Rosario, which are the two main cities at the border, you have around 30,000 people that cross the border everyday just to get out their remittances and to buy the most basic things that they can have in Venezuela.

BAHAR: So, they come to Colombia in the border, they go back at the end of the day --

MUÑOZ: Yes.

BAHAR: -- or they stay there for a week?

MUÑOZ: Just for a day, for two days. They come to receive the vaccines for the kids, to receive food even. We have commoner kitchens where they provide more than 10,000 meals per day to the people that just cross the border just to get a meal per day. And also, to buy food, to buy medicines; this is a very complicated situation at the border.

BAHAR: Well, and Colombia is a country of 50 million people, almost 50

million people. So, this, if we're talking about 1.5 to 2 million people that have joined the country in the past few years, that's more than two percent of the population --

MUÑOZ: Yeah. It's near to three percent now.

BAHAR: Near to three percent. Tell us a little bit about these people. I mean, I visited the border sometimes we've met there, and we talked about it here in the Brooking Cafeteria. But tell us a bit about the needs that these people have. Do they come in need for health services? Do they really have important humanitarian needs?

MUÑOZ: We have recently in Colombia, in the last 10 years I think, three waves of migration from Venezuela. The first wave was seven or eight years ago when some people with some money come to Colombia. After that some people from the oil industry arrived to Colombia. But now in the last two years, the people that are coming is the most vulnerable people in the population in Venezuela. The conditions, the health conditions, the malnutrition of the kids, the critical condition as the pregnant women arrive in Colombia have created a very complicated health system at the border.

To give you a recent statistic in the hospitals in Cucuta at the border; for every Colombia that are born, you have three Venezuelans now. Then it's one, two, three, and of course you can imagine the complication in the capacity and the ability just to cope with this kind of migration. But yes, in the last two years, the conditions are more critical day by day as the process in Venezuela is getting worse in the health system and the location system. Of course, we are receiving more vulnerable

population.

BAHAR: And just for our listeners to know a little bit the geography of Colombia. So, cities like Cucuta, who are really in the border with Venezuela that have the largest crossing between the two countries are Maicao and the Department of La Guajira, those are the places that have the biggest affluence of migrants and refugees. I think that in Cucuta or it's Department, which is Norte de Santander, the share of Venezuelans in the population is huge. It's more than 20 percent, at least in Cucuta, right?

MUÑOZ: No, it's higher than that. You have to consider that we have more than 2,000 kilometers of border. But, of course, between 75 and 80 percent of the population cross for one point which is in Villa del Rosario. Then, it's in (inaudible) which is like a symbol for this process and you can see in the pictures and in the news is where the people cross the most.

But, yes, today we have 33 percent of the migrants on the border cities. We have the 67 percent all over the country. This is not any more like a border issue, this is a national issue. But, of course, in relative terms, you still have municipalities at the border where the population have grown between 12 to 37 percent. Then, of course, you can imagine that we have at least 10 municipalities that are in really, really, complicated problems in terms of their provision of their social services.

BAHAR: And you're talking about hospitals and schools in those areas and we're going to get to that because I want to talk about the funding that you've received coupled with this crisis. But, one question that I have that I think you face

this every day is that, Colombia is a bit different than all the other countries that are also receiving a lot of these migrants. Not only because it's the largest recipient, but also because Venezuela was the largest trading partner of Colombia, historically. We've written a lot about, and people already know how Venezuela was actually the richest country in the region in the 1970's and 80's, and a lot of the development of Colombia was thanks to its trade and its relations with Venezuela.

So, you have a situation now where, not only you have a huge inflow of migrants that might be putting some pressures on labor markets in the short term, but you also have another huge challenge that people don't talk about that much, which is that the Venezuelan economy collapsed. And the moment that the Venezuelan economy collapsed, all the -- particularly the bordering towns that lived out of trade with Venezuela, they just don't have any more economic activities. So, that also significantly affects the dynamic. Do you see that in your tasks, in your day to day?

MUÑOZ: Yes. It's really interesting because you have to remember that between Colombia and Venezuela, we have reached points of commerce, of bilateral commerce, around seven billion dollars, eight/ten years ago and now it's almost zero. Then of course, you have to consider that all the cities along the border, but especially Cucuta and Villa del Rosario and these cities in Norte de Santander, which is the state where Cucuta's located of course, have suffered with this economic collapse because they maintain a lot of commercial connections. And, of course, the crisis at the border began before the migration crisis.

