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Desperate women fleeing Venezuela sell hair, breast milk, sex to get by



By **Hollie McKay** | Fox News



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Venezuelan women sell hair, sex and breast milk to survive as the country crumbles.

CUCUTA, Colombia – Although the sun has barely risen, this border city with Venezuela is already bursting with chaos.

Thousands upon thousands of Venezuelans pour into Colombia over the crowd cross-country bridge, their faces gaunt, carrying little more than a backpack. Rail-thin women cradle their tiny babies, and beg along the trash-strewn gutters. Teens hawk everything from cigarettes to sweets and water for small change.

The young, the old and the disabled cluster around the lone Western Union office – recently established to deal with the Venezuelan influx – in the hopes of receiving or sending a few dollars

to send home. Without passports or work permits, the Venezuelans – many with university degrees or decent jobs in what was once the wealthiest nation in Latin America – are now resorting to whatever it takes to survive.

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“Hair, looking for hair,” an older man choruses through the crowd, turning to a group of women clutching their small children. Another man nearby holds a sign, “we buy hair.” More and more girls and women are turning to the cut the make ends meet, and feed their families for a few days.

Women sell their locks to local wigmakers in Colombia for around \$10-30, depending on length and quality. Other women sell their bodies. Girls as young as 14 line the Cucuta streets available “for hire,” earning around seven dollars “per service.”

“Due to the brutal economic situation in Venezuela, they come to Colombia looking for a job, or at least for shelter and basic care. But they usually end up selling candles or coffee at traffic lights,” said Amy Roth Sandrolini, Chief of Staff at The Exodus Road, a U.S.-based organization devoted to fighting human trafficking globally. “Where they also become vulnerable to being recruited, to become victims of human trafficking.”



Scores flee Venezuela on foot, often making dangerous treks through Colombia (Fox News/Hollie McKay)

Both men and women are exposed to sex trafficking along the route from Venezuela to Colombia. According to several walkers, some women “chose” prostitution as a means to make money and earn rides along the way. And some heterosexual men “sell themselves on the gay market” for a

little money.

Other women are manipulated or forced into giving “pimp types” their documents and identification cards, and are subsequently drawn into prostitution rings. That's particularly the case in border areas, where many rebel and drug-trafficking groups operate.

They come from a country they say now resembles a war zone. Their lives have been ripped apart by displacement, starvation, disease, desperation and torment. But now they're in Colombia, where conditions are far from perfect, but are at least safer, and more stable.



Thousands flood from Venezuela into Colombia on a daily basis. (Fox News/Hollie McKay)

