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## The exodus of migrants, crisis at the borders of the Andean states. Cry of alarm from the Church

"Most of them are families, women, children, pregnant mothers, disabled persons, some of them in wheelchairs." That's what everyone says when asking information on the thousands of Venezuelans fleeing their country, only to find the military blocking them at border crossings. *The first to flee were intellectuals, political opponents, university graduates. Then breadwinners and young people started to leave. Now everyone is fleeing.* These desperate journeys affect all South America, especially the Andean states, currently facing the second wave of the pandemic. Colombia, where over 1,700,000 Venezuelans already live, is the most vulnerable, with its 2,200 kilometre-long border. A few days ago the government announced a temporary protection status. This decision was welcomed by Pope Francis at the [Angelus prayer](#) on February 14th. But many Venezuelans continue their journey towards the south, crossing Ecuador (with approximately 415,000 Venezuelans) and hoping to reach Peru (with an estimated 1,200,000) or Chile (around 700,000). They were thwarted by legal hurdles and now also by the Army. But militarized borders only benefit unscrupulous human traffickers. *Pastoral care workers, men and women religious, missionaries, extend their cries for help to SIR.*

**Humanitarian disaster in Ecuador.** "Ecuador's borders remain closed for the whole of February, but the measure is likely to be extended. Eighty per cent of the country's immigrants are undocumented", said **Enzo Rubinetti**, a humanitarian worker for Caritas Social Pastoral Care of Ecuador's Church. "The southern border with Peru in particular is fully militarised. **We are witnessing a humanitarian disaster.** Many immigrants remain stranded in Huaquillas, on the border with the Peruvian region of Tumbes, amidst poor hygiene and sanitation, with endemic dengue fever. They live in the streets." However, some migrants sought alternative routes. "Three hundred of them are in Macará, in the Ecuadorian province of Loja, to the south. There are no shelters there, but Caritas Loja managed to distribute 200 sanitation kits. Caritas, "is present in eight provinces of the country, addressing humanitarian, juridical and psycho-social needs, in synergy with other organisations and religious congregations", Rubinetti added.



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[, said: "In our activity we are facing increasing challenges: the borders are closed, the government has imposed a set of measures to prevent the stay and legalisation of refugees, with mounting xenophobia. We have seen this in Ibarra. Last year, a young woman was killed by a Venezuelan. The people were furious, they broke into the homes of Venezuelans and set fire to their belongings. The Scalabrinian Sisters carry on with their widespread efforts to provide shelter to migrants in their Homes in various border towns, legal assistance, support for victims of trafficking and violence, as well as political awareness building. The three Homes in Tulcán, Ibarra and Santo Domingo are designed to be milestones along a "welcoming route." "Political influence is central to our activity, in cooperation with community leaders, aimed at sensitizing local communities", she concluded.](#)

**Families and the disabled enter Peru.** As opposed to Ecuador, Peru is also a destination country for Venezuelans, as well as a transit country to Chile. *Indeed, in Peru the situation is even worse, owing to the massive deployment of armoured vehicles along its borders. This measure was taken also in response to the second wave of COVID-19 in a country already hardly hit by the pandemic (-13% of GDP in 2020).* In this context, the influx of other Venezuelan migrants represents a humanitarian disaster. It should be remembered that the country is in the middle of a long presidential election campaign (as is Chile). Father **Luiz Do Arte**, director of the Blessed Juan Bautista Scalabrini Shelter in San Miguel, Lima, remarked: "We are facing a very alarming situation, involving those who are already in the country and new arrivals. Obtaining a visa is extremely difficult, although the paperwork can now be processed online. But many migrants have no resources or skills. The borders are militarised. Families, people with mental and physical disabilities, are entering the country from the north. Venezuelans are being equally rejected by Chile in the south and are now trying to enter the country through Bolivia." Peruvian borders are porous, there are many 'trochas' (illegal trails, *Transl.'s note*)," said **Beatriz Pérez Marcassi**, in charge of the SIMN (Scalabrini International Migration Network) in Peru. Many take advantage of this, and some are contacted by human traffickers in Colombia, who propose veritable 'package deals'. The migrants pay in advance, promised that they will be brought to their destination'. In this scenario, Father Do Arte continued,

### **"migrants place tremendous trust in the Church,**

They first thing they do is to ask for help in parishes and congregations, such as the Daughters of St Anne in Tumbes, who are fully dedicated to this task." However, added Beatriz Pérez, "it is a spontaneous form of support. Despite the challenges, positive aspects must also be noted.



...told SIR. Since external borders are closed, people are entering via illegal routes. "While on the one hand it would be better to encourage regular immigration", said the bishop, "it must be said that border controls are in place also to prevent criminal activity such as drug trafficking and smuggling. There are humanitarian concerns and many people fail to grasp the reasons behind the migrations, resulting in a climate of hostility. For her part, the Church "has strengthened the network of reception centres where these people can live during the quarantine period, their soup kitchens - however possible in this time of pandemic - thanks to the support of congregations such as the Scalabrinians and the Jesuits. Practical support is provided, along with advice on applying for refugee status." Still, the situation is critical and, in some cases, desperate, according to **Delio Cubides**, Executive Secretary of INCAMI (Chilean Catholic Institute for Migration). "Since the border is closed, thousands of people are trying to enter Chile from Bolivia. The Municipality of Colchan, the first town in the Chilean border, is on the brink of collapse. It is located at an altitude of 3,700 metres, where people live in extremely adverse conditions. *But people try everything, they say they'd rather die on the journey, or from COVID-19, than die in Venezuela.* I confirm that families, many women with children, are entering the country, in the attempt to be reunited with their husbands. For Cubides, "since December, the government has annulled many Democratic Responsibility visas, leaving numerous immigrants with no legal status. The government prefers to handle the matter through media coverage." \*Journalist at "La vita del popolo"

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