

International Development Committee

Oral evidence: Humanitarian situation in Venezuela, HC 1928

Wednesday 27 February 2019

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Members present: Stephen Twigg (Chair); Richard Burdon; Mr Nigel Evans; Mrs Paulina Latham; Chris Law; Mr Ivan Lewis; Mark Menzies; Paul Scully; Mr Virendra Sharma; Henry Smith.

Questions 1 - 48

Witnesses

I: Clare Dixon, Head of Region, Latin America and the Caribbean, CAFOD; Dr Alejandro Arenas-Pinto, Senior Clinical Research Associate, UCL Institute for Global Health; Isabel Marquez, Deputy Director for the Regional Bureau for the Americas, UNHCR.

II: Rt Hon Alistair Burt MP, Minister of State for International Development and Minister of State for the Middle East, Foreign and Commonwealth Office; Matthew Wyatt, Head of Conflict, Humanitarian and Security Department (CHASE), Department for International Development; Nigel Baker, Head of Latin America, Foreign and Commonwealth Office.

Written evidence from witnesses:

– [Add names of witnesses and hyperlink to submissions]

Examination of witnesses

Witnesses: Clare Dixon, Dr Alejandro Arenas-Pinto and Isabel Marquez.

Q1 Chair: Good afternoon, everyone. Welcome to this evidence session of the International Development Committee, addressing the humanitarian crisis in and surrounding Venezuela. We have two panels of witnesses. I welcome our first panel this afternoon, and I will invite you to introduce yourselves as you answer questions in a moment. We are going to seek to cover six areas with you over the next 45 to 50 minutes, and then we will be joined by the Minister and officials to cover similar areas with them. Let me kick off by asking for your assessment, each of you briefly, of the humanitarian situation within Venezuela. Clare, would you like to go first and introduce yourself?

Clare Dixon: My name is Clare Dixon, and I am the head of Latin America and the Caribbean at CAFOD, which is the Catholic aid agency. We are a partnership organisation of Caritas in Venezuela and in the surrounding countries. Caritas, as you probably know, is the humanitarian assistance agency of the Catholic Church worldwide. Interestingly, most aid agencies have had very little work in Venezuela, traditionally because the wealth of the country means there has not been a need for any external intervention. Of course, it is because of the economic, social and political crisis that the situation has become as difficult as it is today. That difficulty of course is not helped by the fact that there is no way of having a large-scale humanitarian response to the situation because, understandably, the Government of Venezuela wish not to recognise the gravity of the situation.

The Catholic Church in Venezuela has been working since 2015, in dialogue with the Government, to try to open some kind of humanitarian corridor or some humanitarian channel. In 2015, it managed to get approval for bringing in high-grade, high-quality medicines, which are not available. The situation in terms of growing malnutrition and hunger has been quite rapid over the last few years. There is a humanitarian response from within the country, which we have been supporting with Caritas, which has 412 parishes that run soup kitchens and provide medical assistance, et cetera, but are very much starved of resources.

On the situation in terms of malnutrition, they work only in the poorest areas. You have an incidence of very high levels of malnutrition, particularly with children. The lack of availability of proper food means that most people are not having a balanced diet. The levels of malnutrition are rising, although last year because of some Government measures, the indices seemed to be decreasing a little bit.

Q2 Chair: Sorry to interrupt, but what is the situation with official data? How reliable at all is official data? You said the indices seemed to improve. How reliable is the data?



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Clare Dixon: It is extremely difficult. I am quoting from the data that Caritas itself carries out. It does three-monthly, quarterly reports, which are based in the areas where it is making an intervention, which is more systematic. Those tend to be areas that it has identified as being high risk. It is not a common response everywhere. It is in particular states where there is a particular level of malnutrition or where there is a high risk of vulnerability, particularly amongst children.

Dr Arenas-Pinto: My name is Alejandro Arenas-Pinto. I am a senior clinical academic working at UCL in two departments: the Institute for Global Health and the Institute of Clinical Trials and Methodology. I have to disclose to the panel as well that I am also a trustee of a UK research charity called Healing Venezuela, which does work in Venezuela. In addition to that, all opinions and analysis presented here are mine and are not necessarily supported by the institution I am affiliated with.

The question was about how we can have evidence of the magnitude of the crisis in Venezuela. The crisis in Venezuela I am going to refer to is a health crisis. We have evidence at the moment that the health system has simply collapsed. It is unable to provide basic care for the population and we have some data that can support that. That is due to the collapse of programmes for the control of endemic diseases, such as malaria, or vaccine preventable diseases, which have re-emerged in the country and are being exported through the region with the mass migration problem that we are facing, and have been facing for the last two years.

In addition to that, you just posed us a question about how reliable data is. It is important to mention that any Government on the planet have the responsibility of producing epidemiological data that informs policy-makers about the needs of a country. In Venezuela, the Ministry of Health stopped publishing epidemiological reports in 2014.

Since then, we simply have no official data on the incidence or the prevalence of any of the diseases that are compulsory in terms of reporting according to international standards. Most of the data we have are estimations made by international or regional institutions or academic research. We do have quite a lot of data supporting the concept that the health system has collapsed. Some of the data is hard enough to be trusted. For example, the estimated number of cases of malaria in the country last year was about 500,000. By comparison, in Colombia during that same period there were 70,000 cases. That is the difference. In Peru, it was about the same. There are 70,000 to 80,000 cases per year in our neighbouring countries. In Venezuela, there are over 500,000 cases. That gives you an idea of the magnitude of the problem in Venezuela.

Chair: I thank you for that. We are going to return to health in a few questions' time.

Isabel Marquez: My name is Isabel. I am the deputy director of the regional bureau for the Americas of the UN Refugee Agency, based in



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Geneva. I arrived recently from Brazil, where I was the representative dealing, essentially, with the Venezuela situation.

I will be quick, because, being the third speaker, most has been mentioned already. There are seven resident UN agencies in Venezuela working right now, one of which is non-resident. UNHCR is the agency at present with the highest presence in the field, in particular in the border areas. We have four field offices on the border with Colombia and Brazil. Answering your question, Stephen, about data, this has allowed us to do our community-based projects that we have been carrying out over the years, essentially for Colombian refugees who are still living in Venezuela or who are in a refugee-like situation. These are projects that benefit the whole Venezuelan community. We have been able to gather quite a bit of direct data, but I would agree with the two previous speakers that it is a very big challenge. As we talk about health, we are using the data, for instance, from the Pan American Health Organization, which refers to 80% of hospitals requiring medicines, or 30% to 40% of medical personnel leaving the country. I am a witness to that, because many of those people have fled or left the country and gone to Brazil and other places.

Chair: Thank you very much indeed. We will pick a number of those issues up during the questioning. Thank you, each of you, for those very clear and concise responses.

Q3 **Mr Sharma:** Our understanding is that the situation in the country is unlike many other situations, where humanitarian needs are localised to zones affected by violence, but is one of wider vulnerabilities potentially affecting a majority of the population. Is that an accurate reading?

Clare Dixon: It is generalised, because an economic and structural problem exists at the moment. The first flows of refugees tended to be not geographically based but based on their level of professionalism. A lot of professionals left in the early stages. As the situation became more difficult it has involved people who are poorer and poorer. One tends to come across Venezuelans in neighbouring countries, and many of them are very highly qualified people and they manage to get jobs elsewhere. I do not think there is necessarily a geographical question.

One of the issues about Venezuela is that it is very highly dependent on the imports of food because, having such oil wells, most of the resources of the country went into industrial production and the service industries. It is not like many other countries in Latin America where there was a massive rural peasant population with the capacity to produce food. That is one of the big differences between Venezuela and its neighbours.

Dr Arenas-Pinto: Bringing the discussion back to the health problem, I can certainly say that this is not a localised problem; it is a general problem. If you think about the data we have on vaccine-preventable diseases such as diphtheria, for example, there are confirmed cases of diphtheria, which has been diagnosed in 17 of the 24 regions of the



country. Over 70% of the regions in the country have active transmission of diphtheria as per 2017. That is a clear reflection that the national vaccination programme has collapsed. It is not covering the needs of the population. Therefore, vulnerability is a global thing. Of course, poverty plays a major role in this, and the more vulnerable you are in terms of access to resources and support, the worse you are in terms of defending yourself against the situation. In a country with over 1,000,000% inflation per year, there is not anything that can be done without considering it a national tragedy.