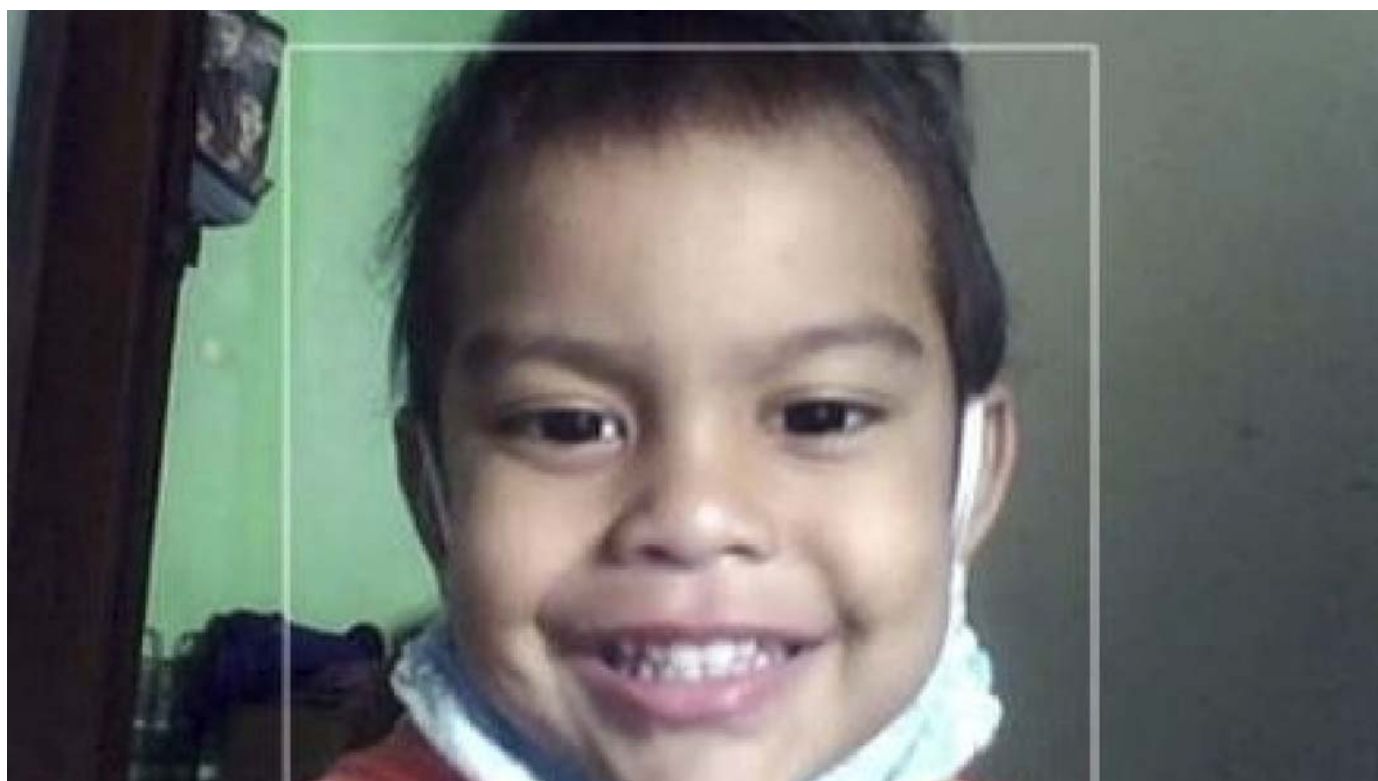
Inside Venezuela, health care has all but dissolved. Children are dying of malaria and hepatitis. They're breaking bones and burning their bodies, having been left unattended while their parents comb the streets for work and food.

Suicide rates too have skyrocketed, even among children. Specific numbers are impossible to come by as the government refuses to track or release accurate data, yet Venezuelan children's rights group CECODAP estimates there has been at least an 18 percent rise in teens taking their own lives over the past year. There are next to no mental health services.

Luis Gonzalez, a 31-year-old former fireman and paramedic from Valencia, Venezuela, has ventured as far away as the Ecuadorian capital of Quito to try and make enough money to save the life on his three-year-old son, who was diagnosed with leukemia in November 2017.

“I’ve only been able to send money back to my family twice, it hasn’t been easy,” Gonzalez, who sells cookies on the streets by day and sleeps at a nearby “resting house” for around 70 Venezuelans – which was quickly transformed from a military uniform factory – over the summer lamented. “But I’m trying to raise money and find donations.”

As there is no treatment available in his homeland, his focus has been on buying whatever medications he can find on the black market – from chemotherapy pills to IV drips – to send back via the Colombian border.



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“The social security was supposed to provide everything to us, but everywhere I went to get help I was obstructed. The central administration would send me to a branch and tell me I could find chemo pills, but then they said they had none. Some places say they don’t have it when they do, but even doctors and nurses and pharmacists sell whatever medications they get on the black market,” Gonzalez asserted. “I have had the police called on me by social security because I’ve become so angry. This is my son’s life.”

A recent National Hospital Survey conducted by the Physicians for Health organization found that not only are more than 95 percent of CAT and MRI machines inoperative but 43 percent of laboratories are out of order, 33 percent of beds are broken, and 51 percent of hospitals are gravely short of emergency supplies. Furthermore, 38 percent of surgical instruments are not in commission, and 62 percent experienced violent incidents from patients' family members toward hospital personnel and 45 percent reported the theft of crucial equipment.

“There is a human catastrophe in Venezuela. There is a resurgence of illnesses that were eradicated decades ago. Hundreds have died from measles and diphtheria. Last year, more than 400,000 Venezuelans presented malaria symptoms. Up to now, there are over 10,000 sick people from tuberculosis,” said Antonio Ledezma, former political prisoner and mayor of Caracas. “People have been doomed to death. More than 55,000 cancer patients don’t have access to chemotherapy. Every three hours a woman dies due to breast cancer.”