But, of course, when you receive on top of this economic condition, a new

situation this ample and immense amount of people, of course, your crisis is going deeper. But, of course, the crisis began well before when Chavez decided just to cut off all the commerce between the two nations, which is so sad.

BAHAR: Right. And of course, it has played a big toll, needless to say, to Venezuela.

MUÑOZ: Yes. Yes, no, of course, because it's the same. The states of the border (inaudible) have very intense commerce relation along this history.

BAHAR: So, Felipe, I was born and raised in Venezuela, and that's also one of the reasons that I, here at Brookings, write so much about it. And I also work on migration academically, and when you are born and raised in Venezuela, you always are surrounded by the thought that Colombia is our sister country, right? Venezuela and Colombia, Venezuela is Colombia's best friend and Colombia's Venezuela's best friend. And I think that now we are seeing that, and I want to get your thoughts on this in particular, because what Colombia is definitely, as we said, the largest recipient of these migration refugee crises. But migrants are going to other places too; Peru and Ecuador are other larger recipients, Brazil is becoming an important one, some people even go to Chile, Argentina. But Colombia, by far, stays the largest recipient.

Not only that, a lot of the people that go to Ecuador and Peru, they actually traveled through Colombia. Yet, we've seen something that I think is a sad development that some countries in the region, Peru, Ecuador, Chile, they have imposed some Visa restrictions in an effort to regulate the flows. These particularly

are a difficult situation because a lot of these migrants don't have passports because it's hard to get a passport in Venezuela. It's a very expensive luxury to have because there's no material and it involves a lot of corruption and so on.

Yet, Colombia has stayed open. Colombia continues with a policy of open borders, of course, regulated with the rule of law. But it has never thought that at some point this is too much for us, we're going to impose Visa's, we're going to close the border. Why is that?

MUÑOZ: I think there are three main reasons. The first one is that we have an historical responsibility here. Remember that more than three million Colombian's live in Venezuela for so many years and they have their economic opportunities. They form their families there and now we have, like, this historical responsibility just to help in their situation that the Venezuelans are coming. But secondly, and I think its most important is, this is an ethical imperative.

We have seen, like, the collapse of the ones, the most richest nation and we have to help them. And third, this is a political decision. This is a political decision leading by the President Duque and the government of Colombia. That along the government maintain a very high-level pressure in diplomatical terms just for the (inaudible) in Venezuela. At the same time, we have to be with open arms just to receive the people. They are not going to Colombia just for tourist. They are going because they are escaping for the more incredible condition that you have seen in the region in decades.

But also, I have to say that because we need to see this in Colombia as an

opportunity, as an economic opportunity in the medium term. We need to obtain, or to get advantage, about the demographic pointers because the people that are coming from Venezuela are younger than the Colombian people. Some of them have a lot of skills that we need to get advantage of this, and at the same time that we continue to work tiredly in the humanitarian process and try to help the people in the most basic needs. Parallel to that, we are working on economic inclusion for migrant's policy that we recently launched it and maybe we can talk about --

BAHAR: Yeah, tell us more about that because I think that what people see from the outside is that this huge amount of migrants and refugees, they are in need of humanitarian assistance which is true. But, there's another part of the coin here, which is that you guys in the government of Colombia have been putting forward a lot of programs to integrate them into the labor force to take advantage. And you know, I always say that what could make this huge migration and refugee wave an opportunity instead of a burden, is that choice of public policy. So, I know that you guys have been working very strongly on that. So, tell us a little bit about the biggest programs that you have and maybe the challenges that you are facing now.

MUÑOZ: Now, we decided just to look what are the main bottlenecks within the public sector for our people who obtain the special permit. We regularize around 600,000 people in the last two years and we will continue in the same path.

BAHAR: So, these are people, for our listeners to understand --

MUÑOZ: Yes.

BAHAR: -- Venezuelans can't work in Colombia, right? They can come in as

tourists in terms of the law, but you have now a lot of people that are crossing the border without the proper documentation, most likely because they don't have passports. So, you guys had a plan to regularize --

MUÑOZ: Yes.

BAHAR: -- tell us a little about that.

MUÑOZ: Yes, in the last two years they decided just to begin to regularize some of the people regardless of their migratory status. I mean, some people crossing from the regular pathways that are in the irregular condition. Noticing that, we decided just to give them, to 600,000 of them, special permits with state regulated --

BAHAR: Like a Visa.

