

UNASUR

Union of South American Nations The Central American Migrant Caravan

Overview

The idea of a unified South American continent goes back to the 19th century and can be traced as far back as Simon Bolivar, a political and military leader. Known in South America as “*El Libertador*” (The Liberator) for leading the revolution that overthrew the Spanish empire in colonial South America in the early 1800s, he liberated the regions corresponding now to the countries of Venezuela, Bolivia, Colombia, Ecuador, Peru, and Panama.¹ Following this triumph, Bolivar proclaimed the first union of nations in Latin America called “*Gran Colombia*” (Greater Colombia), attempting to unify the South American people. This state constituted of the countries he liberated except Bolivia in addition to Guyana and parts of Brazil.

However, Bolivar’s vision for the region would soon be challenged after the end of the war against Spain, when regional tensions, federalists, and separatist movements emerged within *Gran Colombia*. These movements would split *Gran Colombia* and result in the dissolution of the union thus marking the failure of Bolivar’s vision to create a strong unified government in South America.² Consequently, the idea of a united Latin America was forgotten until over 150 years later, where Brazil would become the lead actor. In the late 1980s, Brazil championed the second coming of a united South America. Given that Brazil accounted then for almost half of the South American GDP (in 1989, Brazil contributed over 425B US dollars³ of the 1006B total GDP of the continent.⁴) and had consolidated its place as the most economically powerful country in the South American continent, neighbouring countries were quick to support the idea. This project would only start to concretely take hold over a decade later, in the early 2000s, when the formation of the Union of South American Nations finally took place.

¹ Fornoff, Fred, et al. *El Libertador: Writings of Simon Bolivar*. Oxford University Press, 2003.

² Fedirka, Alison. “Simon Bolivar’s Vision for Spanish America.” *RealClear World*, 4 Mar. 2016, https://www.realclearworld.com/articles/2016/03/04/simon_bolivars_vision_for_spanish_america.amp.html.

³ “Brazil GDP 1960-2025.” *Macrotrends*, 2025, <https://www.macrotrends.net/countries/BRA/brazil/gdp-gross-domestic-product?q=>. Accessed 5 Jan. 2025.

⁴ “Latin America & Caribbean GDP 1960-2025.” *Macrotrends*, 2025, <https://www.macrotrends.net/countries/LCN/latin-america-caribbean-/gdp-gross-domestic-product>. Accessed 5 Jan. 2025.

Founded in 2004 in Brasilia, the Union of South American Nations (USAN), more commonly known as UNASUR, its Spanish abbreviation as well as the official name of the treaty, consists of an intergovernmental regional body modelled after the European Union. While the main goal of this project is to achieve political, economic and social integration amongst its member states, strengthening political dialogue and promoting social and human development in the continent, one of the other main reasons was for economic independence. Countries in South America, notably Venezuela, wanted to be economically independent from the United States, forming a more stable economy. Representing a population of over 427 million people⁵ and a GDP of almost six trillion dollars⁶, UNASUR had plans for an eventual unified South American parliament, passport and currency. However, it is only in December 2010 (six years after announcing its formation) that UNASUR became a legal entity, when Uruguay agreed to ratify the UNASUR consecutive treaty. The UNASUR consecutive treaty serves as a legal constitution to the union; it outlines its organs, structure, juridical foundation, regulation of members, rules and mandate.⁷ When Uruguay signed the treaty, it became the ninth country to do so, thus completing the number of member-states necessary for the entry of the treaty into force. In the following years, all South American countries would ratify the consecutive treaty, thus facilitating the integration of individual countries into important regional efforts.

This harmony, unfortunately, would not last. As of 2019, UNASUR is largely considered as having failed in its mission to unify the South American continent. Facing one leadership crisis after another, notably because since 2017, its members have been unable to reach a consensus on who should be President or Secretary General of the union. As a result, both posts have been vacant for over two years, greatly affecting the potential effectiveness of the organization. Furthermore, as per the UNASUR consecutive treaty, the organization works by regional consensus⁸ but the significant political and ideological divisions among its members often make reaching a consensus impossible. This is further reinforced by the growing fear in

⁵ “South America Population.” *Worldometers*, 2025, <https://www.worldometers.info/world-population/south-america-population/>. Accessed 5 Jan. 2025.

⁶ “Latin America & Caribbean GDP 1960-2025.” *Macrotrends*, 2025, <https://www.macrotrends.net/countries/LCN/latin-america-caribbean-/gdp-gross-domestic-product>. Accessed 5 Jan. 2025.

