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Opinion - Venezuela's Migrants and the Challenges of Trinidad and Tobago

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FAIES JAFAR, JAN 31 2021

On December 15, the UN Refugee Agency (UNHCR) and the International Organization for Migration (IOM) expressed their deep distress over the drowning deaths of Venezuelan adults and children who were on their way to the small Caribbean twin-island state of Trinidad and Tobago. The bodies were found in Guiria, a Venezuelan coastal town 70 kilometers away from the nearest coast of Trinidad and Tobago. The 8-people capacity boat was dangerously overloaded with 41 Venezuelans who had no life jackets or navigation equipment. Venezuela's officials announced that the unfortunate event was not the first of its kind; an estimated 100 persons went missing over 2018/2019 and noted that 118 human trafficking cases were recorded since 2017. Unofficially, these figures could be much higher.

Over the last five years, due to the ongoing economic crises in Venezuela, millions of Venezuelans have fled their homes mainly to other regional Spanish-speaking countries that either share land borders with Venezuela or have maritime borders like Trinidad and Tobago.

Contemporary history shows that the sea journey of irregular migration worldwide is not risk-free. The media regularly report tragedies of attempts in the eastern region of the Mediterranean Sea and North African coasts. For the Venezuelan case, such stories i.e. tragedies associated with sea crossing from Venezuela to Trinidad and Tobago, are unique.

In April 2019, with a large influx of Venezuelans arriving through different beaches, the government of Trinidad and Tobago imposed a registration system for Venezuelan migrants. The registration allowed them a one-year settlement which permitted them to work in the country. At the end of the registration period, some 16,500 Venezuelans were allowed to live in the country for a year which was extended by another six months until the end of 2020. The government recently announced that the registered Venezuelans would be given another six months to remain in the country during which time they will need to re-register. Trinidad and Tobago's government also imposed visa restrictions on Venezuelan passports since June 2019.

Despite their policy, the Trinidad and Tobago government faced criticisms from UN bodies that not enough was being done by the small island state apart from ill-treating Venezuelans. The UN Human Rights Office spokesperson Liz Throssell added that 'all refugees and migrants, regardless of status, are entitled to the respect and protection of their human rights'.

At the international level, the prime minister, Dr. Keith Rowley had to frequently respond to external pressure to accept Venezuelans as refugees. He recently stated that 'Trinidad and Tobago is currently under the latest assault using nameless, faceless people armed with innocent children, to try and force his country to accept their understanding of 'refugee status and international treaty' where a little island nation of 1.3 million people must be expected to maintain open borders to a next-door neighbor of 34 million people even during a pandemic. This is a matter not for the OAS [Organization of American States] but for the people of Trinidad and Tobago.'

The statement explains how Trinidad and Tobago-Venezuela issues and challenges are extended beyond the influx

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of the irregular economic migrants seeking jobs in the small state Island: it is directed to the ongoing polarization of regional and international politics regarding the Nicolás Maduro regime.

In December 2020, Trinidad and Tobago suspended its participation in voting in the OAS after Juan Guaidó's representative in the OAS, not recognized by the Trinidad and Tobago government, wrongly held the Caribbean island responsible for the drowning of the Venezuelans. This is consistent with Guaidó's accusation in November 2020 of Trinidad and Tobago subjecting Venezuelans to 'cruel treatment'.

The Basis for Trinidad and Tobago's Policy Towards Venezuela

A recent study conducted by the University of the West Indies found that neutralism adopted by Trinidad and Tobago governments since the country's 1962 independence is not a tactical foreign policy choice but rather a strategy. Trinidad and Tobago recognize its limited material power and sensitive geographic location, therefore, crafting foreign policies aimed at maintaining the status quo 'neutralism strategy' and appearing not to be anti to any state is a major motivational factor in the formulation of the country's policy. This also explains Trinidad and Tobago's rejection to join US efforts to force President Maduro out of office.

