

VENEZUELAN ACTIVISTS, DEFENDERS, AND OPPOSITION LEADERS DEMAND EFFECTIVE PROTECTION IN COLOMBIA

In June 2024, we produced the document "*Alert on a New Migration Spike from Venezuela*," and in August of the same year, we prepared another document entitled "*Alert on Post-Electoral Persecution Dynamics in Venezuela*". Both documents were privately circulated to the Colombian government, various public institutions in the country, and multilateral organizations with jurisdiction over the protection of people at risk.

Despite the warnings issued more than a year ago, we note with alarm that the response mechanisms for people in need of international protection from Venezuela remain deficient. Dozens of human rights defenders and social leaders who were forced to flee Venezuela after the presidential election of July 28, 2024, had to leave Colombia after their 90 or 180-day stays had expired, without having been able to obtain a visa that would allow them to remain legally in the country. Thousands of asylum seekers, with diverse and indisputable evidence supporting their well-founded fears, remain waiting for a response to their applications for months or years. During this time, they continue to face restrictions on their ability to work, and even if they do obtain employment authorization, they face barriers to opening a bank account, frustrating any aspirations to legitimately exercise their right to work and earn a living.

Certainly, the SC-2 safe conduct granted to asylum seekers does not make them immune to attacks, but the attack on human rights defender Yendri Velásquez and political analyst Luis Pêche Arteaga exposes other gaps in protection faced by Venezuelans with a risk profile. Ministry of Labor Circular No. 0081, issued on July 9, 2025, to allow holders of the SC-2 safe-conduct permit to carry out work activities in the country, is not in effect in practice. In the case of Yendri Velásquez, countless barriers have arisen to opening a bank account, joining an Occupational Risk Administrator (ARL), completing his registration with a health promotion entity (EPS) in a timely manner, and obtaining an employment contract. These are not minor circumstances, as these events made it difficult to obtain adequate health coverage at the time of the medical emergency resulting from the attack on October 13.

The characteristics of the attack indicate that it was not an act of common criminality, as publicly denounced by the Colombian Ombudsman's Office. Therefore, medical care should be covered by the Colombian government through the Victims' Unit. However, the authorities have not yet proposed this option. This is not the first time that a Venezuelan has been a victim of armed violence without the existing response mechanisms being activated.

These gaps demonstrate that, beyond a safe-conduct permit, asylum seekers and other victims in need of international protection continue to face significant barriers to accessing rights and obtaining adequate responses to their protection needs.

Given the exceptional situation affecting Venezuelans in need of international protection, it is necessary for the Colombian authorities to take equally exceptional measures aimed at relaxing entry, transit, and residence requirements in the country, including:

- Activate a mechanism within the Advisory Commission for the Determination of Refugee Status (CONARE) to expedite the review and decision-making process on asylum applications.
- Provide asylum seekers with a provisional document authorizing them to work effectively, with all the administrative consequences that arise from obtaining employment.
- Reactivate the registry of Venezuelan migrants to obtain a temporary protection permit for those who do not qualify as refugees.
- Coordinate with the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) to expedite resettlement in a third country for those who express their desire not to remain in Colombia.

In the specific case of Yendri Velásquez and Luis Peché Arteaga, the events must be investigated, responsibilities established, and the perpetrators of the harm suffered must be punished, from a differentiated perspective that takes into account the victims' status as politically persecuted persons and the conflict context in which the attack occurred.

Likewise, the necessary guarantees must be provided to Venezuelan activists, defenders, and opposition leaders in Colombia, through timely responses to asylum applications and the relaxation of residency requirements for other people in need of international protection.