Caterine Martinez, an attorney, and director of the Prepara Familias (Ready Families) organization in Venezuela – which endeavors to support hospitalized children and their families and caregivers – concurred that the public health care issue in the country is nothing short of “severe.”

“Currently there are no broad-spectrum antibiotics, not even basic antibiotics to treat basic pathogens from children and present chronic illnesses,” she said. “We don’t have x-rays working, they haven’t for a long time. We don’t have a CAT scanner or an MRI scanner. Many other vital medical instruments don’t work. The municipal blood banks don’t have reagents, therefore we have kids who are getting blood transfusions and are getting infected with hepatitis C and could even be injected with HIV.”



Venezuelans sell whatever they can to survive on the Colombian border, in the overwhelmed city of Cucuta. (Fox News/Hollie McKay)

Martinez estimates more than 55 percent of the healthcare professionals – doctors, nurses, and others – have left the country. Resident doctors who have stayed in Venezuela earn the equivalent of \$24 a month, while specialists make just a little more, at \$30.

“We also have a severe problem with nutrition. There is no supply of baby formula, nor nutritional supplements. Therefore, we have a lot of malnourished children and the situation is then even more complicated.”

Julio Castro Mendez, a doctor who specializes in infectious diseases and is a Professor at the Medical Institute at the Central University of Venezuela, underscored that 65 percent of the country’s 70,000 patients with HIV have not received treatment in the past six months. Coupled with astringent malnutrition, some of his adult male patients have dwindled down to 77 pounds, he said.

“Maternal and infant mortality has also increased significantly in recent years, by more than 65 percent,” he added. “More than half of the deliveries in Cucuta are Venezuelan women who cross the border to that babies in environments that are more secure and better-equipped,” Mendez explained.

VENEZUELAN S REGRET GUN BAN, 'A DECLARATION OF WAR AGAINST AN UNARMED POPULATION'

One Venezuelan mother, 30-year-old Marie Chaparral, routinely treks across to Colombia to seek healthcare and vaccines for her three young children, one being only a few weeks old. She explained that she, like most expectant mothers in Venezuela, had to buy all necessary birthing procedural needs – from the painkillers to the scalpels to the towels and hospital gowns – on the black market in Colombia. Only then, lugging all her things to the hospital, would a doctor in Venezuela oversee the birth.

With her newborn, Chaparro had to have an emergency c-section as they discovered the umbilical cord was wrapped around her daughter’s neck. She cited the child’s survival as a “miracle from God.”

Colombian nurse Jenny Diaz, 29, who works at a Red Cross shelter on the border, said that between 120-150 expectant mothers or mothers with newborns cross the border seeking medical assistance or vaccines.

Desperate dads, too, are making the journey.

“We can’t find any vaccines; we can’t find any medicines. Children in Venezuela are dying,” said Alberto Camacho, 35, as he stared down at his five-month-old daughter Ruth Steffania. “I have to give my baby goat milk because baby formula is \$12. It would take me three months to make \$12.”

Camacho defined himself as “unemployed right now,” despite odd taxi jobs, having had to shutter his beloved restaurant five months ago when money and food ran out.





Alberto Camacho, 35 with his five-month-old daughter crosses from Venezuela to Colombia to find healthcare and vaccines. (Fox News/Hollie McKay)

Others have continued their trek through Colombia, to other nations in the region, to give birth.

Maria Alejandra Salazar, 35 – who is six months pregnant with twins – left her two daughters behind in Caracas to sell sweets on the streets in Quito, where she will stay to ensure a safe birth. She noted that despite everyone in the household working two jobs, it just wasn't enough to survive.

Salazar also underscored that family planning has become impossible to come by in Venezuela, with things such as birth control pills often being duds that simply have no effect.





