

THE WEEKEND ESSAY

A BRIDGE TO VENEZUELA

The Colombian border city of Cúcuta braces for more turmoil.

By Daniel Alarcón

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Photograph by Hector Quintanar / Getty



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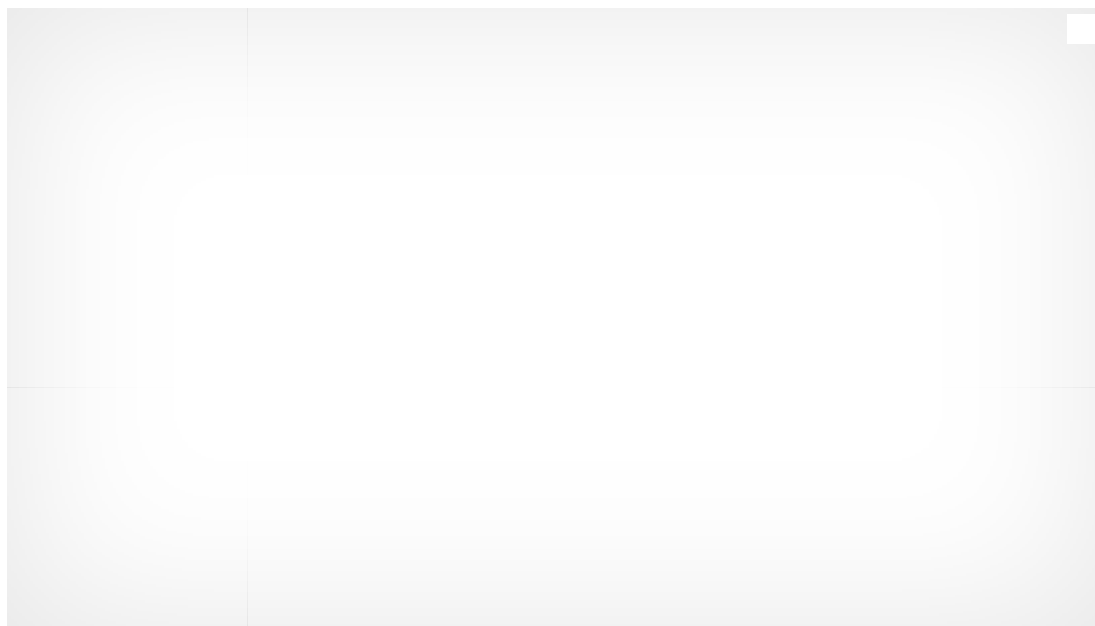


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By the time I arrived in the Colombian border city of Cúcuta, in mid-January, most of the journalists who'd come after U.S. Special Operations Forces had captured and extracted the Venezuelan strongman Nicolás Maduro, on January 3rd, had left. They'd descended on Cúcuta from Belgium and France and Mexico and the U.S., in the hope of entering Venezuela by crossing the Simón Bolívar International Bridge, the busiest of three bridges spanning the Táchira River. (At that time, and still, it was nearly impossible for foreign journalists to get a visa to enter the country, and, in any case, there were few flights to Caracas.) But it had soon become clear that there was little chance of their entering Venezuela safely. On January 5th, the day Delcy Rodríguez was sworn in as interim President, fourteen journalists, thirteen of them working for international media outlets and news agencies, were detained. One was deported. A couple of days later, two journalists, a Colombian and a Mexican, were stopped at Tienditas, another of Cúcuta's border crossings, and held for hours, before being expelled.

The Simón Bolívar bridge is almost always bustling. Swarms of cars and vans come and go from both sides; idling buses advertise destinations as far-flung as Lima or Santiago or Mendoza. On the Colombian side, buzzing armies of motorcycles with uniformed drivers compete to shuttle you or your merchandise to San Antonio del Táchira, the closest city in Venezuela. It's hot and dusty, blue-gray clouds of exhaust burping from passing trucks. You can visit one of several currency-exchange offices or bars blaring cumbia, or just sit

on the curb and take in the spectacle—all the usual chaos one sees at a border that functions both as a transit hub and as an open-air market for legal and contraband goods. On either side of the bridge, there are dozens of illicit routes across the river that are controlled by binational armed groups, bypassing even the occasional cursory checks that might occur at the official border crossing. Movement in both directions is fluid and relentless, the checkpoints usually little more than a formality. A pedestrian, leaving Colombia, can stroll past the gate and cross the bridge on foot; a driver can roll by without so much as a wave at the guards. You could conceivably do the same when you get to the other side, though, these days, if you are neither Colombian nor Venezuelan, it's not exactly advisable.