Isabel Marquez: I fully agree. Other than the collapse of the health system, which has just been covered, there is the inability that people have to procure food on a daily basis. It is not something where one could say it is worse in one part of the country or the other. It is a general effect. Of course, if in a particular part of the country, in addition to that, there are tensions where there are clashes, that of course would just exacerbate a situation that otherwise generally would affect the entire population because of the collapse of the basic services.

Q4 **Mr Lewis:** Good afternoon. Is the provision of international aid to Venezuela now hopelessly interlinked with the political realities and the political situation there? What can be done to depoliticise humanitarian relief and ensure that aid gets to people who most need it? Is it a question of diplomatic efforts aimed at removing aid as a football from the political game? Would it be helped by, for example, the Church playing a greater role in the distribution of aid? Is the source of aid a real problem, for example aid from the United States? How do you think we can best depoliticise the delivery of that humanitarian aid, which is so desperately needed at the moment?

Dr Arenas-Pinto: I would step back a little bit on that one. It is very difficult to answer that question without taking into consideration that this is a political issue. This is a consequence of a political act and a consequence of a Government who have been unable to provide the care that people need. On top of that, it is also in the context of a Government who have been in denial and are still in denial about the existence of the crisis. Therefore, anything you can say and do to prove the existence of the crisis and support or help is going to be taken as a confrontation in terms of the political agenda of the Government, and whoever is against the Government in the country. That makes the story very complicated. That is one thing.

The other thing is that aid certainly has to be depoliticised. Human aid and human rights have nothing to do with politics; it is a human right and people have the right to get access to the support they need. The best way forward to make sure that aid reaches the hands of those who really need it is through work with the institutions and in particular with community-based institutions that are working in the field. We were hearing about the Catholic Church and its infrastructure. Institutions that are working on the ground, not the Church or the clergy because there is



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a political tension there, which has always been the case. The only way we can make this work is by working with NGOs and charity organisations, ideally if they are small enough to have a niche area to work. These are already on the ground delivering the support some people need.

Isabel Marquez: One of the most important things—and I definitely agree with Alejandro—is that Venezuelan actors across the entire political spectrum, and other actors, all have a responsibility to put the interests of Venezuelans at the centre of their actions, whether they are inside or outside Venezuela at this critical time. It is very important—this has been raised not only by the UN but by NGOs, other international organisations, academics and locals—that the humanitarian principles of humanity, neutrality, impartiality and independence must prevail at all times. As Alejandro mentioned, assistance must be free from political objectives and needs to be delivered, as you said, on a needs basis. These would be the main issues.

Clare Dixon: It is the \$64,000 question. We certainly need to look at what we mean by “humanitarian”, because the so-called humanitarian effort that was being made last weekend was not viewed by anybody really involved with Venezuela or in the neighbouring countries as being humanitarian or, with the best will in the world, the way to resolve a situation. It was very much seen as a Trojan horse. I was speaking today to the head of Caritas in Colombia, and he said that thankfully the strategy of the Trojan horse seems to have disappeared because the international contact group has decided to work more on questions of diplomacy.

That is certainly the position the Church has held. Whilst I agree that there have sometimes been tensions between the state and the Church, there has also been an understanding that the Church is doing a lot of good work in trying to put a band aid over the situation at present. The Church has always said it is ready to participate through its national structures and its many thousands of volunteers in the distribution of aid, but they recognise also, in the same way as the Red Cross recognised last week, that they were not going to facilitate that particular intervention over the bridge from Colombia into Venezuela, because they did not regard it as a humanitarian initiative.

Chair: Can I apologise? I missed who “they” were in that sentence.

Clare Dixon: The Church, sorry. There was a lot of pressure put on the Church in Colombia to take part in facilitating the transfer of this. The bishops came out very clearly to say they will support, with any money from anywhere, people who are leaving Venezuela and coming into Colombia, but they would not push into Venezuela because that is a recipe for escalation into a conflict, which nobody in the region wants. The Church has done its utmost to avoid any kind of conflict and violence, even with the Pope saying that he fears a bloodbath and that all measures should be taken to ensure that is avoided.



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Q5 Chair: I feel there is more from you on that, Clare, that I would like to hear, because that was an interesting perspective. I do not know how far you can comment. You have talked, understandably, about the Church's view. Are you able to comment at all about the views of ordinary Venezuelans or indeed ordinary Colombians, in terms of what you have described as the Trojan-horse approach?

Clare Dixon: One of the effects of that show that happened at the weekend, with Richard Branson's concert to raise funds, is that it has probably put more people into a sense of national solidarity and strengthened the support that Maduro would have. With the United States, we have seen this movie before and it does not have a happy ending. In terms of the people who are overseeing US policy on Venezuela, the particular person who is their special envoy for Venezuela, is Elliott Abrams, who oversaw the intervention of the United States in Central America in the 1980s, when a lot of my friends were killed by American guns. Understandably, people in Venezuela, Colombia and further afield are very worried about an escalation of the crisis into a conflict that would develop potentially into a regional conflict, because that is a very, very porous border between Colombia and Venezuela.

Colombia has almost just come out of 60 years of civil war. There are still activities of one of the guerrilla organisations, the ELN, the National Liberation Army, along that border. There is a whole question of what would happen if there was a "humanitarian" push into Venezuela. It would not necessarily be US troops who were pushed in there; it would be some multilateral force, led perhaps by the Colombians. I do not think the Colombians would want that. Certain senators within Colombia last week came out very strongly to say they feared an escalation.

Of course, the whole issue is that you have the ELN, which is being supported at least morally by the Venezuelan Government, which could well start fighting on the side of Venezuela. The level of conflagration is mindboggling. Everyone is saying that you go in, there is no real plan B and there will be not just the army in Venezuela but tens of thousands of militias who would be willing to defend their revolution. Fools rush in where angels fear to tread, I am afraid.

Q6 Chair: Alejandro, would I be right in saying you might have a different view on this.

Dr Arenas-Pinto: Certainly I do. I do not believe that the general population—I am talking about people who are suffering from hunger, people with chronic diseases and people who have no access to treatment—are thinking through the political implications of getting aid from any source. They need to survive. Survival is the key. The reason why people are crossing the border and leaving the country by any means they can is precisely because they feel there is no way they can survive within the country, particularly those who are affected by chronic conditions. There we have a big problem. If humanitarian aid or any



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other type of aid is brought through different mechanisms, I do not think that is the question. The question is that they feel that they need help.

I do not think anyone would like to have a conflict involving military action anywhere. Certainly we cannot resolve a problem creating a bigger one. The fear of a confrontation or the fear of an escalation in the conflict cannot stop and should not stop the aid being provided through the channels that we think will work.

On top of that, to be completely honest, I do not think that a confrontation that we are trying to prevent will have any impact on the level of violence and the number of people being killed on the street for food and basic needs. Caracas is a particularly violent city and violence is very closely related to poverty and the difficulty that people find in procuring basic things for themselves.

Q7 Chair: Are you saying that, even if there was the kind of military invention that Clare was describing and which you were saying that nobody wants, it is so bad that it would not make much difference? Am I misunderstanding?

Dr Arenas-Pinto: That scenario is not in the main consideration of most people who are trying to get food to survive the following day. I do not think the people who are desperately looking for insulin to treat a diabetic relative or a member of their family are going to be considering that potential escalation of the conflict as the main problem. The problem is surviving the next day.

Clare Dixon: I agree with that. I was saying that people are scared. Nobody wants a regional conflict.

Q8 Mr Lewis: In terms of the elite worrying about Trojan horses vis-à-vis the ordinary people, is that the sort of dynamic we have? I am not clear: we all agree that the prospect of military intervention is very worrying, but you seem to be implying that the source of humanitarian assistance was being seen as a Trojan horse. Therefore, we need to be very careful how we deliver humanitarian assistance. Alejandro was saying that it does not really matter where it comes from because people are so desperate. These are two very important distinctions. Can we have some clarity?