MUÑOZ: Yes, it's similar to Visa, it's a special temporary permit that allows them just to stay in a regular way, to access to all the social services but also, and most important, access to a job, to a form of job.

BAHAR: And they can work with no restrictions?

MUÑOZ: They only have restriction in certain works that needs a special permit. For example, if you're a doctor, you need a proper validation or your diploma. Or if you're an engineer there are five or six --

BAHAR: Occupations.

MUÑOZ: -- occupations that need another paperwork and another condition. But in general terms, you are regular in the country.

BAHAR: Okay.

MUÑOZ: Then this is the thing, we will continue to do so. We are planning for another two waves of regularization. We can talk about it later.

BAHAR: And I want to underscore this. You cannot say it, but I will say it, which is this is an incredibly generous program because in many countries you see a lot of discussions about undocumented migrants. It's even very hard to see a discussion whether they should be regularized or not. Mostly there are these discussions of whether they can stay, or they should be deported. And Colombia just went ahead and regularized more than half a million Venezuelan migrants and refugees who were in an irregular status, were undocumented. And Colombia is still there, it still exists. Everything seems to be working fine, right? And this is very generous. I don't think there's any other country that has done such a large regularization process.

MUÑOZ: Not in terms of this magnitude but, yes. For example, Peru, to be clear, has a similar special temporary permit for them and in Argentina and Chile they have created some sort of permits. All South America have been very creative trying to find the legal ways to regularize. But, of course, in terms of magnitude we are ahead of the group trying to integrate these people. And, we identify what are the main bottlenecks that we have in the public sector.

Just to when the people receive the special temporary permit, how they really can get a job. And of course, you find a lot of bureaucratic bottlenecks and we are working on them. Just for name some of them, for example, financial inclusion. We are working with the Banks trying to the Banks say, allow the Venezuelans with the

special permit to have a bank account. Or, for example, we are working in the validation of the diplomas for the Venezuelan people.

We are working with Universities, we need an agreement with Universities and the Universities can certify if you present your diploma, this a valid diploma. We have a set of tasks that we need to accomplish very quickly just to try to integrate these people into the labor market, they begin just to pay taxes. The most important, they begin to be part of the health insurance, the public health insurance, and in that way, we can protect this population.

BAHAR: And do you see that it's working so far? Do you see that Venezuelans are actually having jobs? Are they actually being integrated into the labor markets? I know that Colombia, similarly to other Latin American countries, have very large informal labor market.

MUÑOZ: Yeah, the results are not faster than we expected but, of course, we need to maintain the process because this is really recent process. For example, if you go to the internship, we have seen in the statistic from the Chamber of Commerce of Bogota and other cities, that the creation of companies by Venezuelans are growing and growing month by month. Then, of course, if we create the legal and the financial environment to be friendly, I think we are not only have more works available, but also maybe we are going to have and to experience a creation of more companies run by Venezuelans.

And we are working on that, it's not an easy task. We have a process of unemployment for our local people. Then, we need to maintain just an equilibrium in

the political arena. Just that we are not just working for the migrants, we are also working for the local people. But we need to find some places, for example, the Electoral Federation of Coffee Producers said in an interview yesterday, that most of the recent production of coffee was taken by Venezuelans in the majority of the process.

Then, we need to find the places, not only geographic places where we need people to work, also we need the sectors and we are working trying to identify this and to put this labor available to these places.

BAHAR: Let's talk about costs a little bit because I think that a lot of arguments that people make when they think of these huge refugee crises is that of all type of costs. Usually there's some perceptions that are negative towards migrants and refugees because, roughly speaking, cost, as I say. So, for instance, people think that migrants or refugees will displace locals in their jobs. Some people would say that it's very costly for the state to pay for migrants and refugees.

So, I guess I have two questions. One is, do you see this happening when you look at the economic evidence, you find very little evidence of this in the country. You find that migrants and refugees actually tend to create jobs, as you said before with entrepreneurship. And migrants and refugees are usually in the medium term, not a burden, but actually they contribute to taxes more than what they take. So, what's the discussion now in the Colombian government about that? How do you see it?

MUÑOZ: I think we have a mixed picture now. Of course, we have some

research provided by the World Bank and Fedesarrollo, which is a local think tank and the International Monetary Fund, and they calculate how much it will cost for Colombia just to obtain this amount of people; providing in there with food services. And this is around 0.5 percent of the GDP annually which is around \$1.5 billion per year. We have received in the last three years, 450 million dollars in international cooperation.