On the material resources side, Trinidad and Tobago's position is not baseless. This 1.3 million country's economy is experiencing a challenging period. The migrants per citizen ratio is noticeably high. Dr. Rowley said his country 'per square km and per capita' has more fleeing Venezuelans than any other nation. The ratio of registered Venezuelan migrant to Trinidad and Tobago citizen is 1.3%; some estimation before the registration process began put the ratio in Trinidad and Tobago up to 3.1% in 2019. In Columbia the ratio of registered migrants to the citizen is 1.5% and unregistered 2% in 2020. In Brazil, this ratio in 2019 reached 0.1% and in Peru which claimed to have the highest ratio, is recorded at 2.5% in early 2020. This ratio is calculated by dividing the number of migrants (registered or unregistered or a combination of both) by the number of residing citizens of the particular state.

Apart from security concerns, governments often become very concerned about the impact of such a rapid and massive influx of irregular migrants on their economy. The ability of the particular state to absorb the economic impact depends on many factors. For simplicity, consider the size of the economy as an independent variable whereby Gross Domestic Product (GDP), the total value of goods and services produced by a particular state annually, is a measure of the size of a nation's overall economy. Trinidad and Tobago's nominal GDP in 2020 is US\$ 22.7 billion, Columbia's GDP is US\$ 265 billion (11.7 times Trinidad and Tobago), Peru's GDP is US\$ 196 billion (8.7 times Trinidad and Tobago) and Brazil's GDP is US\$ 1,364 billion (60 times Trinidad and Tobago). In terms of land, the least among these South American states i.e. Columbia has a land of 1,139,910 sq km which is about 223 times larger than Trinidad and Tobago.

Small states have less ability to cope with economic challenges, limited human and institutional capacity, and 'tend to be disproportionately impacted by global economic crises.' Since 2016, Trinidad and Tobago have recorded negative GDP growth.

On the social level, despite some isolated incidents, it is still early to assess the social impact of the influx of irregular Venezuelan migrants to Trinidad and Tobago. This is a process that takes time and is left to scholars to evaluate. Even with some crimes committed by Venezuelans on the island, there are no published studies that indicate widespread anti-immigration sentiment. It is still early to apply wage competition theory and/or sociological theories on the labor market to explore possible social and other impacts.

Despite some early normative positions taken by some individuals in welcoming Venezuelans, there are now noticeable waves of negative comments on social media by members of the public towards them especially when Venezuelans living in the twin-island criticize the government's policy on deporting migrants.

The Policy Decision Style

Responding to Venezuela's growing situation, Trinidad and Tobago leaders took a single-shot decision at the

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beginning for example with the registering process. This was not enough as the political and economic situation in the neighboring Latin state yields to a certain level of political polarization in the region. This led the government to adopt a series of sequential interactive foreign policy decisions, e.g. determine its position to US efforts against President Maduro, the OAS representation issue, extending the legal status of the documented migrants, etc. The policy decisions suggest that conditional leadership of Trinidad and Tobago was attempted under many constraints to formulate a rational policy to reach relative gains.

Facing such a unique challenge forced Trinidad and Tobago to reinvent the wheel of how to tackle the phenomenon of the influx of irregular migrants on a large scale. Therefore, discourses on the local level in particular reflected typical ideal, sometimes utopian, versus classical realists' views. Moreover, in the absence of having transformational foreign policy decision-making system, as the above study suggested, it became costly and difficult for the policymakers to justify their decision to the public. The absence of the transformational model in the policymaking process adds pressure on the leaders in terms of tracing the national interest under many objective and subjective constraints. Add to this that under conditional and situational leadership style, which is the typical case of Trinidad and Tobago the state seems insufficiently equipped (knowledge) to tackle the phenomenon.

In approaching the situation of irregular migration from Venezuela, Trinidad and Tobago's government needs to go beyond its norms in policy formulation and implementation. These norms are characterized by situational analysis based on surrounding conditions and this might not be enough or efficient. There is a need to invest in the development of pre-adaptation mechanisms for the regional crises; effective information gathering and filtering; evaluation of existing and former foreign policy outcomes and most importantly, to include competencies from different disciplines in assessing proposed policies.

About the author:

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.