⁷ Constitutive Treaty of the Union of South American Nations. Union of South American Nations, 2008, <https://www.gsdr.org/docs/open/regional-organisations/unasur.%202008.%20establishing%20treaty.pdf>.

⁸ Constitutive Treaty of the Union of South American Nations. Union of South American Nations, 2008, <https://www.gsdr.org/docs/open/regional-organisations/unasur.%202008.%20establishing%20treaty.pdf>.

Venezuela's "dictatorship", where neighbouring countries believe that Venezuela is slowly becoming less and less democratic and more and more corrupt.

In 2018, Argentina, Brazil, Chile, Colombia, Paraguay and Peru, announced that they would be suspending their membership for a year citing the lack of organization UNASUR suffered from as the main reason.⁹ Since then, UNASUR's standing has become even more precarious with Colombia, Brazil and Ecuador (the host of UNASUR) announcing that they would be completely withdrawing from the bloc and furthermore seeking to create a whole new regional body, notably with the goal to counter Venezuela's influence in the region.¹⁰ However, in recent years, there was a growing movement of rejoining UNASUR, notably from Argentina, Brazil and Columbia, in hopes of rebuilding the dreams of a united South America.

Note for the Delegates: For the sake of the conference, all original members have been reinstated and Central American countries have been added to the original UNASUR member list. This has been done in order to further debate and to facilitate the process of working with each other. Therefore, while the conflicts and failures that led some countries to leave the Union may be addressed if relevant, as most are, the fact that they left may not. This version of the UNASUR will be framed as a strong regional body.

Migrant Crisis

Over the last few years, countries around Latin and Central America have struggled to effectively deal with the migrant crises that have emerged. Prompted by growing political instability, increases in violence -ranging from unjustified use of force by the government/army/police to violence caused by drug cartels, violent protests, insurgency militias to violence caused by non-organized criminals; poverty; food insecurity; and corruption in their home countries, a growing number of people (notably in Venezuela, El Salvador, Guatemala and Honduras) have migrated towards neighbouring countries, creating waves of migration for which the host countries are often unprepared. The important numbers of Venezuelans creating migrant caravans—large concentrations of people, joining together to travel from one country to the other

⁹ "6 Countries Suspend Membership in UNASUR Regional Bloc." *Associated Press*, 21 Apr. 2018, <https://apnews.com/general-news-c409589b666840378818423808519183>.

¹⁰ Ellsworth, Brian. "South America Creating Regional Bloc to Counter Venezuela: Colombia." *Reuters*, 14 Jan. 2019, <https://www.reuters.com/article/world/south-america-creating-regional-bloc-to-counter-venezuela-colombia-idUSKCN1P828P/>.

by foot—and entering border towns has caused tensions with local communities to rise as the ill-prepared towns struggle to manage the influx of people. The migrants are blamed for rises in petty crime, competition for jobs and healthcare; all issues that were already very much present in these communities before the arrival of Venezuelan migrants but that seemed to have been exacerbated. Their arrival can also have great benefits to the communities welcoming them though; in Chile, for example, about 60% of doctors applying for jobs are Venezuelan.¹¹

As of June 2024, over 7 and a half million Venezuelans had left the country. In what the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees has once called in 2019 the “largest exodus in the recent history of Latin America and the Caribbean,”¹² the situation does not seem to have improved in the past five years. In fact, at the start of 2016, reports claimed there were less than a million migrants and refugees from Venezuela,¹³ clearly indicating that the amount of people leaving the country is increasing at an unprecedented pace in South American history. This is due to numerous factors relating to economy, crime, and most importantly an authoritarian president. However, there has been a general trend that people are now moving in more and more organized groups, heavily demonstrating the frequency that this happens at. Most of these migrants have chosen to stay in South America and the great number of people that has crossed over from one border to another serves to highlight the need to support the receiving countries because while “Latin American and Caribbean countries are doing their part to respond to this unprecedented crisis [...] they cannot be expected to continue doing it without international help”¹⁴ or regional coordination. The host countries have made significant efforts to provide emergency shelter for Venezuelans arriving in the border states and main cities. They are providing tents, relief items, drinking fountains, registration through biometrics, community mobilization, among other social services to facilitate the entry of migrants into the country with the help of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees and other NGOs.¹⁵ More recently, some countries such as

¹¹ “How the Venezuelan Migration Crisis Affects South America.” *Strait Times*, 27 Aug. 2018, <https://www.straitstimes.com/world/americas/how-the-venezuelan-migration-crisis-affects-south-america>.

