

CHILE NEWSLETTER



FROM COLCHANE TO IQUIQUE: THE REALITY THAT REFUGEES AND MIGRANTS FACE

In February, more than 3,800 people arrived at the Chilean border, most of them people from Venezuela, who crossed Ecuador, Colombia, Peru and Bolivia, fleeing violence, insecurity and threats as well as lack of food, medicine and essential services.

Many of them were older adults, who walked thousands of miles with swollen feet and aching souls to leave their country, their family and everything they built over the years. Many others were girls, boys and adolescents absolutely exhausted, hungry, disoriented and tired of carrying their suitcases, but full of hopes to

reach a place where their parents promised them that it would be different.

Unfortunately, geography and climate pose the first big challenge for their dreams. A "natural wall" confronts them with the new reality and only the strongest can accomplish to continue further. "If I had known that I would have to go through these conditions, I would not have come," one of them said. "This is not the desert route, it is the devil's route," affirmed another one.

Once the refugees and migrants cross from Pisiga, Bolivia, to Chile, they reach Colchane, a little town with

no more than 1,500 people, most of them of Aymara origin, located at more than 4,000 meters high and with temperatures up to 30 degrees Celsius during the day but dropping to -10 degrees Celsius at night. The sun and the cold are merciless with their faces. The wind and the earth crack their eyes and lips. The altitude takes their breath away and crunches their weary hearts even more.

The local health centre can't keep up with the influx of people. Despite the efforts of its officials, who have worked endless hours to serve this humanitarian emergency, the health centre is not equipped for this crisis and they do not have the medical supplies to attend all the people. For this reason, priority has been given to minors.

As the borders have been closed due the COVID-19 pandemic, refugees and migrants are mostly entering the country irregularly, but those who report themselves to the Carabineros (police) are transferred by buses to temporary quarantine shelters in Iquique. Given the high demand, there were people who had to wait for several days, with some of them even sleeping outdoors. Those who did

not report themselves – some arguing, for instance, fearing to be expelled –, continue walking, completely unaware that after leaving Colchane there is only desert and it may take more than four days to arrive to Huara, the nearest town, and five days to Iquique.

In order to respond to the humanitarian emergency, in February UNHCR Chile reinforced its presence with missions to the regions of Tarapacá (Huara, Colchane, El Loa and Iquique), while maintaining regular work in Arica and Parinacota as well as Antofagasta. In fact, the UNHCR team continues to be on the ground monitoring the situation and providing assistance together with local authorities and its partners in the aforementioned cities.

In which conditions are they arriving? What are the difficulties they face during the trip? What are their main needs? UNHCR spoke with refugees and migrants from Venezuela in Colchane, Huara, Pozo Almonte and Iquique, to find out about their situation.

COLCHANE, THE ENTRANCE TO CHILE

Leizi Peña is one of them. "I arrived two days ago in Colchane from Maracaibo, Venezuela. My journey was difficult. I traveled with my little girl who is less than a year old and my husband. I have two more children, but I couldn't bring them, so they stayed with my family in Bogotá, Colombia", she says. Leizi says she has walked for a month from 5 a.m. to 9 p.m. "No one is going to go through so much stumble for pleasure or tourism. We just want to work to survive. In Venezuela I was a teacher and business administrator. I had a good situation and little by little I was left with nothing, so we had to sell chocolates, cookies, wash dishes and do anything to earn our lives", she says.



Oswaldo Acosta arrived four days ago to Colchane from Calabozo, Guarico State, in central Venezuela. "I left Bogotá a month and a week ago. This journey has been very hard. Backpacking, enduring the cold, hunger, tiredness, the sun. I came with two more cousins, the wife of one of them, two boys of 12 and 10 years old and a girl of 9. It has hit us hard. We have been persecuted and there are many people who take advantage of the little that one brings with oneself " he says. The situation of children is what worries him the most. "We tell them to be strong and be brave, but when we ourselves have been about to give up, they have been the ones who have given us the strength and have kept us focused to continue the route" he says. Their goal is to get to Santiago, where three cousins and a brother are waiting for them, to start working as soon as possible.

ALTO HOSPICIO: THE COMMUNITY OF SOLIDARITY

In the midst of this crisis, there are those persons who

make a difference. Some of them are the neighbors of Alto Hospicio. Ramón Valdés is one of them, who affirms “in addition to food, people need to feel that we are here to help and receive them, regardless of their nationality. That is how we feel it”, he says.