Clare Dixon: I was referring particularly to the intervention of last weekend, which was the building up of massive amounts of aid to ship across the border. It was a political move from the United States, very clearly. I am not at all saying that the Church should not continue to negotiate with the Government and civil society organisations to ensure that they can bring in aid. The needs for humanitarian assistance are very great but, as Alejandro has said, the Government are refusing to open that possibility.

We are ready, and the Caritas network is ready and has been supporting the Church's efforts, but it is a political issue and a political question that



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needs to be resolved. Therefore, just dropping in or forcing in humanitarian assistance could escalate into a conflict. We saw the beginnings of a conflict last weekend.

Q9 Mr Lewis: What we need to understand is whether you are saying that it is making it worse. "Do no harm" is obviously the starting point for any humanitarian assistance. What I am slightly concerned about, from the tone of what you are saying—which might be true, by the way; I have no view either way—is that what happened at the weekend is worse, whereas Alejandro is saying, no, it does not matter where it is coming from and we need to get as much aid in there as we can as quickly as possible.

Clare Dixon: I am saying that the International Committee of the Red Cross and the Colombian Committee of the Red Cross and Red Crescent said they would not be involved in that particular initiative because it would not fulfil the basic criteria—the fundamental criteria—of neutrality and independence.

Dr Arenas-Pinto: It is important to highlight that there are political agendas around; there will always be in any country in any setting in any circumstances. One of the important things here is that the Venezuelan crisis has been ongoing for years and has been unnoticed by many, many countries. There is a concept that Venezuela is a rich and prosperous economy because it has plenty of oil and natural resources, that Venezuela does not need any help and that people in Venezuela are doing well. That is not true and has not been true for years. It is quite important. If anything, the events of last Saturday or Friday just show to the world that there may be a problem in Venezuela. There is a problem in Venezuela. People are dying in Venezuela, including from very preventable conditions. That is the reality. The challenge is about how to tackle that, particularly in the context of a Government who are doing everything it can to stop it.

Chair: What we are going to do now is move to some of the broader regional impacts.

Q10 Nigel Evans: I spoke to a lot of legitimate Venezuelan MPs, when I was chairman of the Inter-Parliamentary Union, at some of our conferences. The stories are horrific, about ordinary citizens vying with dogs for scraps of food, bare shelves and all that sort of stuff. Can you put a bit of colour on this? I heard what you have said now about the fact that people seem to have missed what has been going on in Venezuela. We know it is a rich country, and it would be if it were not for the manmade humanitarian crisis that has literally been created by the regime. Can you paint colour on the health situation particularly, regarding things like vaccinations, malaria coming back, measles and all that sort of stuff? Can you maybe add some colour about the people who have fled the country: the experts, doctors and nurses?

Dr Arenas-Pinto: I come back to the point that we do not have access to official data because the Ministry of Health stopped producing these



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reports a few years ago. However, we do have data from regional and multinational institutions, and we have some academic research informing us about that. I already mentioned the example of malaria. Perhaps it is important to say that in the 1930s the most important public health problem in Venezuela was malaria. 70% of the Venezuelan territory was an active area of malaria transmission. That was a massive problem. That triggered a massive, well organised and empowered national control programme to reduce the transmission of malaria to levels of elimination in most of the country.

That lasted until very recently. We lost that, and we lost that because the health system just collapsed. The WHO, the World Health Organization, set up a target to reduce the incidence of malaria by 75% globally between 2000 and 2015. If you see the final report of that initiative, the only country in the world that failed to achieve that target, and was going in the wrong direction, was Venezuela. The incidence of malaria in Venezuela increased over that time—in fact, by over 300%. It was a complete collapse of what was a very successful control programme.

Vaccination programmes is the other area that it is important to measure—the quality of healthcare that a society receives from the state. There we can say that, as an example, the European Centre for Disease Prevention and Control, the ECDC, in its 2017 report highlighted that diphtheria is considered a threat for the planet, in particular for Europe and European citizens. The source of that problem—diphtheria as a global threat—is two countries. One is Yemen. We all know the horrible situation in Yemen because of the war. The second one is Venezuela. That is the level of the tragedy. You need to fail quite strongly in your coverage of vaccination to have enough susceptible individuals in your population to have active transmission of diphtheria. As I was saying earlier, 17 or the 24 regions in the country have confirmed cases of diphtheria as of 2017. That is the level of the crisis in terms of preventable diseases.

We could go along with a number of other things—for example, the treatment of HIV. The Venezuelan control programme for HIV was very efficient and one of the best in the region. It was one of the first in the region. The Government were providing treatment for over 70,000 people in Venezuela. It was effective treatment. To put it into context, in the UK we have 100,000 people on treatment. In Venezuela by 2012, we were treating about the same number of people that were treated here in the UK, and our population is about half or less than the UK population. That is the magnitude of the impact of the HIV control programme. By now, most of the people living with HIV have not had access to treatment for over seven months in some of the regions of the country. This is a major tragedy. In fact, Healing Venezuela funded a project with the institute of scientific investigation in the country, just to try to look at the impact of that in terms of resistance because of people not having access to the treatment. We are reporting preliminary data that about 20% of the people who have never been treated with drugs for HIV have been infected with resistant viruses. That is a problem for the individual but it



is a tragedy for the programmes because the drugs that are going to be used in the first line will not then be effective for them.

Having said that, and coming to your point on migration, people are migrating and leaving the country. As I was saying a few weeks ago, they are leaving the country with all their hopes and skills but also with all the health problems that they carry with them. That includes HIV, for example. That includes malaria. Last year, in a small town in the border area between Peru and Ecuador, 96% of the cases of malaria that were diagnosed were imported from Venezuela. Last year, over 70% of the cases of imported malaria that were reported in eastern Brazil were cases from Venezuela. The same thing can happen with measles, diphtheria and any other communicable diseases. This is where we can have data, because they are diseases that can or should be registered and reported. There are also people who leave the country with cardiovascular disease, a chronic renal disease or any other conditions. That is the magnitude.

Q11 Nigel Evans: Are there pharmacies without essential medicines? Can you walk into a chemist shops and get regular drugs?

Isabel Marquez: No. There are hardly any basic medicines that we would use. Most importantly, in many of the hospitals there is not even the basic equipment any longer. That makes it extremely difficult. To complement what Alejandro was saying, having myself being in Boa Vista setting up the emergency response, we also need to look at the pendular movements. Some of the populations have been moving back and forward. Some of the epidemics, like yellow fever, actually went from Brazil into Venezuela. The Pan American Health Organization, together with the WHO and the respective local authorities, have tried to set up regional healthcare to address the retroviral issues, in particular with Colombia, Brazil and, as Alejandro said, elsewhere. We must not also forget that the more vulnerable you are, the weaker you are and the easier you will become sick. Let us not forget that people at the moment are having great difficulties eating more than once a day. The weaker you are, the more vulnerable you become.

Q12 Nigel Evans: Finally, is it true that the military are in charge of the drugs, and that without corruption, bribery and all that sort of stuff, you literally will not get access to them? You talk about preventable deaths. There must be hundreds of thousands of people who have now died since the humanitarian crisis started.

Dr Arenas-Pinto: It is very difficult to quantify that because there is no source data that we can check and that can be verified independently. It is very hard to know. If you look at reports from charitable organisations that have been working with specific groups, they can tell you about a significant number of things. One thing that comes to my head at the moment is that they say that about 50% of the people who were in haemodialysis because of end-stage renal disease due to renal failure died last year because of lack of access to treatment, which for decades has shown to be effective in keeping people healthy and alive for a long



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time. If that is true, we are probably talking about tens of thousands of deaths that are very preventable.

- Q13 **Mark Menzies:** This is to Alejandro, but, Isabel, feel free to chip in. With regards to the transmittable diseases—measles, malaria and so on—looking at your medical profession and with your humanitarian hats on, what could be done in terms of vaccination programmes in Colombia for people that have come in from Venezuela in order to raise a level of protection by immunisation? What would that look like?

Dr Arenas-Pinto: That is a very, very challenging scenario, mainly because people crossing the border, as Isabel was saying, are not necessarily crossing and staying where they initially arrive. They tend to move. They cross Colombia and can move further on down in the continent. If you are going to try to set up an emergency vaccination programme for migrants, which can be done and has been implemented in a number of refugee camps—I am sure all of you have far more experience than I have on these kinds of things—those programmes are based on the principle that people are going to stay there for a period of time. You can complete a course of vaccination on that population because you have access to them over a stable period of time. With this dynamic movement of people, it is very hard to see that. For that, we would need to get advice from experts.

