

Venezuelan city under effective curfew after mass looting

Some 400 people arrested in Cumaná after 20 shops ransacked
Food riots and looting occurred in several cities in June

Stephen Gibbs in Caracas

Wednesday 15 June 2016 16.47 EDT

The Venezuelan coastal city of Cumaná is under a de facto curfew after an outbreaking of mass looting this week left at least 20 shops ransacked and 400 people arrested. Videos posted on social media showed hundreds of people - mostly men - raiding a supermarket and carrying away everything from cooking oil to boxes of beer.

Soldiers, special police and the feared Sebin security force are now patrolling the city. Motorcycles, which are an essential means of transport for many Venezuelans but often used by looters as getaway vehicles, have been banned from its centre for 72 hours as of Tuesday evening.

June has seen a rash of lootings and food riots in several cities across the country, and four deaths have been reported in separate incidents in the last week.

The drop in the global price of oil, Venezuela's main export, and years of economic mismanagement have left President Nicolás Maduro's government struggling to import enough food to feed its people.

"We are hungry" is now a familiar chant in the long lines outside supermarkets, which, until recently, were notable for their passivity. Shoppers hoping to buy basic food products such as pasta, rice or bread have grown accustomed to waiting for four hours or more.

An early sign that people's patience was cracking came on 2 June, just a few streets from the presidential palace in Caracas. A group of about 100 protesters attempted to march to the palace, demanding food. Unlike the mostly middle-class protesters that are often seen on organised opposition demonstrations, this group was from a nearby slum.

"It's worse than ever now. Now you can't get anything," Tita Panacuaire, 64, who lives in the vast Petare shantytown in Caracas, said recently. Rail thin, she sits alongside her daughter and her granddaughter. The two women say they only eat one meal a day. The 12-month-old baby consumes breast milk, and nothing else.

The row of shops near their home was looted three times last Friday. Now a large white water cannon is parked outside the local bakery, which has no bread.

Acknowledging the crisis, which he blames on an "economic war" by his political enemies at

home and abroad, Maduro says the solution is more direct control of food distribution. The government is instigating a scheme whereby subsidised food boxes are distributed to poor families every three weeks.

The president's critics say the scheme will favour the government's supporters, and risks further fuelling an already rampant black market. They blame the socialist leadership's byzantine scheme of currency and price controls, corruption, and the expropriation of private businesses, which began under Maduro's predecessor, Hugo Chávez, for being the real cause of the crisis.

The looming fear for many Venezuelans is a repeat of the 1989 "Caracazo" riots in the capital, when a previous oil slump and economic collapse, under the government of President Carlos Andrés Pérez, led to days of uncontrollable looting and hundreds of deaths.

Some make the grim assumption that political change in Venezuela will always follow the same pattern. "The only change here comes through chaos," says Christian, 62, a Caracas taxi driver.

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