BAHAR: Only Colombia.

MUÑOZ: Just only Colombia, in three years, which is around \$150 million dollars per year, which is like 10 percent of the money that, according to this calculation, what we needed, and then 90 percent is provided by the government of Colombia. Yes, in the short term, but at the same time these studies also show that in the medium term it's going to be useful for Colombia, even for the growth of Colombia. The thing is that we are in the first two years of the process. But even, for example, we have an independent committee that works with the Minister of Finance trying to maintain the fiscal rule in place. The fiscal rule is a condition for Colombia, this is in the Constitution, that you have to maintain, like, a path or decrease your --

BAHAR: The debt to the GDP ratio.

MUÑOZ: -- the debt to -- according to the GDP ratio. And the last year they said, okay you can spend a little more because you have this big influx of migrants. But in the same paper they say because we are expecting that in two or three years this economic inclusion of these migrants is going to produce some revenues for the country.

BAHAR: So, we just have a few minutes left, but just to go back to the big picture. You mentioned funding from outside and a recent article we just published by me and my colleague, Meagan Dooley, we were looking a little bit at the numbers. And what we see, for instance, is that a lot of people thought that the Venezuelan crisis will surpass the Syrian one. What we see is that it already had. It already had when you look at relative to the number of years that the crisis has been going on.

So, for instance, the Venezuelan crisis you could say has been going on for four years. The number of Venezuelan refugees is 4.5 or 4.6. It's pretty similar to the number of Syrian refugees when it was four year into the crisis. So, in relative terms the Venezuelan refugee crisis is almost there. But where it's very, very, different that we also show, is the funding from international community and four years in the Syrian crisis or funding from the international community to help refugees resettle, was maybe around \$10 billion from international community; \$10 billion.

What we see today from the Venezuelan refugee crisis is that even though there's an appeal and the U.N. agencies are asking for money, in fact, the money that actually has been received and dispersed is less than \$600 million. If you just compare in per capita numbers, then the comparison is crazy. We're talking about thousands of dollars per Syrian refugee but for Venezuelan refugees is maybe just about \$100, no more than that. And funding is really important. Not only for humanitarian needs but I guess also for the task of integrating people into the labor force because you need to, maybe, provide credits to firms to employ migrants and

all the other Colombian people too and so on.

Of course, this is an obvious question, but do you feel this pressure that you really think that there should be more help towards your way from the international community? What are you doing about it and what are the big programs that, even though you don't have this help as much as you want it, what are the things that you are doing?

MUÑOZ: Totally agree and you are not the only one that are talking about it. Filippo Grandi, the Director of UNRWA, in the last conference in Brussels one month ago, said in her opening remarks at the conference that this is the most underfunded migrant and refugee crisis in the world. And he as a leader, of the UNRWA, this is a very important voice.

Yes, we are worried about it, but we decided just to go and to raise awareness about what is happening in the region. Not only in Venezuela, which is absolutely a disaster, but also for the receiving countries. This could create, if not managed well, instability for all the region. This is not only just a Latin American problem; I think it could be considered a regional and a world problem and a world crisis and we need to work on it.

And we are working tiredly following the orders of the President Duque with the former Minister of Foreign Affairs, Cuellar, and now with Minister Blum, going to all the international forums, heightening our voice and saying, hey we need more help. We want to maintain our borders open, this is the political decision of the President, but we need more help. Yes, we have your figures and we use it in our

international forum because they're really useful and when you show the people that this is the reality then the people is getting surprised. And yes, we are here in Washington. We traveled to Europe and we are going to all international forums that we have to go just to raise awareness; just to explain to the international community that, yes, we need more help.

BAHAR: Well, Felipe, we ran out of time but we're really thankful for you being here and for everything you are doing, and the Colombia government is doing, for the Venezuelan migrants and refugees. We hope to help you guys in achieving all of your goals and make out of this a huge opportunity for the growth and the success of Colombia.

MUÑOZ: Now, it is my pleasure to be here at Brookings, it's an honor and thank you very much for all your support.

DEWS: The Brookings Cafeteria Podcast is the product of an amazing team of colleagues starting with audio engineer, Gaston Reboredo and producer Chris McKenna. Bill Finan, Director of the Brookings Institute Press, does the book interviews and Lisette Baylor and Eric Abalahin provide design and web support.

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Until next time, I'm Fred Dews.

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Carleton J. Anderson, III

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