Isabel Marquez: In most countries in the region, from Venezuela down, they have put in place almost mandatory—it cannot be legally mandatory—reinforced vaccinations systems. In Brazil, as you enter through Pacaraima, you get vaccinated and, as they say, some Venezuelans have been vaccinated four or five times. They will not be able to transition in the country through the interiorisation programme from location A to B if they are not vaccinated. The same is happening to some extent in Colombia, Ecuador, Peru and now also in Chile and Argentina. They try their best. In the next meeting, which is confirmed for April, that is one of the issues that I understand is going to be tackled: how to harmonise this vaccination.

- Q14 **Paul Scully:** Coming back to you, Isabel, in the UNHCR report, the assessment of need for tackling the whole Venezuelan crisis, including migration, is only 7% funded. What are the prospects for attracting more funding and the immediate implications of not getting very close at all to the target?

Isabel Marquez: Are you referring to inside Venezuela or in the region?

Chair: The whole crisis. Our understanding is it is 7%.

Paul Scully: It is \$146 million that you are looking for but there is only \$10.6 million of funding.

Isabel Marquez: That is right. If I step aside for a second from the UNHCR hat, there are 90 partners that have gathered together, NGOs and 17 UN agencies, which have come up with a refugee and migrant



response plan—RMRP. We are seeking altogether \$738 million. As far as I am aware, but I could be completely wrong, in some projections there is only \$14 million or \$15 million. We are very, very behind for what we need as a whole. It is very interesting to note, particularly in health, nutrition and WASH, that all these sectors and agencies have come together to seek funds, including NGOs.

It has been quite difficult to raise funds, I must admit, for outside Venezuela these days, because the attention happens to be more inside the country. We must not forget that there are 3.4 million migrants and refugees in the region and have been there for quite some time with extreme vulnerabilities. If those are not addressed, they will end up in incremental sexual gender-based violence. We have instances of extreme vulnerability because people's needs cannot be addressed and the generosity of the Latin American countries, just to mention some, has a limit in the sense that there is only so much they can cope with in terms of the large numbers that continue to arrive.

Q15 Henry Smith: We have heard of some of the health challenges with regard to Venezuelan migrants in surrounding countries. Can you give a little bit more information on issues such as access to legal services status and in particular to education for children and young people who are Venezuelan migrants in neighbouring countries?

Chair: Is that for Isabel? Clare, do you want to come in? I am conscious you have not had a say for a little while.

Clare Dixon: It is, again, very difficult. In Colombia, there has been an issue—moving backwards and forwards in between Colombia and Venezuela is very traditional. A lot of people who fled the war in Colombia went to Venezuela. A lot of them are coming back. You have many Colombians who reside in Venezuela. There are a lot of familial contacts. The numbers are now exceeding any capacity for the state to respond. Colombia has 7 million displaced people of its own, who were displaced during the war. Therefore, the humanitarian needs that they are bringing forward are also very great.

There is the added problem, of course, that the local population in Colombia says, "There are 7 million displaced people here. How are we going to resolve the problems of all these Venezuelans who are coming in when we do not have the resources to resolve our own problems?" There is that kind of social conflict. There have been some rather awful cases of retribution against people deemed to be Venezuelans who have committed crimes. In Cúcuta you had people being set alight alive. That is the kind of challenge that is facing our partners in the different parishes and dioceses who are receiving them. It is very challenging.

Q16 Chair: Isabel, in particular, can you address Henry's points about the legal status and education?

Henry Smith: Yes, education in particular, if we have limited time.



Isabel Marquez: On access to legal status, I see it a little bit differently from Clare, in the sense that we must not forget that there are 1.3 million people who have been regularised already through alternative legal pathways. When we look elsewhere in the world, it is difficult to think of instances where that would have happened—not only that, but they have alternative legal pathways that are some sort of residency, and in addition 392,000 people have sought asylum. Either of the two pathways, so to speak, would entitle them in general, in most countries, to have access to basic services. In some countries—Ecuador and Brazil, among others—they would have entitlements equal to nationals in terms of access to basic services. That is a very positive dimension that shows the region's generosity, and the legal frameworks and public policies.

However, for education, it is a very big challenge. The number of people that have arrived—I am talking about Brazil but the same goes for Colombia, where I have also been—means that it was very, very difficult for the local authorities to expand schools. You have very qualified children who come but who do not know, as Alejandro alluded to, whether they are coming or going, so at first they will not try to be educated. We are working with other UN agencies, NGOs and churches for alternative ways of educating during this transitional period and then they decide to stay. Remember, many of them are going through the Andean corridor, trying to reach as far south as they can—many of them think that it is better the further they move. They call them mochileros because they are bringing their backpack with them. Education is one of the biggest challenges at the moment.

Q17 **Henry Smith:** We heard earlier that for all sorts of historical reasons the British international aid footprint in South America has been very limited indeed. There are some Commonwealth countries that border Venezuela—Guyana and Trinidad and Tobago. Are there any migrants who have particularly gone to either of those two countries?

Isabel Marquez: Yes. I do not have the figures with me. I can pass them to you, but in some of the territories or states in the Caribbean, you have a situation worse than Lebanon, where 25% at some point in history have been refugees. In some instances, over 35% are Venezuelan migrants or refugees. The numbers are small but so is the island, so it is all relative. There is a large presence of UN NGOs addressing that.

Q18 **Chair:** If you could send us a note on that, that would be very helpful. We just have three minutes, and I really want to do this. You have a minute each. We have the Minister next. If there is one thing the UK could do to assist with this crisis, what would it be?

Clare Dixon: Working with multilateral allies in coalition to continue with diplomatic measures to ensure, first of all, that humanitarian access can be given, and to lend our support to a negotiated solution, which will be difficult and long-term.



Dr Arenas-Pinto: The challenge will need to be in moving forward to help inside the country, with the organisations that are actually delivering support to very vulnerable groups. Despite all the problems and confrontations with the Government and their allies, a number of organisations have been delivering good support on a small scale in different parts of the country. If we could build on that, that would support a network that can deliver the aid that more and more people need. That will secure and help them to implement higher levels of support that may come from organisations with political agendas. Who knows when they are going to come?

Chair: That is a great answer. Thank you very much indeed.

Isabel Marquez: Put Venezuelan men, women, girls and boys at the centre of all actions, reduce tensions and address the root causes.

Q19 **Chair:** What about your massively underfunded appeal? It is very unusual none of you answered with, "We need more money".

Isabel Marquez: Give us money. Please give money to us and the rest of the humanitarian community.

Chair: Thank you all very much indeed. You are welcome to stay for the second panel to hear from the Minister and the officials from the British Government. We are really grateful to you for your evidence here today. Thank you.

Examination of Witnesses

Witnesses: Rt Hon Alistair Burt MP, Matthew Wyatt and Nigel Baker.

Q20 **Chair:** Welcome. Thank you very much. This is our second panel in taking evidence on the humanitarian crisis in and surrounding Venezuela. Welcome, Minister, and senior officials. We have eight areas that we are seeking to cover over the next period. Let me kick off. The Government have made a welcome announcement of £6.5 million of emergency aid for Venezuela. Minister, can you tell us how that money is going to be apportioned?

Alistair Burt: Yes. Thank you, Chair and thank you for the opportunity to speak to you. As you appreciate, on 12 February we committed a new package of £6.5 million in humanitarian aid to respond to the most severe needs in Venezuela and the wider region. The package builds on our significant existing support to the UN and Red Cross movement operating in the region. Two-thirds of the £6.5 million will be spent inside Venezuela and about one-third outside. It goes to fund health, nutrition and emergency aid that is needed. As you know, we work closely through agencies there. We are limited in what we can say directly about exactly who we work with, for obvious reasons. The circumstances inside Venezuela are difficult. It has not been easy to get information on the



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ground. We have rough estimates of how many people might be in need. I am sure you are aware of poverty levels increasing from 48% in 2014 to 87% now. We derive our evidence from NGOs on the ground, and universities and research centres, because Government figures are not available. As I say, the basic allocation is two-thirds inside and one-third outside for humanitarian needs.