Ramón created a campaign, but there was not much response from other locals because, in general, “they are upset”. He told UNHCR that “as there is a need for us to contribute and show those who are upset that prejudice and anger do not lead to anything. We need to see people and their needs. We want them to look at their hearts, not their problems, to look at their anguish, the cold, their walks, fatigue and making them believe that they are not alone”.

And that is how they got to Huara, about an hour by car, where they found a group of young Venezuelans. Their testimonies reflect the loneliness mentioned by Ramón. “I arrived two weeks ago. I came alone. I left Venezuela, I lived in Peru for two years and the truth is that I have been in Chile for two weeks and I already want to go back. I have been living in a shed for two weeks”, says Gabriel García.

David Zenteno, another among this group, told UNHCR: “I arrived two weeks ago, walking all across that desert... you really can't. Our skin aches. We need transportation, jobs because we don't want things to be given for free to us, we want to organise ourselves to rebuild our lives. Now I hope to get to Coquimbo, where there is a cousin who can receive me” he says.

POZO ALMONTE, THE FIRST TENTS

In Pozo Almonte, almost an hour away from Iquique by car, the first tents begin appearing in sight. Carolina Castillo, lives in one of them. “I travelled with my family. We are four sisters and two nephews and to get here we have traveled three months. Nobody helped us,

nobody gave us anything. We know that there are Venezuelans who have done things wrongly, but we innocents pay for the sins of the guilty ones. We want to get a job, support ourselves, help those who remained in Venezuela”, she says.



The same says Yolano Torres, a Venezuelan who was painting one of the squares where they had been sleeping for two months, to thank the city that received them. “We are in this square to clean it, this is the house where we are sleeping. The paint cans were donated by a Venezuelan and we hope that Chileans will also continue to support us”, he says. He also says “we bathe in the same square, with a hose because there is not much. There are portable toilets in front. But we do not have soap nor clothes. Many things are being donated for the children, who we know are the ones who suffer the most, but due to hygiene and COVID-19, we would like to get clean clothes to change” he says.

Next to his tent live Jean Carlos and Valentina, parents of a boy (6) and a girl (3) told UNHCR: “When we left Venezuela, they stole everything from us, even our documents. Once in Colchane, it took us about three days to get to Pozo Almonte. It was so terrible, it felt like years. We walked down with the children. It is not something we wish on anyone”, they say. They began their journey on 1 December. He has a degree in medicine, and she is a business administrator, but they report that due to the situation in Venezuela, they could not even buy a notebook for their son. “There (Venezuela) you get paid five dollars and I wonder, with that, what do you eat? Now we just want to settle down to start working and give our children a better quality of

life”, they say.



UNHCR’S HUMANITARIAN RESPONSE

In February, UNHCR has supported the Municipalities of Colchane, Huara and Iquique in the delivery of humanitarian assistance to refugees and migrants from Venezuela. With UNHCR support more than 3,000 food and hygiene kits were delivered.

Also, UNHCR provided access to information and legal counselling, shelter, food, hygiene kits, sun and skin creams and warm clothes to refugees and migrants.

Also, refugees and migrants have been supported with cash vouchers and cards to cover the most pressing basic needs in the COVID19 context.

UNHCR is facilitating the integration of people amongst host communities.



UNHCR donation to the Municipality of Colchane.



Humanitarian kits at Carabineros’ Office in Colchane.



UNHCR donation to the Municipalities of Iquique and Huara



Delivery of milk formulas and diapers to the Bishopric of Iquique

UNHCR has continued to deliver humanitarian assistance to refugees and migrants from Venezuela and continues to assess the situation in Chile. With the support of the Municipalities of Colchane, Huara and Iquique, in February the UNHCR delivered 3,000 food and hygiene kits.



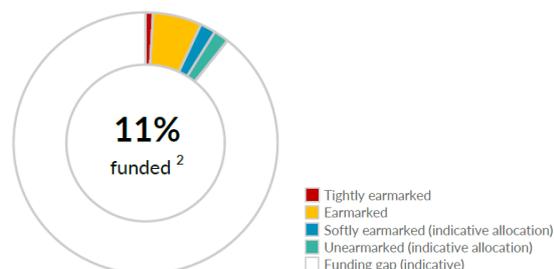
Beneficiaries in Iquique receiving humanitarian kits

DONORS

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