



Contact: Jill Watson, Communications Manager
Malteser International Americas
jill.watson@malteser-international.org
Phone: 1 (646) 794-3457

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Malteser International Americas Intervenes with Emergency Relief for Venezuelan Refugees Fleeing to Colombia

Colombian border towns on verge of crisis as thousands of Venezuelans seek refuge in the region

NEW YORK– With over a million refugees now on Colombian soil, Malteser International Americas today announced it is providing emergency relief along the Colombian-Venezuelan border in northern La Guajira to prevent the prolongation of a humanitarian crisis in the Western Hemisphere.

“For the last three years, Malteser International Americas and its primary partners on the ground have provided health and rural development, emergency relief, developed strategic local partnerships and cemented a trust with indigenous communities. This, combined with our unparalleled cultural and geographical access and deep knowledge of remote Afro-Colombian and indigenous communities allows us to work in their sacred communities and prevent further crises from erupting across international borders,” said Ravi Tripptap, Executive Director, Malteser International Americas.

Malteser International Americas, the humanitarian organization of Order of Malta, begins the first phase of emergency interventions this week in the urban center of Riohacha, as well in five initial surrounding Wayuu settlements. Working alongside local partners (Malteser Colombia and ABIUDEA), local government entities, and community members, our ongoing emergency efforts include:

1. Distributing critical hygiene kits for 2000 refugees;
2. Providing emergency medical relief for 1,800 Venezuelan refugees and 800 indigenous people in host communities, including primary health care, medicines, and vaccination and nutrition services via mobile health brigades; and
3. Establishing sustainable systems and food security initiatives to integrate indigenous Venezuelan refugees into indigenous host communities, which will benefit host communities and refugees.

By the end of 2017, officials estimate that 600,000 Venezuelan refugees and asylum seekers fled to Colombia. Unofficial figures and estimates, including illegal border crossing, suggest that there are now more than 1 million refugees (65% Venezuelans, 35% returning Colombians), with up to 8,000 people crossing the Colombian border daily.

There are 3 official and around 280 unofficial border crossings along the border between Colombia and Venezuela. The northern border of Paraguachón is located in La Guajira, one of the poorest departments of Colombia. Since 2015, Malteser International Americas has provided health and nutrition relief and development to internally displaced people and particularly marginalized Afro-Colombian and indigenous people in the region, specifically the Wayuu, Colombia's largest indigenous population.

While the humanitarian crisis has the potential to have exponential consequences and cause havoc to the entire region, the mass exodus of Venezuelan refugees into these communities results in a severe crisis for the Wayuu people, who believe in the indigenous concept of being 'one people beyond national borders'. A spot check in seven vulnerable communities confirmed that those communities alone are hosting at least 750 Wayuu refugees of Venezuelan descent in already extremely poor conditions. However, it is believed that indigenous refugee numbers are in the thousands.

"The current situation of the refugees in La Guajira is dire. Families are sleeping in parks and public places in the urban centers without access to food or basic services in visibly bad nutritional and health conditions," said Jelena Kaifenheim, Regional Manager Latin America & Caribbean, Malteser International Americas. "Pregnant women do not have access to prenatal care, newborns are not attended to, and there is no access to postnatal care. Many children and pregnant women also show signs of acute malnutrition. Furthermore, due to their often illegal status, refugees are particularly vulnerable to discrimination, exploitation, extortion, violence, sexual abuse. I am calling on the international community to take action before this crisis causes greater damage."

Malteser International Americas is seeking donations to provide protection and fulfill the needs of all affected communities in a comprehensive, sustainable and coordinated manner. To support efforts in Colombia resulting from the Venezuelan crisis, visit www.orderofmaltarelief.org.

About Malteser International Americas:

Malteser International Americas is an affiliate of Malteser International, the humanitarian relief organization of the Order of Malta. Through its U.S. headquarters, Malteser International Americas provides emergency relief and sustainable, community-based programs focused on health, nutrition, clean water, sanitation & hygiene, and disaster preparedness, to vulnerable people in North America, Latin America and the Caribbean. For over 60 years, the humanitarian organization's focus remains to empower people to live healthier, better, more resilient lives with dignity. Visit www.orderofmaltarelief.org to learn more.

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