

PRESS RELEASE

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Militarization at borders puts refugees and migrants at risk

Increased use of armed and military personnel along the borders of Peru, Ecuador and Colombia places Venezuelan refugees and migrants at risk. The migratory control measures, intended to help prevent the spread of Covid-19, will likely have severe ramifications on people's ability to safely access asylum.

Peru have in recent days deployed armed and military personnel on the borders in order to deter "illegal migration" from Venezuela. Peru is host to over 1 million Venezuelan refugees and migrants, many of whom live in precarious conditions, lacking legal status and protection.

"This week, when I was at the border, the military pointed guns at us and told us that if we continued walking, they would shoot. They treated us like criminals and had no mercy with our children," Angelica, a 29-year-old Venezuelan, told the Norwegian Refugee Council (NRC). Angelica has been stranded in Ecuador since international borders were closed in 2020.

Last year Colombia, Ecuador and Peru closed their borders and restricted access for refugees and migrants in an effort to curb the spread of Covid-19. While governments in the region are responsible for protecting the populations against the Covid-19 health emergency, such measures should not restrict access to asylum and must safeguard the rights of refugees. States are obliged to uphold the principle of *non-refoulement* and ensure protection for Venezuelans seeking safety in their countries.

"Covid-19 continues to threaten the most vulnerable in society, which includes displaced Venezuelans who are living on the margins of society. Instead of curbing their right to seek safety and claim asylum, we should be looking at how we can support vulnerable refugees and ensure they are afforded protection" said Dominika Arseniuk, NRC's Country Director for Colombia, Ecuador and Panama.

The recent expansion of the security perimeter around the borders means that those attempting to cross will now have to travel through even more remote and unsafe places. Aid agencies have raised the alarm that this situation will increase the risks of trafficking, extortion, and sexual and other forms of gender-based violence for vulnerable refugees and migrants.

"In the midst of a pandemic, we cannot exclude and deny access to people in dire needs, only based on their citizenship. Governments in the region must ensure Venezuelan refugees and migrants are able to access humanitarian aid and protection when needed", Arseniuk added.

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Note to editors

- According to the UNHCR, Colombia, Ecuador and Peru host 3.1 million Venezuelan refugees and migrants.
- The Cartagena Declaration 1984 stipulates that States receiving refugees and migrants should allow them access to their territory and adopt appropriate and pragmatic protection-oriented responses in line international refugee law. The framework encourages regional cooperation, responsibility and burden sharing.

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