

The Venezuelan Crisis Spills Over Into a Small Island – Trinidad and Tobago

Written by Faies Jafar

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FAIES JAFAR, AUG 31 2018

The overwhelming influx of Venezuelan migrants and refugees regionally has spilled over to small island states in the Caribbean including Trinidad and Tobago which offers visa free entry for up to 90 days for business and tourist visitors. Cedros, a bustling fishing village in Trinidad's southern tip is the closest legal entry point, lying less than ten miles across the rocky Atlantic Ocean, from Tucupita in the Venezuelan state of Delta Amacuro.

The coastal nation of Trinidad and Tobago, comprising 1.3 million people and extending a mere 1,980 square miles, has never experienced a high density of irregular migrants and the influx of Venezuelans into the island has emerged as an issue of concern.

A major problem lies with Trinidad and Tobago lacking domestic legislations to incorporate the 1951 Convention Relating to the Status of Refugees and its 1967 Protocol signed in November 2000, into law. It has left the executive power with no choice but to rely on existing immigration laws which create a conflict particularly with asylum seeking applicants.

Venezuelans, living illegally in the country after their period of stay has expired, are regularly rounded up by the police and taken to an immigration detention centre. Some detainees claimed they were arrested despite applying for refugee status.

Last April, the government of Trinidad and Tobago followed a bureaucratic process supported by their legal framework when 82 Venezuelans were repatriated to Caracas which attracted criticism locally and from the UNHRC, particularly over allegations that some had applied for asylum. The repatriation process as Trinidad and Tobago officials claimed was organized with the Venezuelan embassy and the detained individuals were given the freedom to decide whether they wanted to return to Caracas.

Debate on the impact of irregular migrants on Trinidad and Tobago, still recovering from a recession, is centered on the state's readiness to contain the steady flow of Venezuelan migrants. The rhetoric of framing their status reflects a clear epistemic problem.

The Living Water Community, a religious based organization, which acts as the implementing partner of the UN Refugee Agency, UNHCR, has called for the protection of Venezuelan migrants on humanitarian grounds and because some were seeking asylum.

David Abdulah, political leader of the Movement for Social Justice, falsified the narrative of asylum seeking needs on the basis that Venezuela enjoys a functioning democracy; therefore, an economic crisis cannot be an excuse to shelter illegally migrating Venezuelans. It must, however, be pointed out that there is no such economic refugee status under the UNHCR.

The island's government is also very careful in designing their policy towards the problem. The framing of their action has been designed to respond to possible domestic criticism into a problem that is seen, from a humanistic

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perspective, as local rather than foreign issue. At the international level, the Trinidad and Tobago government has attempted to take advantage of certain norms it has followed with its closest neighbor Venezuela to ease up possible reactions.

Historically, the two countries enjoyed very stable relations. Trinidad and Tobago's reputation of neutralism encouraged the former Trinidadian Prime Minister Patrick Manning, for instance, to attempt to play a major role in establishing some rapport between USA and Venezuela during the Organization of American States (OAS) 2009 summit held in Port of Spain, the island's capital.

Challenges facing relations between Trinidad and Tobago and Venezuela are often resolved through quiet diplomacy and this has been the modus operandi over the last three decades. Therefore, a repatriation of irregular Venezuelan migrants necessitated a careful selection of words, and close cooperation with the Venezuelan Embassy by Trinidad and Tobago's officials.

Trinidad and Tobago's government's policy towards this unique challenge is bounded by the small state's limited material abilities and the need to maintain good neighbor relations with Venezuela. Both countries also share lucrative oil and gas fields running along their maritime borders.

Trinidad and Tobago's position may seem passive as compared to other regional states such as Brazil and Columbia which decided to tighten their borders in February this year by adopting an active policy of stricter migratory controls. Their policy included deployment of thousands of new security personnel and soldiers among other measures. In early August, Columbia adjusted their policy, allowing 440,000 Venezuelan migrants to remain in the country.

For objective reasons, duplicating such policies in the case of Trinidad and Tobago may not be optimal. The Caribbean island naturally controls the entries of migrants since it shares no land borders. Venezuelans arrive either through the sea port or the airport. Individuals entering the country illegally can be sentenced up to six months in jail with hard labor.

In spite of such control, the picture on the number of the irregular Venezuelan migrants seems unclear. The Living Water Community estimated the number as 20,000 in 2016 and up to 40,000 in September 2017. A vastly contradicting figure came from the Acting National Security Minister Dennis Moses in June 2017 that between January and May 2017 there were 1,015 illegal Venezuelans in Trinidad and Tobago.

Having accurate data, sufficient laws and legal procedures in place, apart from being transparent in informing the public, can play a decisive role in exploring and debating the problem in any democratic state, and Trinidad and Tobago should not be excluded in this regard. Having these in place will reduce speculation and confusion which is the current case.

Being a small state, unfamiliar with tackling irregular migrants and having limited resources, Trinidad and Tobago is left with minimal options; and this is not an excuse for policy failure. Crafting an active policy without appearing to be anti-Venezuela adds more constraints. Among these options, Trinidad and Tobago may include: 'continue to repatriate' a policy that may demotivate new arrivals; impose 'visa restrictions temporarily' or 'visa on arrival with limited time to reside' which makes it unfeasible to stay.

Another issue the influx of the Venezuelans helps to explore is the adherence to the 1951 Convention. In spite of the signage and the ratification of the Convention, most of its articles are not materialized by the Trinidad and Tobago's state agencies. Including some NGOs, such as the Living Water Community, in ad hoc procedures may provide insufficient solution. In the long term, the current and similar complex evolving problems require highly adaptive and creative policies in place.

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Faies Jafar obtained his Ph.D. at the Institute of International Relations at the University of the West Indies, Trinidad and Tobago. His areas of interest are international relations theory, small states behavior, political psychology, chaos and complexity science, foreign policy analysis and Middle East politics. He is currently a Senior Instructor at the University of Trinidad and Tobago, Project Management and Civil Infrastructure Systems Group.