

Venezuelans facing food shortages, leading to deep hunger | Miami Herald

By Dayanna Palmar

Every Wednesday, Joselyn Morales and her three sons join hundreds of other Venezuelans in lines at the Padre Claret church in Maracaibo, a city in northwestern Venezuela, for meals served by volunteers.

“We eat what people give us. My husband works as a watchman, but his salary is not enough to buy food. We have gone up to two days without eating,” said Morales, accompanied by her sons — ages 8, 4, and 1 — as she waited in the slow-moving line.

Morales is just one of many Venezuelans who are hungry due to the country’s economic crisis, where reports show that more than one-third of the people eat only one meal a day. The economic collapse sparked by two decades of socialist Chavista policies has turned the once rich oil-producing country into one of the poorest in the region.

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Experts say the Venezuelan economy has shrunk more than 50 percent since Nicolas Maduro became president six years ago, a process that destroyed the buying power of Venezuelans and plunged the country into hyperinflation.

The country faces even tougher times ahead.

Inflation, which hit nearly 1 million percent in 2018, could soar to 10 million by the end of this year, according to the International Monetary Fund. Trapped in a labyrinth of socialist formulas, the Maduro regime is pushing for measures that increase inflation rather than dampen it.

In November, Maduro announced a 150 percent increase in the minimum salary, the sixth such increase in 2018.

“This correction comes as a Christmas gift. It’s to improve the life of the people,” Maduro declared.

But not all Venezuelan families enjoyed the gift. Very few could afford the typical holiday meals. Just one ham bread, one of the traditional Christmas dishes, cost 4,892 Bolivares *soberanos* — more than the minimum monthly salary of 4,500 Bolivares *soberanos*.

The hundreds of Maracaibo residents who wait in line Wednesdays at the church are not exempt. Volunteers from the *Fundación la Casa de la Misericordia* serve about 800 meals each Wednesday. Some weeks, it’s chicken soup, others, rice with meat and vegetables.

Many in line are extremely thin, a signal they don't have the funds to buy food or can't find food on the shelves.

One study by the non-government Human Rights Commission for Zulia State — Maracaibo is capital of the state — found that 72 percent of food items were in short supply in October and November, even as prices soared by 305 percent.

The study concluded that Maracaibo residents suffer from all the aspects of food insecurity: concerns about acquiring the food; limited variety, quality and rations; and hunger.

Nearly 75 percent of the homes surveyed reported that at least once over the previous three months, the adults and children were hungry but did not eat. Only 8 percent reported eating protein every day.