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To the Judges:

“What’s going on in Caracas today?” tweeted Hannah Dreier, the AP’s Venezuela correspondent. “Congress is waiting out a bomb threat, and a mob has burned a thief alive. And both hardly count as news.”

Dreier was determined to make it news.

For months, The Associated Press reporter had been covering anti-government protests, food riots and street violence in a country with one of the highest murder rates in the world. After a fall in the price of oil and years of mismanagement by the socialist government, once-prosperous Venezuela was simply coming undone. Food and medicine were disappearing from stores. Honest workers were turning to piracy. And security was giving way to vigilante justice. As a result, Venezuelans were suffering — and dying.

Dreier knew the average Venezuelan shopper spent 35 hours a month waiting in food lines. Then she waited with them in day-long queues where shoppers were held up at gunpoint and a woman fainted from heat. “She tilted backward. No one broke her fall and her head smacked the concrete. She came to and started vomiting,” Dreier wrote. The other shoppers held their coveted ground in line.

When the government opened the border with Colombia to allow Venezuelans to go shopping there, Dreier joined the thousands who made the trek. She watched middle-class Venezuelans convert their life savings into sacks of rice, flour and sugar as the television news flashed aerial shots of the masses of shoppers and reported a humanitarian crisis. “Oh no,” said one of them, Tebie Gonzalez. “That isn’t Venezuela. That isn’t us.”

But it was. And Dreier wanted to know why.

Venezuela’s farming and food industries had collapsed. Fishing was kaput for lack of investment. The Venezuelan military was in charge of food imports and distribution, but supplies were low and prices were high. Dreier and colleague Joshua Goodman found that the military was profiting from hunger. According to documents and interviews with more than 60 officials, business owners and workers, kickbacks and food theft by the military were at the heart of the problem. Up and down the line, from cadets to generals, from port to plate,

the investigation revealed that while Venezuela was on the verge of starvation, the Venezuelan military was involved in food graft. “It’s like drug trafficking you can carry out in broad daylight,” said Carabobo state lawmaker Neidy Rosal.

This was, said Washington Post editorial writer Jackson Diehl, “an astounding feat of reporting.” U.S. senators called for sanctions against the corrupt officials the AP named. Local journalists wrote to thank Dreier for reporting what they couldn’t, due to censorship and fear of repercussions.

During her reporting, Dreier has been detained by Venezuelan intelligence officers who threatened to slit her throat. She has received warnings on Twitter from government supporters who say that they know where she lives, and that she will leave the country in a body bag. She has been robbed on the street, tear-gassed and held at gunpoint by police. But Dreier never gave up. She found that food shortages have affected everything from education, as teachers skip classes to look for groceries, to safety, as former fishermen take up piracy or join gangs.

For bringing home the story of Venezuela with rich detail and tremendous impact in the face of considerable personal risk, we are proud to nominate “Venezuela Undone” for the Gerald Loeb Award for International Reporting.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Marjorie Miller', with a long horizontal flourish extending to the right.

Marjorie Miller  
Vice President, Global News and Enterprise  
The Associated Press

# AP

## VENEZUELA UNDONE

### International Entry



#### 1. VENEZUELA MILITARY TRAFFICKING FOOD AS COUNTRY GOES HUNGRY

BY HANNAH DREIER AND JOSHUA GOODMAN

Dec. 28, 2016: The Venezuelan military is using its control over the national food supply to make money, even as millions of citizens go hungry or even starve, an AP investigation has found.

<http://bigstory.ap.org/article/64794f2594de47328b910dc29dd7c996/venezuela-military-trafficking-food-country-goes-hungry>

#### 2. LIFE ON THE LINE IN VENEZUELA AS ECONOMIC CRISIS WORSENS

BY HANNAH DREIER

July 12, 2016: Venezuelans now spend an average of eight hours a week in epic lines that are becoming longer and more violent as the oil country falls deeper into an economic crisis.

<http://bigstory.ap.org/article/7c0464c1dd404aca99458a8a19930bad/life-line-venezuela-economic-crisis-worsens>

#### 3. VIDEO: AMID FOOD CRISIS, LIFE ON THE LINE IN VENEZUELA

SHOT AND EDITED BY RICARDO NUNES

July 11, 2016: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=bZKSG7jagh0/>

#### 4. MIDDLE-CLASS VENEZUELANS LIQUIDATE SAVINGS TO STOCKPILE FOOD

BY HANNAH DREIER

July 18, 2016: Members of Venezuela's middle class live in upscale neighborhoods and have designer clothes, but cannot compete with 700 percent inflation.

