

# Crowds steal flour, chicken and underwear in looting spree in Venezuela

Episodes of looting increase as basic products run short in oil-exporting country, with opposition blaming president's economic policies

**Reuters in San Cristobal**

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Crowds of people in Venezuela have stolen flour, chicken and even underwear this week as looting increases across the country in the wake of shortages of many basic products. Many people have adopted the habit of getting up in the dead of night to spend hours in long lines in front of supermarkets. But as more end up empty-handed and black market prices soar, plundering is rising in Venezuela, an Opec nation that was already one of the world's most violent countries.

There is no official data, but the Venezuelan Observatory for Social Conflict, a rights group, have reported 107 episodes of looting or attempted looting in the first quarter of 2016. Videos of crowds breaking into shops, swarming on to trucks or fighting over products frequently make the rounds on social media, though footage is often hard to confirm.

In one of the latest incidents, several hundred people looted a truck carrying kitchen rolls, salt and shampoo after it crashed and some of its load tumbled out in Tachira state on Thursday, according to a local official and witnesses. Fifteen people were injured, including six security officials trying to restrain the crowd, said local civil protection official Luis Castrillon. "There was a big scuffle ... There were shots in the air and they fired teargas," said witness Manuel Cardenas, 40.

Such scenes are adding to an increasingly dire panorama in Venezuela, an oil-exporting nation, where inflation is the highest in the world, the economy has been shrinking since early 2014, and there are frequent power and water cuts.

President Nicolás Maduro has blamed the crisis on the fall in global oil prices, a drought that has hit hydroelectric power generation, and an "economic war" by rightwing businessmen and politicians. But the opposition says that the disastrous statist economic policies of Maduro and his predecessor, Hugo Chávez, are responsible. They are pushing for a recall referendum this year to remove Maduro, 53, and trigger a new election.

In other looting incidents, a group of hooded motorcyclists tried on Thursday to steal around 650 sacks of flour as they were being delivered to a deposit in the nearby Andean state of Mérida. Security forces managed to stop the theft, but two National Guards and four policemen were injured in the melee, according to a local security official.

On Wednesday, looters in Mérida broke into a state-run supermarket, stealing food, shelves and even doors after learning that chicken was being stored there. An underwear store was plundered a day earlier in Mérida.

Socialist party officials have condemned the looters as criminals and smugglers seeking to make a quick buck from reselling. Maduro has vowed a tough stand against violence and warned that his enemies are plotting a “coup” akin to this week’s suspension of Brazilian leader Dilma Rousseff.

Critics counter that hunger and desperation are pushing people to theft, and say the situation will only worsen unless urgent policy changes are made, such as an easing of strict currency and price controls that have crimped imports and production.

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