The bridge itself has a single lane of traffic in each direction, and a narrow sidewalk on either side. It isn't long, around a thousand feet, maybe four city blocks. I was told by local friends that, as a foreigner, I could safely walk to the middle of the bridge, but no farther; unfortunately, there is no visible indication of where exactly the middle is. To make this apparently simple stroll sound even more harrowing, a friend warned me that sometimes Venezuelan National Guard agents would drag unsuspecting foreigners who had crossed this unmarked dividing line to their quarters for a shakedown or worse, especially if

they were journalists. I'm not a particularly brave man, and so, with this horror story echoing in my head, I went to the bridge on my first day in Cúcuta in a state of near-panic, glancing warily behind me to spot any would-be abductors. (How would I even recognize them?) I took one anxious step, then another. Is *this* the middle? What about *now*? The whole enterprise felt utterly ridiculous.

As it happens, the international bridge and its ambiguous border are, together, a fairly apt metaphor for understanding Cúcuta. The metropolitan area has a total population of around 1.2 million people, about a quarter of whom are Venezuelan. Throughout the city and the region, the familial, cultural, and economic ties to Venezuela run deep. Virtually everyone I spoke with, during my time there, either had family on the other side or had themselves lived there. Many had dual citizenship, a remnant of the time, not so long ago, when Venezuela was the prosperous and stable oil-rich country next door, while Colombia was in the grips of an intractable and deteriorating crisis. In the eighties and nineties, the forward-thinking parents of babies born in Cúcuta would cross into Venezuela and register them there, too, just in case. It was simply the practical thing to do for the future of your child.

For decades, the flow of migrants went in one direction—Colombians moving to Venezuela for jobs and opportunities that couldn't be found at home. In the nineteen-nineties, Colombians were Venezuela's largest immigrant group, though hardly the only one: such was the strength of the Venezuelan economy that it had drawn workers and professionals from all over Latin America, and Europe and Asia. Colombians who grew up in Cúcuta in the nineties have fond memories of day trips across the border, marvelling at the pristine, newly paved roads, eating at McDonald's, or visiting the malls in San Cristóbal, the capital city of the Venezuelan state of Táchira. They recall watching Venezuelan

television in awe, at a time when Colombia had only a few channels, whose broadcasts went dark from before midnight until the following morning. One Cucuteño told me that he grew up a fan of the iconic cartoon “ThunderCats,” broadcast from across the border; his cousins in the Colombian capital, Bogotá, hadn’t even heard of it. In short, Venezuela was the future, while Colombia, mired in chaos and violence, lagged behind.

The journalist Sinar Alvarado, a Colombian who grew up in Venezuela in the eighties, once told me how confusing it was to try to place himself within a class structure that shifted depending on where he happened to be: his immediate family was working class in Venezuela, but, when he visited Colombia, he was magically transformed into the rich cousin. In Cúcuta, the local economy depended on Venezuelans who crossed the border to spend their powerful currency on shoes and clothes, flaunting their wealth, often buying in bulk. The contrast between then and now couldn’t be more stark: Venezuelans these days are, for the most part, no longer in town to buy sneakers. They’re buying groceries. Today, you can purchase stacks of worthless bolívars in Cúcuta’s central plaza, nostalgic souvenirs of a prosperity that may never return.

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After Hugo Chávez's election in 1998, net emigration from Venezuela began to increase. It was a relative trickle at first. The people leaving were, broadly speaking, the well-off, the business class, those who wanted to protect their investments and properties. Next, as the economic outlook worsened, came the middle class, looking for better opportunities, and many of those who went to Colombia could be more accurately described as returnees: the children and grandchildren of Colombians who'd emigrated a generation or two earlier, now claiming their citizenship in order to start over. Both of these groups included dissidents, victims of the ever-tightening repression. Each disappointing election lost by the opposition (or, more recently, stolen by Maduro) prompted many who no longer believed that change was possible to leave.