- Q21 **Chair:** You will know, Minister, that the Committee has been very keen to encourage support for local organisations. I do not know how far you can comment on this. How far might local organisations, both within Venezuela but also in surrounding countries, have access to some of this funding?

Alistair Burt: Principal funding has gone through agencies, as you are aware, through CERF, to which we are the second largest contributor, to WHO and to ICRC. There is a mixture of agencies that will be involved in delivering the aid locally. We are conscious of the surrounding factors amongst those who distribute aid.

I should start off by saying that I have with me Matthew Wyatt from DFID and Nigel Baker from the FCO. I am not sure how much more we would say about the local NGOs, for obvious reasons.

Matthew Wyatt: The only thing we would say is that we would expect that at least some of the assistance that we are providing would find its way from the agencies we support to the local NGOs.

- Q22 **Chair:** Can I ask specifically about education? You know this has been a big focus for our Committee in our general work. We heard, in the first panel, from UNHCR about some of the challenges, which are familiar to us from other crises for displaced people, whether they are internally displaced in Venezuela or in neighbouring countries. My understanding is that there is no explicit reference to education in the package of funding that we have announced. Why is that?

Alistair Burt: There are two reasons. First, the immediate concerns are based on protecting those Venezuelans who have left Venezuela and are in the surrounding countries, principally Colombia. Secondly, it is based on immediate humanitarian needs. Although we are very conscious, as you are, about the need to provide education both locally and for those who have fled—one of the figures is that of those who leave a country one-third of them lose primary education and two-thirds of them lose secondary education—at the moment it is genuinely hard to discern precisely what is going to be needed. I spoke to our representative in Caracas this morning. We all agreed that, once there is more access, we will find out more about what is needed and what is available. South America, as you know, has not been part of DFID's longer-term development plans. It has not needed to be. The principal donors are others. What I suspect we will uncover when the lid comes off is maybe a much greater degree of deprivation across many other sectors. At the moment, it is not part of our delivery. Everything is open for the future.



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What we have done is respond to the immediate crisis but that does not mean that other packages will not be available in due course. Matthew, is that right?

Matthew Wyatt: Yes, that is absolutely right. Some of the support we are providing is helping people to get the documentation that they need to access services in the region and regional countries. In that case, there is an impact on their ability to access education as well.

Q23 Chair: We are going to return a bit later to the broader question of DFID's engagement in Central America and South America. What we have already heard is, yes, this is a man-made crisis but even before this immediate crisis the levels of poverty in Venezuela have been seriously challenging. Why is it that DFID's involvement in Venezuela has been so low, even compared with some of the other countries in South America?

Alistair Burt: I am not a Venezuelan expert, as you know. This is a country with the largest proven oil reserves in the world. It is also a country that has resolutely refused to accept there was any form of humanitarian aid necessary and any form of humanitarian crisis going on. Bearing in mind the way in which DFID uses its resources, it has not been necessary. Also, as you are aware from the pattern of aid that has come forward, the engagement of those locally has been much greater, as it is now. The United States and Canada are the principal donors. Other countries that take a keen interest in affairs are the Lima Group. I do not think it has necessarily been part of an overall sense of need in terms of what DFID is looking for.

If you look at DFID first in relation to its dealings with absolute poverty, you would not pick Venezuela as a target. If you are looking at those states that are moving into lower-middle-income status and beyond, again Venezuela would not necessarily be there. What has happened, as you say, is that the man-made crisis has truly heightened awareness of what has been going on but, as I am sure you are going to come on to, part of the issue is that if a state does not acknowledge what its needs may be and is in denial, and then it resolutely refuses and defends its borders to the extent of refusing aid, you have a completely different picture. It has not been a big part of the programme.

Chair: You have anticipated the next step of questions, so that is perfect.

Q24 Chris Law: I would like to know what steps the Government are taking to negotiate greater humanitarian access inside Venezuela. I know you have pointed out that it is quite difficult to get information on the ground so this may be patchy but I want to know what progress has been made.

Alistair Burt: DFID's bottom line remains a non-politicisation of aid and a determination to ensure that aid reaches those most in need, no matter what the background may be. As I said earlier, we put principal support through the agencies, and the agencies themselves are involved in trying to see what they can do inside Venezuela. It is difficult with state



agencies. There is also this issue of association. If agencies fear they become associated either with state or with political parties, there is a risk. As you know, we have two advisers in Venezuela and we have supported five or six posts.

Matthew Wyatt: There are seven now.

Alistair Burt: We have supported seven posts in the major aid agencies in order to ensure that we have others who are getting access or trying to get the information. My understanding, as you saw from the news clips over the last few days, is that negotiating to get things through the border appears to be extremely difficult, almost impossible. The other routes are quite rare.

Q25 **Chris Law:** Following on from that, how do you separate that politics that have been taken by either side from aid and getting aid into the place? What steps can be taken?

Alistair Burt: Let me give you a politician's response and then ask Matthew for detail. As this Committee will know better than most, trying to ensure that aid does not carry a political flag is really important for the safety of aid workers. They need to be seen everywhere, whether it is in conflict areas like Yemen or very tense political standoff areas like Venezuela, as being neutral, so that they cannot be targeted and cannot be attacked. In many places, that is held to. The work of the ICRC and others makes that a priority.

In this particular case, because of the nature of the political and constitutional crisis, in terms of the standoff on aid, with one part of the political process recognising the crisis in the country and wanting to have access to aid, that is seen as a political gesture rather than the humanitarian gesture that it ought to be seen as. Equally, the state, in resisting this, is seen to be taking a political stance as opposed to an objective view about the needs of the country that could be relieved by aid.

The best thing for DFID to do is to maintain absolutely this separation and say very clearly that our aid goes towards those who are in need, and be extremely cautious in how any UK support or finance is channelled. That is why we are being extremely cautious of any relationship with state or political parties. That is why, of course, the local NGO situation is difficult, because for their very existence they may have to co-operate with state or the de facto authority in a particular area. The more often we can say that we do not see the politicisation of aid as beneficial, the better. Other countries may take different views and the politics of the situation is very difficult, but the United Kingdom's position that aid is distributed to those in need on a humanitarian basis is our best protection. That is a political view. Matthew, what about for those who are the practitioners on the ground?



Matthew Wyatt: The only thing to say in terms of practitioners on the ground would be that the agencies that we will be working through are agencies that are very experienced in working in highly politicised and even militarised environments, doing so in a way that is consistent with—if it is humanitarian assistance—humanitarian principles or with broader international humanitarian law, human rights law and so on. Bringing experience from elsewhere is very relevant to Venezuela, although, of course, Venezuela is a unique case.

Alistair Burt: The fact that we call for unfettered access to aid is not a political statement. It is a reaction to the humanitarian situation on the ground.

Nigel Baker: Of course, this is not new. Through the European Union we have been calling for free access for humanitarian aid into Venezuela since 2017, at the very least. That is two years' worth of calls for this. The Government have continually said no but modest amounts of EU aid have been able to get through, through some agencies and local NGOs, but it has been very difficult for an extremely long time. We have been very consistent in calling for that free access.

Q26 **Chris Law:** That is very helpful. What we saw on the television at the weekend was obviously a highly politicised attempt to bring humanitarian aid to the border. In fact, we were earlier hearing from witnesses that it was seen as very much a US effort and, as a result, it has created some national solidarity, in fact, within Venezuela behind Maduro. What is the UK Government doing in persuading the US to decouple aid from the politics of it?

Alistair Burt: We stand four-square with the United States and others in calling for the constitutional processes to be gone through in terms of the move towards new elections and to recognise the constitutional situation that Venezuela is in. On that, we are very clear. We call for the unfettered access of aid into the situation and we believe, as we have made clear, the origins of the situation lie with decisions of the Government in Venezuela. We are not particularly in the business of offering lectures to partners about how they see things, and I do not think we should, because that gets us drawn into the argument in the first place. It is one of those areas where I am proud to say that DFID's reputation stands on its own. It is not seen as taking a political edge and we are keen for it not to do so.

