IPS

INTERVIEWS 03.04.2019

'Colombia could become a target of retaliation'

Kristina Birke Daniels on why intervention in Venezuela would destabilise its closest neighbour and endanger the peace process

Read this interview in German.

Hundreds of thousands of Venezuelan refugees have fled to Colombia in recent years. As recently as January, the number of new arrivals was as high as 60,000 a day. Does this massive movement of refugees continue?

According to the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, there are officially almost 1.2 million Venezuelans in Colombia. Adding the many unregistered refugees, the total number is thought to be as high as 1.9 million. Although Venezuelan President Nicolás Maduro has formally closed the Colombian border, eyewitness reports confirm that thousands of Venezuelans are still crossing the "green" border every day. The increasing shortages in Venezuela are swelling the number of people leaving the country, including a growing number of people deserting the military, estimated at between 700 and 1,000.

What's the situation like for the refugees in Colombia?

The response from the Colombian population so far has been exemplary: Historically, economically and politically, the fate of the *países hermanos*, literally "brother countries", is closely tied together. However, Colombia's migration law doesn't include much beyond the return of migrants with Colombian roots. It's also hard to understand why the Colombian government has not declared the situation to be a humanitarian crisis in order to allow aid to enter the country duty-free. The more precarious things become for the refugees, the worse the situation gets. Many refugees are looking for work in the informal sector. They're economically vulnerable and exposed to numerous risks to their personal safety. Illegal armed

groups in Colombia and Venezuela are taking advantage of the emergency by demanding money in exchange for crossing the border and recruiting refugees to their cause.

The conservative government in Colombia has taken a clear stance against Maduro. What's the position of the Colombian opposition?

The opposition in Colombia is made up of seven parties. Their political orientation ranges from the centre to the extreme left. There's not just one position on Venezuela either within or among the individual parties. However, there's a prevailing desire to avoid war. The only party to publicly express its support for the Venezuelan regime is FARC, which emerged from the former guerrilla organisation and which recognises Maduro as the legitimate president. All other opposition leaders are in favour of a peaceful democratic transition and a mediated settlement negotiated solely among the Venezuelans themselves. In contrast, the media and the government coalition are advocating as much external involvement as possible, often including calls for military intervention.

The Colombian opposition faces the challenge of distancing itself from the *Chavismo* ideology with which they were closely associated under Hugo Chávez. Political opponents accuse left-wingers in Colombia of pursuing the same political objectives as Maduro. Left-wing presidential candidate Gustavo Petro, who made it to the run-off election, recently found himself trending on Twitter again as "the Colombian Maduro". In interviews with the international press during the election campaign, however, Petro described Maduro as a "dictator" – thereby dissociating himself very clearly, compared to some European left-wingers. Despite this, Petro is the subject of criticism because, unlike the Guaidó opposition in Venezuela, he sees the solution to the crisis not in a change of government but in a fundamental renunciation of the extractivist economic model.

There are currently very few international players who seem positioned to mediate in the conflict, with most having taken one side or the other. Are there discussions in Colombia about potential mediators? Who could they be?

Colombia's positioning with regard to its most important neighbour has always been and remains important. But it's also never been without conflict. Under the previous Santos government, Venezuela was one of the most important backers of the peace process in Colombia. Now there's a sense that the Colombian government, in concert with the US, is seeking to stand shoulder-to-shoulder with Guaidó and actively drive the process of regime change. By taking

sides in this manner, the Colombian government has squandered any chance of playing a part in a multilateral approach. Academics, former diplomats, officials and numerous experts would have preferred their country to adopt an independent position. Scores of open letters have repeatedly called for a more multilateral attitude in the interests of supporting a peaceful negotiated settlement.

There are growing concerns that the conflict in Venezuela could escalate into civil war. What would this mean for the security situation in Colombia?

It would be disastrous. The fates of Colombia and Venezuela are inextricably intertwined. Firstly, it's possible that the conflict would spill over onto Colombian territory, particularly in border areas. Moreover, guerrilla groups such as the ELN and FARC dissidents, who have long used Venezuela as a refuge, are currently growing in strength.

Secondly, Colombia on its own would struggle to cope with another influx of migrants and refugees as a result of civil war. Despite all assurances to the contrary, it's possible that the Colombian government might decide to intervene, whether at the behest of the US or in response to domestic policy considerations. There could be huge supply shortages in some of the already highly neglected border regions.

The human rights situation in Colombia, which is already critical in light of the growing number of murdered activists, could deteriorate further. Violent social conflicts over resource distribution are also in the realm of possibility, with the resulting impact on people's safety.

Would such a development also have consequences for the peace process in Colombia?

The peace process is already unstable, and a civil war in Venezuela could put it at even greater risk. Factions such as the ELN and FARC dissidents could become more influential. Both now have a strong criminal influence in the Amazonas and Bolívar states in southern Venezuela, where they control parts of the mining industry. The Iván Duque government would also increase its defence spending at the expense of funding for rural development and social inclusion, which is already inadequate, thereby further undermining the goals of the peace accord.

US President Donald Trump and representatives of his administration have repeatedly considered military intervention in Venezuela. Self-proclaimed interim president Guaidó is also not

ruling out the possibility of US military intervention under his authorisation. What would be the consequences for stability in the region?

It would be a major setback. Although most countries in Latin America currently have close relations with the US administration, they have spoken out against intervention. Instead of working together to find a diplomatic solution, intervention would mean allowing the US to reassert its former supremacy over the continent – which would be a slap in the face for the emancipation that progressive Latin American governments have worked hard to achieve in recent decades. Colombia could also become the target of potential military retaliation by Venezuela if any action were to originate from Colombian territory. In Venezuela itself and the border region, an intervention would most likely result in conditions akin to civil war, with extensive civilian casualties and sustained instability.

Colombia is home to various US military bases, and there's close military cooperation between the US and Colombia. Do Colombians see the talk of intervention from Washington as a credible threat or as mere rhetoric?

People often debate whether the phrase "5,000 troops to Colombia", carefully placed on a notepad by John Bolton for maximum media impact, was meant as a threatening gesture or a declaration of intent. Looking into things more closely, last year's annual report by the US Department of Defense shows that the it has a military facility covering almost 2,000 square metres in Colombia. The number of soldiers is not mentioned. Colombian President Iván Duque does not give the impression that he views the threats as rhetoric.

Meanwhile, the opposition is accusing the government of having made this situation possible in the first place. It's true that the government long refrained from delivering a consistent line on the issue of intervention. Furthermore, Iván Duque responded to the ELN attack on a police academy in Bogotá in January by calling for a more hard-line security policy. This appears to have established his narrative as head of state. His poll ratings have improved enormously. As recently as the start of the year, he had been polling lower than Nicolas Maduro.

The interview as conducted by Claudia Detsch.



Kristina Birke Daniels

Stockholm

Kristina Birke Daniels is Director of the FES Regional Office for the Nordic Countries in Stockholm. Previously, she worked for the FES as Head in Colombia, Morocco and India.