Still, no one was really prepared for 2017, when Venezuela's hyperinflation made daily life unsustainable. That year, the official inflation rate rose to eight hundred and sixty-three per cent; the following year, it went even higher, to an astonishing annual rate of more than a hundred and thirty thousand per cent.

Faced with this untenable situation, ordinary people from across the country simply picked up their belongings and began walking, eventually crossing the Simón Bolívar bridge into Cúcuta, and then heading farther, into Colombia, and beyond. What was initially a local concern for Cúcuta—which woke to find its streets and byways lined with refugees—soon became a national, and then regional, crisis. It was unprecedented, and if you talk to Cucuteños today, many still shudder as they recall those scenes. Mention *los caminantes*, the walkers, and everyone here knows what you're talking about.

Keila Vilchez, a Venezuelan journalist writing for Cúcuta's main paper, *La Opinión*, told me that those people weren't migrating so much as fleeing. "That's all you can call it," she said. "Because anyone who decides to walk for twenty days, thirty days, forty days to leave their country is doing it because there is no hope." The walkers whom Vilchez met in those days while reporting from Cúcuta, and along the roads of the Colombian state of Norte de Santander, were mostly headed to Bogotá, or to the coast, or to the coffee-growing region of Colombia, having heard rumors that there might be work there. They carried their entire lives with them, rolling their bulging suitcases along the sides of roads, children in their arms. They wore sandals or were barefoot. They were desperate: no papers, no money, perhaps a phone number of a relative or an address somewhere in Bogotá. Unprepared for the altitude or for the elements, many died along the way. In 2018 alone, more than 1.3 million Venezuelans left the country. "As a Venezuelan, I couldn't help but think how lucky I'd been," Vilchez said.

All told, more than seven million Venezuelans—around twenty per cent of the population—have left since 2015. It's no exaggeration to say that this unprecedented exodus has affected every country in the region: straining diplomatic relations, testing social safety nets, sparking xenophobic backlash, polarizing public opinion, and transforming politics. The humanitarian emergency arguably transformed the political debate on immigration in the

U.S., as well. How many Americans had heard of Tren de Aragua before it became a shorthand for the kinds of immigrants Trump was promising to deport en masse? I was living in New York when Republican governors began sending busloads of migrants to blue-state cities like mine. In the winter of 2022 to 2023, I volunteered to meet new arrivals at the Port Authority, most of whom were Venezuelans. They were young men and women, families; I remember them as dazed and bewildered and excited, scarcely able to believe that they were in midtown Manhattan. They needed winter coats and hats and underwear and shoelaces. And more—a place to rest, a job, a school for their kids. Many had crossed the Simón Bolívar bridge, and all one could do was offer a welcome, and stand in awe of how far they'd come, every journey a kind of miracle.

One morning in Cúcuta, I went to Las Delicias, a neighborhood of roughly four hundred families on the outskirts of town, where dirt roads snake up and down green hills, turning to mud in the rains, and more than half the residents are Venezuelan. There had been gunfire the previous afternoon, the victims a pair of young men on a motorcycle, one of whom had been shot in the back and died. The other remained hospitalized. Neither garnered much sympathy from the residents I spoke to; they were thieves, or so it was said, and life was too difficult to spend much time feeling sorry for criminals. Las Delicias officially became part of Cúcuta in 2015, a bureaucratic change that many hoped would bring much needed services and infrastructure improvements to the neighborhood, but not much has materialized yet.

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The Venezuelan families I spoke to had all arrived in the time of the walkers, and all told versions of the same story: the economic catastrophe, the yearning for something better, if not for themselves then for their children. A fifty-eight-year-old named Ramón remembered the exact date he'd decided to leave: September 23, 2015. "I couldn't take it anymore," he said. "If you wanted to buy flour, or bread, or anything, you had to wait in line for two or three hours." He'd repaired electronic equipment back home, and had found work in Cúcuta doing the same. He'd come with his wife and two daughters; his youngest, a boy, was born in Colombia.

