

The Venezuelan Walking Migrants J'accuse

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Originally published in *El Nacional*, September 23, 2018

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The monumental mosaic by artist Carlos Cruz-Diez on the floor of the departure lounge of Maiquetía International Airport was the first great icon of the Venezuelan exodus caused by the catastrophe of the 21st century socialism. At the time most emigrants left by plane mainly to the United States and Europe.

The next was the Simón Bolívar International Bridge between North Santander in Colombia and Táchira State in Venezuela. The aerial view of the old bridge crammed end-to-end with desperate Venezuelans trying to cross the border became a more painful symbol of this migration. Venezuelans were leaving by then on buses to other cities in Colombia or further south on their way to Ecuador, Perú and Chile.

But the image of the bridge soon became outdated. The new icon of the agonizing stampede fueled by the Maduro regime is that of the walking migrants: groups of Venezuelans traveling on foot along the Colombian highways looking randomly for shelter, work, food or some security. In this last wave they do not have enough money to pay for a plane or even a bus.

On a recent visit to the border to participate in the Cúcuta Book Fair in North Santander, I found myself face-to-face with this phenomenon. In less than a week I went past the International Bridge, spent a few days in Pamplona – the mountain town where the new pariahs usually rest – ending up in the city of Bucaramanga, the first stop where those fleeing the apocalypse decide their final destination.

I thus reconfirmed there is nothing like seeing the scene with your own eyes to comprehend the social issue in its entirety. Neither the TV news nor the chronicles of seasoned journalists have fully conveyed the suffering and despair that compels thousands of people, in their right state of mind, to undertake this journey on foot. It takes between five and seven days, often carrying children, to cross the Colombian Andean roads reaching heights of 3000 meters at temperatures as low as -5 C.

While they walk during the day, the group of migrants do not hint of their titanic quest. Like typical Venezuelans they happily say hello, some with victory signs, giving the false impression to an uninformed observer of a merry group of hikers. But as night falls still on the road, it becomes cold, the fog and darkness settle, and the thoughts of those who have died of hypothermia induce fear, anxiety and dejection.

On the whole journey there is not a single decent shelter run by a concerned institution. The few we saw during that busy week – in the company of a team of young reporters from both countries documenting the event at their own risk – were precarious dwellings kept by the locals who, with resourcefulness and integrity, have taken on the task of feeding and keeping the hopeful mountain crossers warm.

We visited one of these improvised refuges the night of Sunday the 16th. On one side of the road, an old, improvised henhouse shielding women and children, on the other a similar modest shed for men to sleep. Volunteers arrive with clothes, blankets and shoes. Some of the walkers put up their feet hoping the cold would heal the bruises and blisters. They are all grateful to the Colombians for support. In their opinion, they prefer to footslog in Colombia with a full stomach than to starve at home. The scene is heartbreaking and tearful but fills your chest with pride. None of the walkers give up, they all curse Maduro's mother.

At dawn next morning I go with the volunteers to say goodbye to three groups that spent the night; I feel as if we were part of those black-and-white documentaries showing long queues of silent republicans abandoning Spain across the Pyrenees with their belongings. But the new film is in color and those escaping the *chavismo* of the 21st century are noisier and not as sad as those during the war won by 20th century *franquismo*.