<http://bigstory.ap.org/article/e8edfaa3e6d7431a87e247502b35535c/middle-class-venezuelans-liquidate-savings-buy-food>



Dec. 28, 2016

# Venezuela military trafficking food as country goes hungry

By HANNAH DREIER and JOSHUA GOODMAN

Associated Press

PUERTO CABELLO, Venezuela (AP)

When hunger drew tens of thousands of Venezuelans to the streets in protest last summer, President Nicolas Maduro turned to the military to manage the country's diminished food supply, putting generals in charge of everything from butter to rice.

But instead of fighting hunger, the military is making money from it, an Associated Press investigation shows. That's what grocer Jose Campos found when he ran out of pantry staples this year. In the middle of the night, he would travel to an illegal market run by the military to buy pallets of corn flour — at 100 times the government-set price.

“The military would be watching over whole bags of money,” Campos said. “They always had what I needed.”

With much of the country on the verge of starvation and billions of dollars at stake, food trafficking has become one of the biggest businesses in Venezuela, the AP found. And from generals to foot soldiers, the military is at the heart of the graft, according to documents and interviews with more than 60 officials, business owners and workers, including five former generals.

As a result, food is not reaching those who most need it.

The U.S. government has taken notice. Prosecutors have opened investigations against senior Venezuelan officials, including members of the military, for laundering riches from food contracts through the U.S. financial



Ariana Cubillos • AP

**A youth uses his pillow as a bag to collect rice that shook loose from a food cargo truck waiting to enter the port in Puerto Cabello, Venezuela.**

system, according to four people with direct knowledge of the probes. No charges have been brought.

“Lately, food is a better business than drugs,” said retired Gen. Cliver Alcala, who helped oversee Venezuela’s border security. “The military is in charge of food management now, and they’re not going to just take that on without getting their cut.”

### **“WHAT’S THE PROBLEM?”**

After opposition attempts to overthrow him, the late President Hugo Chavez began handing the military control over the food industry, creating a Food Ministry in 2004. His socialist-run government nationalized farms and food processing plants, then neglected them, and domestic production dried up. Oil-exporting Venezuela became dependent on food imports, but when the price of oil collapsed in 2014, the government no longer could afford all the country needed.

Food rationing grew so severe that Venezuelans spent all day waiting in lines. Pediatric wards filled up with underweight children, and formerly middle class adults began picking through trash bins for scraps. When people responded with violent street protests, Maduro handed the generals control over the rest of food distribution, and the country’s ports.

The government now imports nearly all of Venezuela’s food, according to

Werner Gutierrez, the former dean of the agronomy school at the University of Zulia, and corruption is rampant, jacking up prices and leading to shortages.

“If Venezuela paid market prices, we’d be able to double our imports and easily satisfy the country’s food needs,” Gutierrez said. “Instead, people are starving.”

One South American businessman said he paid millions in kickbacks to Venezuelan officials as the hunger crisis worsened, including \$8 million to people who work for the current food minister, Gen. Rodolfo Marco Torres. The businessman insisted on speaking anonymously because he did not want to acknowledge participating in corruption.

Last July, he struggled to get Marco Torres’s attention as a ship full of yellow corn waited to dock.

“This boat has been waiting for 20 days,” he wrote in text messages seen by AP.

“What’s the problem?” responded Marco Torres.

### *One South American businessman said he paid millions in kickbacks to Venezuelan officials as the hunger crisis worsened.*

Although money was not mentioned, the businessman understood that he needed to give more in kickbacks. In the end, he told the general, the boat had to pull out because costs caused by the delay were mounting.

Bank documents from the businessman’s country show that he was a big supplier, receiving at least \$131 million in contracts from Venezuelan food ministers between 2012 and 2015. He explained that vendors like him can afford to pay off military officials because they build huge profit margins into what they bill the state.

For example, his \$52 million contract for the yellow corn was drawn up to be charged at more than double the market rate at the time, suggesting a potential overpayment of more than \$20 million for that deal alone.

