



Venezuela in crisis

Economic and social unrest in Venezuela have led the health system to the brink of collapse. Infectious diseases are surging as a result. Joe Parkin Daniels reports.

For more on malaria in Venezuela see [News](#) *Lancet Infect Dis* 2018; 18: 257

Venezuela, mired in economic and social turmoil, is struggling to contain several outbreaks of infectious diseases, some of which were previously long absent in the country. Despite having the world's largest proven oil reserves, years of mismanagement have wrecked Venezuela's finances, with hyperinflation predicted to reach 1 million percent by the end of 2018, according to the International Monetary Fund. Basic food items are in short supply, with supermarket shelves seldom stocked. Medications are also scarcely available, exacerbating epidemics and putting strain on a crumbling public health system. The prognosis is stark.

WHO reports that malaria in Venezuela is rising at the fastest rate in the world, with over 406 000 cases documented in 2017, a 69% increase on the year before. This is partly due to many people, desperate to make ends meet, heading for the gold mines in the south of the country, where stagnant water is an ideal breeding ground for the mosquitos that carry the disease. Malaria is considered an epidemic in nine of Venezuela's 23 states, according to that same WHO report. The situation is a far cry from that in the 1980s, when the disease was close to being eradicated, which earned Venezuela international plaudits at the time.

That same WHO report also noted a 41% increase in cases of tuberculosis. 10 185 cases of the disease were documented in 2017, up from 6063 cases in 2014. Typically associated with poverty, tuberculosis is thriving in Venezuela because of widespread malnutrition, a result of the rampant food shortages. According to the UN Food and Agriculture Organization,

3·7 million people in Venezuela were undernourished between 2015 and 2017, nearly 12% of the population.

Endemic transmission of measles has also been re-established in Venezuela, according to the Pan American Health Organization (PAHO), whereas 34 other member states of the organisation maintain their elimination status. Up to September, 2018, there were 3545 confirmed cases of measles in the country, including 62 deaths.

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Venezuela is the only country in the world in which access to antiretroviral therapy (ART) is falling. In 2016, the most recent year that official data were published by Venezuela's Health Ministry, there were 120 000 people with HIV. In the past 8 years, HIV infections have increased by 24%, according to UNAIDS, which estimates that less than two thirds of people with HIV were accessing ART. Those with the means often travel to neighbouring Colombia for treatment. Civil society organisations in Venezuela also distribute ART, although they face logistical struggles.

2017 also saw a huge outbreak of suspected cases of diphtheria. More than 2000 cases were reported in the past 2 years, causing more than 200 deaths, according to PAHO. There were no cases of diphtheria reported between 2006 and 2015. The exact figures in Venezuela can be hard to accurately ascertain because the government, led by president Nicolás Maduro, has not published official data in over 2 years and has consistently denied the existence of

a humanitarian crisis. When a Cuban health ministry website published data on diphtheria figures in Venezuela earlier this year, the Public Health Society, a group of Venezuelan doctors critical of the Maduro administration's public health policies, called on the government to release data. "The lack of access to official information of general interest violates constitutional rights and arbitrarily restricts useful information that would let the population learn about health risks and how to protect itself", said a statement published at the time.

The collapse of Venezuela's public health system has worried regional neighbours. Porous borders with Brazil and Colombia have enabled diseases to cross, with rates of malaria and measles rising. 3 million Venezuelans have emigrated, raising concerns about the strain that mass migration could put on neighbouring public health systems. A US navy hospital ship anchored in Colombia, near the Venezuelan border, has been treating many Venezuelans. China sent its own hospital ship to Venezuela in September.

Despite the bleak outlook, there is muted hope for change. Maduro asked the UN for assistance in ending the medicine shortages, a marked change in his policy of refusing requests for humanitarian aid. Regional leaders, including Brazil's president-elect Jair Bolsonaro and Colombia's Ivan Duque, hope that Venezuela's social and economic downward spiral can be reversed, but Duque says it is impossible with Maduro in charge. Meanwhile, health officials across the continent worry about how many of these epidemics can be contained.

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