The best thing we can do is stick to our principles: free and unfettered access; support—as a number of European countries have done, as well as the United States—the constitutional efforts that must be made to resolve this crisis peacefully; and make sure our aid is handled on the basis of need. Sometimes going directly to places, we look to see if we can provide, through our intermediaries, aid directly to hospitals, for example, to try to short-circuit authorities and others to get in there. That is better. As I say, the United States' relationships in South America and Central America are very different to ours, and they ought to be able



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to answer for themselves about how they are doing it. We should stick to our part of it.

Q27 Chris Law: How can humanitarian aid workers working inside Venezuela best be safeguarded?

Alistair Burt: Safeguarding workers is, again, attached to the difficulty of getting access. The operating space is very limited. Again, the United Kingdom making clear that international rules must be observed, humanitarian actors are not targets and demonstrating that our work remains based on need and humanitarian principles is the best we can do.

At the moment, our sense is that, except at the border where there have been clashes, other parts of Venezuela are, at this stage, calm. We should not be doing anything to raise the temperature in any way. As the Committee will know very well, the risk of the politicisation of aid means that those who are seen as being involved in that are seen to be targets by others. We make clear the rigid separation of the two is the best protection for workers. Should there be any evidence of aid workers being deliberately targeted then that would raise concerns even more so.

While we are concentrating on aid here, that is another reason to remember the constitutional processes that need to be gone through and really press on those. Look at the pictures at the weekend, the issue of the bridge and the confrontation between protestors and those in the military, and the tensions we are familiar with, between armies who themselves have families who are suffering in places. The only way forward on this is to seek the political solution. That is the best way of protecting people.

Q28 Richard Burden: You have been very clear about your determination that aid, at least as far as aid with which the UK is associated, is separated from politics and for that to be depoliticised in what is clearly a very highly politicised and militarised situation. This is not the only part of the world, is it, where those dilemmas and problems appear, whether it be a regime blocking aid getting to its intended recipients or whether it be the risks posed to people seen to be facilitating aid? I wonder if you think that there are any other lessons that could be applied to the Venezuela situation from other parts of the world where, though the same problems are not being experienced, some parallels are being experienced, whether it be in, say, Yemen or Syria.

Alistair Burt: The short answer is yes. The scrutiny that DFID is put through, partly through the parliamentary process and partly through external reviews, means that where we have been operating in a conflict situation and there have been a variety of risks, including diversion of supplies or pressure on humanitarian actors, we can and do constantly learn lessons about how things can be done. Syria has taught us quite a bit about risk appetite. As I have mentioned to the Committee before, in these difficult situations where there is great need, if there are risks then



it is for officials to spell those out to Ministers. We take the judgment on that and then we come before you and others and explain the factors behind taking a risk. You give us a nod or a shake of the head in terms of whether it was a justifiable risk to take, bearing in mind what happened afterwards. If I can explain why we took a risk and it was justifiable, if something has gone wrong then we will learn from that, but if things have gone well we need to take risks. One thing is risk appetite.

A second thing is always looking at which agencies tend to be the most successful in getting aid in. Sometimes they may be faith-based agencies. Sometimes they may be other local NGOs. Our experience, in my understanding, has given us an opportunity to observe what practice works best in most conflicted areas, such as how you assess that local commanders might be relied upon rather than might not be relied upon, and the pressures upon them. Experience in the field feeds back. Every conflict area can teach you something. We are very conscious of that.

The Venezuelan situation at present is rather different to those conflict areas. We are not quite in that situation. The politicisation of aid and the blank refusal of a state to accept all of the evidence weighted against it, which says that its people are in need, almost takes you back to some of the famines of the 1930s in states that refused to accept that situation because of the disgrace it would bring, et cetera. This is a complex factor. It is much harder to hide these days. Everyone has a phone. Everyone can see what is going on. States that want to deny the obvious are in a more difficult situation than ever before. Hopefully, that will add pressure not to increase the risk of confrontation but to recognise the needs that need to be resolved.

Q29 Richard Burden: It would be invidious and quite wrong to start to grade whether access challenges in Venezuela are greater or less than in Syria or Yemen, because they are different situations. As far as the UK is concerned, the fact that we do not have a particular track record, not only in Venezuela but in Latin America generally, for all the reasons you have said, does create particular problems for us there because of our lack of street wisdom of the situation on the ground, or would you say that is not a problem?

Alistair Burt: Again, I will bring Matthew in in a second, but the honest answer is that we are not seeking to set up, as it were, a significant British aid presence there. That is why we use agencies that are already on the ground and already have that knowledge. To seek to set up from afresh some DFID organisation that would try to learn all the things you are saying very quickly in a difficult situation would not be an effective use of the aid we can give, while using agencies that are already on the ground and already have that experience would be. As long as we can identify and answer your questions about where the money goes when we reach the end of the process—if we know where all the money has gone and we are able to tell you, honestly, whether we are using that



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money to support agencies who know the ground better than we do, then that is the best use of our time and resource.

Matthew Wyatt: As the Minister said before, we do have a co-ordinator in Caracas and an embassy in Caracas. We do have knowledge and contacts, and they are talking to all relevant parties to try to understand better the situation. As the Minister says, we are working through partners who are very well plugged in and understand the environment very well, and so are able to navigate the environment.

One thing in all this is not to be too defeatist. It is a very, very difficult environment to work in but there are agencies that are able to work. We are learning lessons from things like the Syria crisis and other crises, and on things like tracking. The Minister mentioned mobile phones. Everyone has a mobile phone to see what is happening, but mobile phone technology could also be used to track where stuff is getting to, to make sure it is reaching where it needs to reach and so on. There are lessons there as well, in terms of how you monitor and track assistance even in very difficult environments.

Nigel Baker: To reinforce that point, we do have an embassy in Caracas. It has been very valuable for the FCO to be able to offer a platform as necessary to DFID and the adviser coming in, with that deeper advice. Although DFID has not been physically present in Latin America, the embassy has been, pre-crisis and through the crisis, and it is able to provide that extra context in which DFID might operate or deliver aid.

Q30 **Mark Menzies:** This is initially to the Minister. What are the plans to rapidly scale up the responses to the crisis if needed?

Alistair Burt: First, the tranche of support that we offered was an initial one. The Secretary of State made very clear that the doors are not closed. It would depend entirely on what is discovered when people get into Venezuela. Our anticipation is that it will probably be worse than we currently imagine. Secondly, it will be about the extent to which we can make a distinctive contribution and, in the meantime, what we can do about worsening situations in neighbouring countries.

We are ready to do more. That is why we have the advisers there and that is why we supported those who would be working through other agencies. At the moment, it is an open question. It will depend what the needs are, what resources are available to meet those needs, and how the UK's contribution could make a distinctive difference. Is that right, as far as the future is concerned?

Matthew Wyatt: Yes, that is absolutely right. We will continue to monitor carefully the needs and the information we have on the needs as they evolve. What we are able to provide is also dependent on the access question, which we have already discussed. Thirdly, it is about the UK's comparative advantage, as the Minister said, and the distinctive things that we can bring to bear on the situation. They will all be factors that



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Ministers will want to bear in mind as they consider if and when more needs to be done.

Alistair Burt: We have programmes that can do that. The CSSF is in a different position to the longer-term country programmes. DFID has the flexibility to finance, should it be needed. We are also very conscious of specific needs. We were discussing this morning some issues affecting medicines. There are particular medicines that are needed by people. We know all about that. We are looking for ways to access that. There are security aspects there. Everything going into a difficult situation has a value. Therefore, local relationships with security forces to make sure they are all doing their job that they need to do to protect all members of the public and prevent corruption or theft is very important.

In looking at particular groups that may be in greater need, those that are very reliant on medicines, we know that the health system is in very, very poor shape indeed. The Ministry of Health stopped producing statistics a couple of years ago, I understand, because they were showing marked increases. There is great concern about what may be found there. Perhaps you have uncovered that in talking to others that you have seen in the inquiry.

Q31 **Mark Menzies:** One of the things that has been raised with us, as you have just identified, is around medicines and vaccines. If DFID was able to get in, pending a change in the political situation, how quickly could we respond to the need for HIV medicines or vaccines for measles or diphtheria? How long would it take to ramp that activity up?

Alistair Burt: My understanding is that the aid package we have announced is designed to support emergency rooms and maternity wards, where we know there is already severe pressure. In terms of the support we provide to other funds to deal with AIDS, tuberculosis and malaria, for example, we have those monies available. We are ready to scale up quite quickly if need be.