¹² “Venezuela Situation.” *UNHCR; the UN Refugee Agency*, 2023, <https://www.unhcr.org/emergencies/venezuela-situation>. Accessed 5 Jan. 2025.

¹³ “R4V Response for Venezuelans – Coordination Platform for Refugees and Migrants from Venezuela: Central America and Mexico Situation Report – February 2021.” *Reliefweb*, 15 April 2021, <https://reliefweb.int/report/mexico/r4v-response-venezuelans-coordination-platform-refugees-and-migrants-venezuela-7>.

¹⁴ “Four million have now fled Venezuela, UN ramps up aid to children who remain.” *United Nations News*, 7 Jun. 2019, <https://news.un.org/en/story/2019/06/1040001>.

¹⁵ “Venezuela Situation.” *UNHCR; the UN Refugee Agency*, 2023, <https://www.unhcr.org/emergencies/venezuela-situation>. Accessed 5 Jan. 2025.

Ecuador and Brazil have allowed for facilitated entry into their countries, either with new visa systems or simply allowing free entry. At the same time, countries such as Colombia have changed their policies in 2023 to become more strict as to limit the influx.

Many countries are seemingly struggling to adapt to the continuous arrival of Venezuelan refugees. They are not only facing resource issues, but this change in population has also brought upon social issues such as an increased competition in the job market. Amongst many factors, this has led to a growing sentiment of xenophobia against the Venezuelan population. Thus, many host countries have opted to change their open-door policies, which certainly does not help resolve the situation. Additionally, in Central America, caravans of migrants keep making their way to US borders coming largely from Central America's Northern Triangle -Guatemala, Honduras and El Salvador- where per capital homicide rates remain amongst the world's highest. The same issues that plagued Venezuela plague these areas as well- that is, political unrest (which goes hand in hand with corruption) and organized crime. The migrant caravans' arrival has been met with a largely hostile response. Since the arrival of Trump, adults travelling to the United States have often been met with deportation, whereas Biden's administration have opted for a more hopeful resolution, aiming to fix the root of the problem. With Trump coming back in office in January, fear is spreading amongst immigrant families.

Case Study: Venezuela

The Venezuelan migrant crisis has been caused by multiple factors; notably the fact that its democratic political institutions fell in shambles -due to the growing opposition from the population; the challenge of the legitimacy of the second term of Nicolas Maduro after winning the last elections in a highly controversial way; and the unwillingness of democratic institutions such as the National Assembly to support Maduro- and that the state-controlled economy collapsed spectacularly.

Some argue that this crisis began 25 years ago when Hugo Chavez took power in 1999, which then was undoubtedly accelerated when Nicolas Maduro, the socialist successor to Chavez, entered office in 2013. The economic collapse can be explained largely by the country's overdependence on oil revenue (96% of its earnings came from crude oil¹⁶) and its lack of

¹⁶ "How the Venezuelan Migration Crisis Affects South America." *Strait Times*, 27 Aug. 2018, <https://www.straitstimes.com/world/americas/how-the-venezuelan-migration-crisis-affects-south-america>.

competition in the energy sector, which left Venezuela with a shortage of capital when the price of oil fell dramatically in 2010. The Maduro government responded to this economic crisis by simply printing more money, effectively causing inflation rates to skyrocket and the country to fall into a recession of which -over 5 years later- the country's economy shows no sign of being on a road to recovery or that it will be anytime soon. In fact, over the last six years Venezuela's GDP has fallen at an alarming rate and very few people in the country have been spared by the economic crisis; from the highly educated to the poor all have been affected. This can be explained by the fact that Venezuela has by far the highest inflation rate in the world, thus making food and medicine often unaffordable and inaccessible for the general population.¹⁷ This inaccessibility has, in turn, contributed to a large increase in violence in Venezuela, effectively making it South America's most dangerous country and placing its capital- Caracas- as one of the most dangerous cities in the world, with 120 homicides per 100 000 inhabitants..¹⁸