30-year-old Marie Chaparral, routinely treks across to Colombia to seek healthcare and vaccines for her three young children, one being only a few weeks old. (Fox News/Hollie McKay)

Miguel Barreto, the Regional Director for Latin America for the UN's World Food Programme (WFP) pointed out that hospitals in neighboring nations – especially Colombia, which is bearing the brunt of the Venezuelan, exodus having absorbed an estimated one million migrants and asylum seekers since the crisis heightened three years ago – have become “overwhelmed.”

“The level of women crossing the border to give birth has dramatically increased,” Barreto said. “The forecast is for this only to get worse in 2019, so we plan to increase our response.”

Venezuelans stuck inside are also dying of hunger. Women are trying to support other women by donating breast milk to malnourished babies, others have attempted to sell it as a means of feeding their own families. Even though a life-saving measure in much of Venezuela, concerns of hygiene also remain.

“The biggest concern is now food. 70 percent of people are facing steep food insecurity and acute malnutrition,” Barreto lamented.

COLOMBIAN MOTHERS CHALLENGE 'BAD LUCK' TABOOS, TAKE THE LEAD EMERALD MINING

Not only do Venezuelan residents troll through trash cans looking for scraps, but many – including children – hide along roadsides and wait for a moment to strike, where they toss rocks at passing vehicles, or blow out tires with metal strip. Then they either steal or hold up the vehicle in the hopes of bargaining for food. Or they might loot a passing food government truck – making the job even more dangerous for the drivers.

The food trucks carry Venezuelan President Nicolas Maduro's trademark boxes of subsidized food, known as CLAP. They were intended to feed a family of four for at least a week. But if and when the boxes come at all, Venezuelans claim, they are often spoiled.





Venezuelans line up for hours and sometimes days for gas and food as the situation in Venezuela deteriorates.

The boxes every couple of months, on a schedule no one seems to know. And the Venezuelans say next to not much of sustenance – meat and vegetables – are affordable, with families living off out-of-date cereals. Other Venezuelans said sardines, yucca, and lentils that last a few days a week have become their staple.

Meanwhile, decimated and abandoned homes and institutions and parks languish at every turn – looted and burned, livelihoods decimated in a pile of rubble. Trash piles up in the streets. Some venture out to scavenge for food, but streets are often ghostly – forsaken and upended, with families in fear of falling victim to crime and violence should they step out into the streets.



Remnants of a classroom in San Cristóbal, Venezuela. Many fear going outside their homes due to the uptick in crime since the economic crisis began in 2015. (Fox News/Hollie McKay)

Another Venezuelan, who requested his name not be published out of fear and security reasons,

described the levels of crime and violence as something akin to a horror movie. He worked as a security guard in the capital, Caracas, despite having been shot in the stomach by government-backed street gangs known as the “collectivos.” He was left permanently disabled, and said his store manager is threatened and forced to hand over the most valuable food goods to the gangsters.

“It is complete anarchy. There are tens of thousands of these gangs – Cuban and Venezuelan – who operate in every state,” the 33-year-old father bemoaned. “I have only managed to survive this long thanks to Jesus and the Holy Spirit.”



San Cristóbal, Venezuela. Much of the infrastructure has been looted and burned. (Fox News/Hollie McKay)

Venezuela is also gripped by a bewildering hyperinflation, which has exceeded one million percent, according to the International Monetary Fund, rendering the currency - the Bolivar - essentially worthless.

The increasingly authoritarian Nicolas Maduro-led government, continuing the policies of Hugo Chavez, denies the existence of a humanitarian catastrophe, instead pointing fingers at everything from Venezuela’s positioning to the sun, to opposition movements and the United States for infringing on their economic rights.

Nonetheless, life isn’t all doom and desperation for everyone in Venezuela.

“There is a stark difference between those who have access to hard currency or not,” added Guillermo Aveledo, a political science professor at the University of Caracas. “Chavista magnates

and related classes have become an obscene upper class, with access to a bevy of products and services well beyond the international price and driving up the price for everyone else.”

Hollie McKay has been a Fox News Digital staff reporter since 2007. She has extensively reported from war zones including Iraq, Syria, Yemen, Afghanistan, Pakistan, Burma, and Latin America investigates global conflicts, war crimes and terrorism around the world. Follow her on Twitter and Instagram [@holliesmckay](#)



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