Everyone I spoke to had family back in Venezuela—parents, cousins, brothers, sisters. When I asked what they were hearing about the situation there, how things had changed since Maduro's ouster, I was met with blank looks. "Nothing," one woman in her early thirties told me with a shrug. "What I know, I know from the news. We can't say anything. We talk about breakfast." In other words, people were still scared, and nothing had really changed.

“Regime tweak,” the *Guardian* called it. It’s no wonder that people were afraid to speak. In addition to economic freefall and the consequent humanitarian emergency, Maduro’s nearly thirteen years in power were marked by repeating cycles of repression: the pro-democracy opposition movement would gather strength in anticipation of an election, or in the angry aftermath of one, and each wave of street protests—in 2014, 2017, 2019, and 2024—would be met with indiscriminate state violence and mass arrests. At this writing, five weeks after President Trump announced that the U.S. was running Venezuela, more than six hundred political prisoners, including close allies of the opposition leader María Corina Machado, are still languishing in Venezuelan jails.

When I spoke with Vilchez, she had just gone to Venezuela, not as a reporter but to pick up her daughter in Maracaibo. She’d left her cellphone in Colombia, as a precaution in case she was stopped, but nothing had happened. She’d seen a young man get bullied out of a gold ring by the National Guard, but this was an indignity so quotidian it was hardly worth noting. Everything was normal, she told me. Tense, but normal. The same could be said of Cúcuta, where a veritable parade of international media had arrived in search of a story only to find none. “There were more journalists than there was news,” she told me, laughing.

Still, if everything in Cúcuta is normal, it should also be noted that normal itself is pretty alarming. The city is among the most dangerous in Colombia—in 2025, there were more than seven times as many homicides per capita here than there were in New York City—and conversations with locals are laced with chilling anecdotes recounted offhand: a man shot during a church service; a couple who sold coffee on the street murdered one morning. A young Cucuteño named Juan Sebastián toured me around his neighborhood, Colombia Uno, pointing out the sites of the executions that had marked his childhood and adolescence. One night, on my way back to my hotel, I was forced into a detour; the roads around the government buildings were closed to

protect against potential drone attacks by the E.L.N.—the Spanish acronym for the National Liberation Army, a guerrilla group traditionally allied with Caracas, which remains active in the area. Whatever was happening or not happening in Venezuela, this was simply Cúcuta on an ordinary day. And although things appeared quiet for the moment, many locals I spoke to were afraid that they might not stay that way. Fresh unrest in Venezuela could spark another wave of refugees, and now, after the collapse of U.S.A.I.D., most of the structures that had been in place to deal with the humanitarian emergency no longer existed.

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Photograph by Schneyder Mendoza / AFP / Getty

I went back to the bridge a few nights after I arrived, to attend a vigil being held by a couple dozen family members of political prisoners in Venezuela. If Maduro's ouster had sparked any hope, these people might have been the ones to feel it most acutely, to believe that it was now possible that they might finally see their loved ones again. There were dozens of photos of unfortunate men and women, including Colombians who had crossed the border one day—to see family, to go sightseeing, to teach a workshop—only to fall victim to the arbitrary brutality of the Maduro regime, to be accused of terrorism or conspiring against the state and imprisoned. The people at the vigil were sombre, as the Lord's Prayer played on repeat from a speaker. One woman, Miriam, told me that she hadn't seen her son in a decade, so long that she'd given him up for dead until, a few months ago, a Colombian who'd been released had come home with the news that he'd been in the same prison as her son. It had to be him, she said, because his first name, Guzmán, was very unusual. If he is, in fact, alive, he'd be thirty-eight now.

As the vigil wound down, I walked across the bridge and onto the Venezuelan side, bolder this time because I was with friends. It was all but deserted, with only the occasional car or motorcycle drifting past, a few pedestrians, and, along the railing, faded signs from ACNUR, the Spanish acronym for the U.N. Refugee Agency, denouncing human trafficking. We walked right up to the gate and a checkpoint, unmanned at that hour. A sign spanning the width of the bridge wished us “Bienvenidos, República Bolivariana de Venezuela,” and as we approached there was a smiling portrait of Nicolás Maduro in a white collarless shirt. Beside his face was the caption “In this world, no one respects cowards.” ♦

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