All of these factors have led people to leave behind their homes in Venezuela to seek refuge in neighbouring countries. Approximately 3 million people have left the Venezuelan republic since 2015¹⁹ with no expectation to return in the short to medium term. Colombia has received the largest number of those migrants with over a million migrants and refugees entering the country since 2018, followed by Peru with over half a million, Chile, Ecuador, Argentina and Brazil all have received an influx of over 100 000 migrants in the last year.²⁰ It is notable that many of the migrants who have left Venezuela in the past few years, ironically enough, are Colombians who had immigrated there decades ago to escape Colombia's own civil war when Venezuela, then very wealthy due to oil money, was still considered a somewhat peaceful and prosperous place. However, the large influx of migrants have completely saturated the immigration system of Latin American countries that are not used to immigration, and even less so in numbers as large as the ones seen over the last years. Latin America lack the resources to

¹⁷ "Venezuela Inflation Rate." *Trading Economics*, 2024, <https://tradingeconomics.com/venezuela/inflation-cpi>. Accessed 5 Jan. 2025

¹⁸ Tait, Robert. "Caracas, Venezuela Named as the World's Most Violent City." *The Telegraph*, 28 Jan. 2016, <https://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/worldnews/southamerica/brazil/12126593/Caracas-named-as-the-worlds-most-violent-city.html>.

¹⁹ Taylor, Adam. "3 million Venezuelans have fled their country, according to new U.N. estimate" *The Washington Post*, 8 Nov. 2018, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/2018/11/08/million-venezuelans-have-fled-their-country-according-new-un-estimate/>.

²⁰ "About the regional Venezuela Situation." *IOM, UN Migration*, 2025, <https://respuestavenezolanos.iom.int/en/about-regional-venezuela-situation>. Accessed 5 Jan. 2025.

effectively deal with a crisis that has turned into a full-blown regional phenomenon and that affects every country in South America. As such, attempting to deal with the migrant crisis requires a multifaceted response.

The arrival of migrants has had an important impact on host countries. In Colombia, for example, unemployment had already been a big issue for decades and the arrival of more competition in the labour force was far from welcome and resulted in great tension between the local communities- that fear for their economic stability as migrants are willing to work for lower wages- and the migrants, looking for a source of income. However, the Venezuelan migrants are often relegated to the informal market because few can manage to regulate their legal status (residency, refugee status, etc) in a timely manner; this leaves them vulnerable to frequent sexual and labour exploitation.²¹ Moreover, while the government has provided temporary shelters for the people crossing into its border, it has steered away from setting up formal refugee camps, leaving the communities the burden to care for the newly arrived and provide them with medical care, education, etc. This has led to the emergence of an anti-immigration sentiment in certain regions of South America, particularly in places where the growing pressure on public services caused by the arrival of migrants and refugees have directly affected the communities' ability to provide care for the people that were already there.²² The migrant crisis has, thus, become an important political topic and has had an impact on domestic politics in countries that have received large number of refugees and migrants; in fact, polls have shown that nearly 90% of Colombians consider the Venezuelan crisis as a problem that affects Colombia directly. In Colombia and Brazil, the Venezuelan crisis played a role in the most recent presidential elections and aided to the election of two right-leaning presidents that had been vocal in their criticism of the Maduro regime in Venezuela.

In an attempt to coordinate a response to the crisis, the leaders of eight countries (Argentina, Colombia, Chile, Costa Rica, Ecuador, Paraguay, Peru and Uruguay) met in Quito in November 2018 and signed the "Action Plan on Human Mobility of Venezuelan citizens in the region." Among the steps these countries have agreed to take to facilitate migration are: the strengthening of the actions that facilitate human mobility of Venezuelans within the signatory

²¹Pareja, Jeronimo. "How Open is Colombia to the Reception of Venezuelans." *Open Democracy*, 30 Apr. 2019, <https://www.opendemocracy.net/en/democraciaabierto/how-open-colombia-reception-venezuelan-migrants/>.

²²Miko. "Venezuela's Economic Crisis and its Effect on Colombia" *Medium*, 22 Aug. 2017, <https://mikolombia.medium.com/venezuelas-economic-crisis-and-its-effect-on-colombia-part-2-aa9a5f8869d8>.

countries such as increasing the presence of humanitarian workers along key borders to limit possible risks to the safety of migrants, in particular with regard to trafficking, exploitation, and to quickly identify people who require supplementary aid such as unaccompanied children and pregnant women²³; increasing the number of migration and development initiatives that are implemented for an adequate economic and social insertion of migrants into local communities such as providing Venezuelans with vocational training to help them get into the labour market of the country they have migrated to.²⁴ This, also, includes initiatives to facilitate the migratory processes in each host country, with the support of the organizations of the United Nations System and according to the legislation of each signatory country.