Matthew Wyatt: In terms of the funds we are supporting, as you know, we are the second largest donor to the Global Fund to Fight AIDS, Tuberculosis and Malaria. They have provided \$5 million for retrovirals through working with other partners allocated with Venezuela. That is one example where it is possible now. In terms of how quickly it will be possible to ramp up as and when things open up, that depends on when and how they open up. It is hard to answer that question.

Alistair Burt: As well as what the circumstances would be. If the constitutional change is peaceful, there is no conflict and the Government are willing and welcoming of aid, then things can be done very quickly. The longer the political situation remains unresolved the greater the risks there are for the population.

Q32 **Mark Menzies:** Moving on to the next set of questions—and this is more for Nigel—what assessment do the UK Government make of the potential



for the crisis to spread across the Andean states?

Nigel Baker: There are real dangers for the neighbourhood in what is happening in Venezuela. Colombia in particular is vulnerable. As you know very well, Colombia is in the process of an implementation of peace. It remains very fragile. There are armed groups and criminal groups operating. One particular guerrilla group, the ELN, is operating and has been operating for some time out of Venezuelan territory and recently committed an atrocity, a major bomb attack in Bogotá. There is a danger of the creation of an empty, ungoverned space, particularly around those border areas. It is no coincidence that we saw some violence in the border areas over the weekend, both in Brazil and Colombia. That danger is a very real one.

The Minister mentioned the CSSF, the Conflict, Stability and Security Fund. We have been deploying that for some time in Colombia in support of the peace process. Although the ability to deploy inside of Venezuela has been extremely limited, we are keeping a close eye out there, scoping possibilities, and there are some emergency funding mechanisms there that could potentially be deployed were we able to identify areas where we needed to for that. The danger is real and it is one reason why the neighbour and the Lima Group is so focused on Venezuela and the impact and the instability it is exporting across the region.

Q33 **Mark Menzies:** You have covered what I was going to ask next, so I will jump forward. Is there a risk that the work the United Kingdom has already done, particularly in Colombia, will be undone by a failure to support neighbouring countries in protecting what are very porous borders? I am thinking particularly about some of the work that has been done by the Prosperity Fund in Colombia and some of the points in the Government-to-Government agreement from President Santos's state visit. There are some really positive actions there. What is the risk to that being unpicked by this?

Nigel Baker: There is a danger. There are at least 3.5 million, probably more, Venezuelans who have fled the country. They are putting an extreme burden on the neighbouring countries, Colombia especially, but also Peru and Ecuador. These are already fragile systems in parts of the country that have been conflict areas up until the peace process. They are putting a great strain on the ability to cope, let alone on the ability to implement a proper peace process. There is a risk. It is why the neighbourhood is taking the situation so seriously and why it is so important that the UK continues to work very closely with the Lima Group of countries in identifying solutions and working with them on a solution to the crisis, rather than trying to come up with our own independent solutions. It is so important that we are listening to what the region is saying.

Alistair Burt: It has been significant that Minister Duncan has been at meetings of the Lima Group, on occasions as the only EU representative from outside. His own personal commitment to the area, on behalf of the



UK, has been really important. Of course, with his development background that has been doubly helpful. This really is a situation on which DFID and FCO are working together at all different levels.

Q34 Chair: We heard from UNHCR about the level of funding. Our figures are suggesting that only 7% of their assessed need is being met at the moment. Is there an opportunity here for the UK to make a bigger financial contribution to UNHCR's appeal for the Venezuelan crisis?

Alistair Burt: It has not been the immediate target for us up until now, partly because we have put resources elsewhere into immediate needs. As I indicated earlier, there is always room for more in the future, depending on what the needs may be. Remember, the UK's particular contribution is much smaller than the United States and those who have been engaged for some time. It is best to target ours effectively. UNHCR has not been the target of the money. We wanted to spend on immediate humanitarian needs and direct it towards the health sector, nutrition and protection of women, girls and others. This absolutely does not mean that at some stage in the future we would not support UNHCR.

Matthew Wyatt: I would just add that we do of course provide core funding to UNHCR of £35 million a year. That is flexible funding that it can use where it sees the biggest needs. Indirectly, through our core funding we are supporting UNHCR.

Alistair Burt: Through CERF they also get money. Remember, we are the second largest donor to CERF. Money comes from there and has gone in relation to the Venezuelan crisis that way. It may not be direct but support from the UK is there.

Q35 Chair: Minister, you mentioned women and girls. Could you or Matthew say a bit more about what focus there is on meeting the particular needs of women and girls, either those within Venezuela or those who have sought refuge in neighbouring countries?

Alistair Burt: I will say a little and Matthew can say a little bit more. On the political side, we recognise the particular needs of women and girls. I may have said to the Committee before that my experience at the UN over recent years is that people say that what used to be a nice add-on has now become an absolute priority. It is built into so much, whether it is providing counselling for those who have been involved in situations of abuse, or protecting them if they are in places where they could be vulnerable to trafficking or exploitation. It has become not the afterthought but a very big part of it.

In this particular instance, I believe the contribution we are making to documentation and access to services is perhaps the single biggest contribution we are making to recognising the risks and making sure that our support has gone to signpost and pinpoint the services that women and girls need, and the protection they might be able to use. It has perhaps been the single most important thing that we have done.



Q36 Chair: In the context of the Rohingya crisis, which we have had exchanges on, we raised the issue of the preventing sexual violence team based in the Foreign Office. Are they potentially going to be deployed to address some of the issues that you are referring to that arise from the Venezuela crisis?

Alistair Burt: I do not know the answer to that, because I am not sure if the evidence is there of similar abuse, but it will be if need be, of course. Matthew, can you say a little bit more about what we are doing?

Matthew Wyatt: There are two things I would add to what the Minister has said. The first is that we already mentioned that we have funded seven secondments into the UN. Two of those are specifically people who are experts in gender-based violence. That is to ensure the whole system is meeting the needs of women and girls and the protection needs for them.

The Minister also mentioned that we have a co-ordinator in Caracas and a humanitarian adviser in Bogotá. They are also in dialogue with the agencies we are supporting, making sure that is done. The other thing is we are making sure that we channel our resources through agencies that have a strong commitment to and track record of meeting the needs of very vulnerable groups, including, specifically, women and girls.

Q37 Mr Evans: There has been a recognition—this regards one of Mark's earlier questions—that the community not working together more quickly may have had an impact upon other countries, including Colombia. You mentioned the ELN car bomb. If you look at the countries that are supporting Maduro at the moment, you have Bolivia, Nicaragua and Cuba; it is the usual suspects. What is unusual is the number of countries from the region who are against Maduro and want to see change. Do you think the lesson to be learned from this is that perhaps we should have got that coalition working harder, quicker, earlier on, in order that it could have alleviated some of the problems not only faced in Venezuela but also in the neighbouring countries?

Alistair Burt: This is much more for Nigel than me.

Nigel Baker: You are absolutely right that it is a new aspect of the situation. The emergence of the Lima Group is a group of countries in the region that are actively and collectively taking a lead in a political situation within their own region. This is quite rare in Latin American history. The regional organisation, the Organization of American States, has taken very strong positions on Venezuela but there are also divisions because, as you say, there are different countries on different sides of the divide within the region. The fact that you have the major countries in the region—Colombia, Peru, Chile, Brazil, Argentina and others—actively grouping together to set the pace is something new. It is something that we have identified that we want to support strongly.

We have looked to engage with them really quite actively and have said from very early on, "We recognise this is a crisis that is impacting on the



region and the region wants to take a lead; we are very happy to support the lead that you are taking". Could we have done so earlier? We were there reasonably early. Certainly amongst European countries, we are probably the most active in our engagement with the Lima Group. In terms of individuals, Sir Alan Duncan and the Foreign Secretary have talked to a lot of the Foreign Ministers from the region, and they have also been attending and supporting their declarations of support. We would like to see the European Union working much more closely with the Lima Group and recognising that this group is taking a lead that we in Europe should be taking account of and following.

- Q38 **Mr Evans:** Mr Guaidó is the politician in the region who is being recognised by an increasing number of countries. I do not know if the United Kingdom is one of those countries who recognise him now.

Alistair Burt: Yes.

Nigel Baker: It is.