Key Issues and Challenges

Latin America faces many challenges when it comes to finding potential solutions to the migrant crisis in the continent. The organization and financing of initiatives to aid migrants in areas such as housing, employment, health and education remains one of the biggest challenges' countries have to deal with in their attempts to help migrants. There is a substantial cost attached to receiving a large influx of migrants/refugees not only in terms of welcoming them but also to integrate them into local communities; few countries are willing to bear this cost. For this reason, the help of the international community, NGOs, and international organizations is of great importance in order to address the issue of financing initiative. Most countries in Latin America lack the resources to finance action plans themselves, while others simply lack the incentives needed for an economic commitment to helping refugees and migrants. Creating these incentives is, thus, a crucial step to solving the crisis.

As such, UNASUR was proposed to be the ideal solution to the root of the problem, which is political instability. The hopes and dreams for UNASUR was to create a united South America, similar to Europe. This would allow member states to help promote democracy, which is seen as an important topic as Venezuela's President Nicolas Maduro is widely seen as an authoritarian. Additionally, a united UNASUR would also help promote economy within South America, and decrease dependency on the United States. As it stands, the effects of the United

²³ "Venezuela Situation." *UNHCR; the UN Refugee Agency*, 2023, <https://www.unhcr.org/emergencies/venezuela-situation>. Accessed 5 Jan. 2025.

²⁴ "Venezuela Situation." *UNHCR; the UN Refugee Agency*, 2023, <https://www.unhcr.org/emergencies/venezuela-situation>. Accessed 5 Jan. 2025.

States sanctioning Venezuela's oil back in 2019 is still affecting the country's economy, as they have not managed to recover yet. Trading amongst member states would offer a much more safer and stable economy. Finally, a South American passport would also facilitate movement amongst South American states, allowing for individuals to seek refuge from other places much easier.

Unfortunately, this is still simply in an ideal world. While there are attempts to establish such an organization, growing tensions in Venezuela often act as an obstacle from their objective. Furthermore, trade routes within South America are generally considered as poor. As such, this migration crisis will remain for the near future as well. However, the practical challenge presented by the scale of this crisis cannot be ignored. The large amount of people moving from one country to the other, at a really fast rate causes the resources of host countries to be overstretched and some countries- in particular Brazil and Colombia to reach a saturation point. Many among the host countries are concerned about the strain migrants are putting on welfare services, the rising competition in the labour market and the financial burden on the country resources. However, global trends suggest that with effective resources for migrants to integrate quickly economically as well as socially to the community, they can become quickly independent, find a job and thus contribute taxes, eventually offsetting the initial cost of integration.

Lastly, another big challenge faced by governments in Latin America is finding a coherent and multifaceted approach on which all 20 members can agree. In the last year, there has been significant attempts to organize a continent-wide response, the efforts have been significantly overpowered by the significant political and ideological divisions among the members of the union. In order to effectively deal with the crisis, all members of this body must agree on what the next step forward should be; calls for a more comprehensive response strategy must be addressed and given the enormity of the task in front of this union, concrete actions must be put in place; ideally tackling both the cause of the current migrant crisis in Venezuela and its consequences in the host countries.

Conclusion

There is no doubt that migrant crises, economic collapses and political instability in countries affects the region as a whole, both in South and Central America, migrant crises have become a key factor to consider in regional initiatives. It is, however, important and necessary

for members of this body to make the distinction between the geopolitical and economic effects and the effects the crisis has on migrants and citizens on a human scale and to attempt to find solutions for both. This means that this body must remain careful; to view this migrant crisis solely in numbers would be ignoring an important aspect of this regional phenomenon; the daily lives of migrants and the difficulties they face on a more human scale: the children separated from parents, the emotional burden, their daily reality, etc.

Questions to Consider

1. What are ways in which this body can attempt to deal with the crises on a regional scale without infringing on nations sovereignty?
2. How can the UNASUR effectively address the root cause of the crises, as well as the effects it has on other nation states? What kind of intervention could this organization, reasonably, put in place?
3. How can UNASUR affect change regarding conflicts in Central and South America?
4. What are ways in which this body can attempt to deal with the consequences of this crises on a regional scale without infringing on nations sovereignty?
5. What policies are already in place, and which need to be implemented, in order to facilitate the integration of migrants into their new societies?
6. How can countries work together towards ensuring greater safety for migrants that cross into their borders?

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