- Q39 **Mr Evans:** Do we believe that he is the person who can help to change this political situation around? If so, what sort of assistance are we giving other countries to come to that same conclusion?

Nigel Baker: The Foreign Secretary has said that we see Juan Guaidó as the man to take Venezuela forward. He has been very clear that he is not trying to take power for himself. As the President of the National Assembly, he is constitutionally mandated to generate a political process towards free and fair elections, preferably under proper international scrutiny and supervision. We support him. We recognise him under the Venezuelan constitution as the interim President. There are about 55 countries that do so, including those major Latin American countries we have mentioned.

The Foreign Secretary has spoken to him and asked him what the UK can do to help and support. He was very clear. He said there are two things: maintain the pressure on the illegitimate regime in place, to ensure that this constitutional process can go forward; and to remember that this is about the Venezuelan people and to provide support—more support if we can—on the humanitarian side, which is what we are trying to do. We are taking our cue from that leadership and from the National Assembly that he represents, which is the last democratically elected body in Venezuela.

- Q40 **Chair:** That is an unusual thing for the UK to do, is it not? I am just looking at the letter that Sir Alan Duncan sent to my colleague, Tom Tugendhat: "The UK's policy is a case-specific exception to our continuing policy of recognising states, not Governments". Do you want to elaborate on that?

Nigel Baker: Do you want me to answer that?

Alistair Burt: On the basis that you probably know more about the drafting of that letter, Nigel, than I do, yes.



Nigel Baker: The answer is yes. It is a very particular set of circumstances. You have a so-called presidential election back in May that was not recognised by the international community as free and fair. You have under and in line with the Venezuelan constitution Juan Guaidó declaring himself President, with the support of the legitimate National Assembly. Now, 50 or so countries, and the regional organisation, the Organisation of American States, recognise him as the interim President until those elections. It is case-specific and an exception to our policy rather than a change in our policy.

Q41 **Chair:** Minister, earlier you said you would be cautious about giving public advice to the Americans on this. I understand that. I am certainly not a defender of Maduro; clearly his regime is responsible for this crisis and there should be fresh elections, but you do not have to be a defender of him to be very cautious about the history of the US involvement in Latin America, and in particular some of those who are in the current US administration. I do not know if I can tempt you to make any comment on that.

Alistair Burt: Bear in mind that it is not my political portfolio area, but just from our general background, history and common sense, people have memories. Although some decades have passed, memories are long and I would expect everyone to recognise that and for people to go carefully. Intervention all over the world has its risks but, as we have also learned in recent times, so has leaving things alone and believing that the strictures against intervention are so strong that you should stand by and see something terrible happen. In a way, all these things are almost case-specific. You have to ask, "What is the danger to people here? What is the best way of dealing with it?"

As Nigel has outlined, there is a strong structure of regional countries who recognise the risks to themselves, strongly value their independence and security, but also understand that both their own reputations and the risk to people in the area should a regime go so rogue that it defends itself with a denial of the circumstances affecting its people. That is the context and the background. I would strongly expect both the State Department and the White House to be very well aware of all the circumstances of difficulty but nonetheless to recognise that the humanitarian needs have to be met, and to consider how it can best work with partners to alleviate that and help resolve a constitutional crisis.

Q42 **Henry Smith:** It is of course the Foreign and Commonwealth Office, and there are two Commonwealth countries that are neighbouring Venezuela—Trinidad and Tobago and, perhaps more so, Guyana. What sort of support can we offer our Commonwealth friends in terms of being able to offer support to those Venezuelan migrants who have been fleeing the situation in that country?

Matthew Wyatt: As we have been talking to partners, we have been talking about the portion of the assistance that was announced that would be for countries of the region. We want to make sure, obviously,



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that it is reaching those most in need in the region. I would need to check and let you know about Guyana, but certainly Trinidad and Tobago would be in scope for that assistance, so they would be able to be assisted through that vehicle.

- Q43 **Chair:** This is an interesting element that Henry has raised during today's two panels, so it would be useful to have a note on precisely the implications for the two neighbouring Commonwealth countries.

Alistair Burt: We can do that.

- Q44 **Paul Scully:** Can I ask if you think the speed and effectiveness of the UK response has been affected by the fact that the UK has prioritised trade and economics with its focus on the deployment of Prosperity Fund resources in South America?

Alistair Burt: The short answer is that I am not aware of that having been in any way a hindrance. The response we have made has been quick in terms of support for agencies that are already actively involved there. In response to a request for assistance we have assisted. I am not aware in the Department, and in discussions between Sir Alan and the Secretary of State, that that has been in any way a hindrance or a difficulty.

- Q45 **Paul Scully:** Do you think taking that focus on the Prosperity Fund was and is the right thing to do at the forefront?

Alistair Burt: I do not see that there is necessarily a conflict. Do you want to tell me a little bit more about the concern?

- Q46 **Paul Scully:** You are looking at trade and economics, and obviously there is this humanitarian aspect behind it. Do the politics of it sometimes get lost because of the drive toward the trade and economy?

Alistair Burt: I understand the risk. Again, my understanding is the short answer should be no. Those funds are pretty flexible. As always, the Government's clear position is that whatever trade and business relationships may be, humanitarian needs and human rights issues are predominant. We must make sure the trade business policies are commensurate with the other things that are important to the United Kingdom. As far as I am aware, that applies as much to Latin America as it would to some parts of the world with which I am slightly more familiar.

- Q47 **Chair:** That takes us nicely to my final question, Minister. You have explained well the historic reasons why DFID does not have a presence in South America, both in terms of the geography and political relationships. The US and Canada are key players, but also economically the countries there have not been the poorest. Is this an opportunity to think again about our engagement with Latin America, and in particular South America, in the light of this crisis, either in terms of perhaps looking to more of a DFID presence or, if not, looking at ways in which we can give greater support to some of the key multilaterals that can relieve the



current humanitarian crisis?

Alistair Burt: I will say two things. In relation to the uncovering of need in terms of what may happen when we find out a little bit more, as I said earlier, I have no sense in the Department that any doors have been closed and that more support would not be available if it was necessary.

In the longer term, both this crisis and of course Brexit—which is not a crisis in the same way but an opportunity for the United Kingdom—present a point at which we can consider relationships in the region. As you know, the emphasis on global Britain post Brexit is very real and very genuine from the United Kingdom Government. Latin and South America will be a key part of that. As far as DFID is concerned, it will depend on needs and everything else, how we look upon what our partners are doing in the region and, again, where we can make distinctive contributions. We have a name and reputation there that is very clear. We have been asked to help by partners. That will not change in the future. We will take the opportunities as they come up. That would be my sense.

Matthew Wyatt: The only very small point I would add to that is there is not no DFID presence in the region. We do have a small presence in Brazil. There is a toe in there. I would not want to oversell that, but it is there.

Nigel Baker: This is very much DFID business, but from an FCO perspective what is clear is that some of those partners in the region—Colombia, Brazil and Mexico in particular—are countries that have a very high regard for what DFID is able to do and does around the world. They would very much welcome the ability to do more in partnership with DFID, possibly in their own countries, within their own region and possibly in other places as well. Mexico looks at Central America, for example, and the problems there. Brazil has been doing things with DFID in Africa and other places. There is that real openness in the region to partnership and recognising that DFID has a brand and an expertise that they would love to do more with where there is a possibility.

Q48 **Chair:** That strikes me as something that will be a positive basis for further consideration. The other thing that strikes me—Paul asked about the Property Fund and I think Nigel mentioned the Conflict, Stability and Security Fund earlier—is that there may be potential for a greater focus in these funds on some of the areas that have been hit by the humanitarian crisis and, in particular, looking at what work can be done to support economic development in some of the poorer parts of the region once a political settlement is reached, which we hope happens soon.

Alistair Burt: I will certainly take that back as an interest of the Committee. My understanding is that these funds are agile enough to respond to those sorts of concerns. As I say, who knows what will be the situation even in a matter of weeks in Venezuela? We very much hope for a peaceful solution to the constitutional process and, above all, free and



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unfettered access for humanitarian agencies to go in, with protection for humanitarian workers and those who have been forced to endure recent circumstances.

Chair: Brilliant. On that note, I thank all three of you for your evidence today, as well as our earlier panel.