The Food Ministry’s annual report shows significant overpayments across the board, compared to market prices. And the prices the government pays for imported foods have been increasing in recent years, while global food prices remain stable.

This spring, the opposition-controlled congress voted to censure Marco Torres for graft. Maduro vetoed it as an attempt to hurt the Food Ministry, and

Marco Torres stayed on as minister.

Internal budgets from the ministry obtained by AP show the overpayment continues. For example, the government budgeted for \$118 million of yellow corn in July at \$357 a ton, which would amount to an overpayment of more than \$50 million relative to prices that month.

“What’s amazing about this is it’s like a clean form of corruption,” said Carabobo state lawmaker Neidy Rosal, who has denounced food-related government theft worth hundreds of millions of dollars. “It’s like drug trafficking you can carry out in broad daylight.”

Marco Torres did not respond to several requests for comment by phone, email and hand-delivered letter. In the past, he has said that he will not be trapped in fights with a bourgeoisie opposition.

### “SCRAPING THE POT”

By putting the military in charge of food, Maduro is trying to prevent soldiers from going hungry and being tempted to participate in an uprising against an increasingly unpopular government, said retired Gen. Antonio



Ariana Cubillos • AP

**Young men climb into an empty food truck, in search of leftover grain, as the vehicle comes to a slow stop outside the port in Puerto Cabello, Venezuela, the port city that handles the majority of Venezuela’s food imports.**

Rivero. Venezuela's military has a long history of coups against governments, and Maduro has arrested several officials for allegedly conspiring against him from within.

"They gave absolute control to the military," Rivero said from exile in Miami. "That drained the feeling of rebellion from the armed forces, and allowed them to feed their families."

However, it also opened the door to widespread graft and further squeezed the food supply. In large part due to concerns of corruption following the government's takeover of the food industry, the three largest global food traders — U.S.-based Archer Daniels Midland Co., Bunge Ltd. and Cargill — have stopped selling to the Venezuelan government.

One major scam involves the strict currency controls that have been a hallmark of the administration. The government gives out a limited amount of coveted U.S. currency at a rate of 10 bolivars to the dollar. Almost everyone else has to buy dollars on the ever more expensive black market, currently at 3,000 bolivars to the dollar.



Hannah Dreier @hannahdreier · 28 Dec 2016

As Venezuela goes hungry, the military is getting rich off trafficking food. And the corruption starts at the top

The holders of licenses to import food are among the select few who get to buy dollars at the vastly cheaper rate. Alcalá, the retired general, said some officials distribute these much-desired licenses to friends. The friends then use only a fraction of the dollars to import food, and share the rest with the officials.

"We call it 'scraping the pot,' and it's the biggest scam going in Venezuela," Alcalá said.

In 2014, one general presented Maduro with a list of 300 companies suspected of simply pocketing the cheap dollars they obtained with their licenses and not importing anything. No action was ever taken and the general was forced into exile, accused of corruption himself.

Some contracts go to companies that have no experience dealing in food or seem to exist only on paper. Financial documents obtained by AP show that Marco Torres gave Panama-registered company Atlas Systems International a \$4.6 million contract to import pasta. Atlas has all the hallmarks of a shell



Ariana Cubillos • AP

**Above: A man peeks over the crowd, waiting to cross the border into Colombia on the Simon Bolivar bridge from San Antonio del Tachira, Venezuela.**

**Right: A man cooks chicken skin he found at the dump in Puerto Cabello, Venezuela, the port city where the majority of Venezuela's imported food arrives.**



company, including no known assets and the use of secretive shares to hide the identity of the company's

true owners. Another government food supplier, J.A. Comercio de Generos Alimenticios, lists on its website a non-existent address on a narrow, partially paved street in an industrial city near Sao Paulo, Brazil.

The two companies transferred more than \$5.5 million in U.S. dollars in 2012 and 2013 to a Geneva account controlled by two young Venezuelans, according to bank and internal company documents seen by AP. The Venezuelans were Jesus Marquina Parra and Nestor Marquina Parra, brothers-in-law of the then-food minister, Gen. Carlos Osorio. Efforts to reach the brothers were unsuccessful.

Osorio is no longer food minister, but has an even more important role in overseeing food. He was promoted in September to inspector general of the armed forces, with the mission of ensuring transparency in the military's management of the nation's food supply.

Arturo Sanchez, a former supply chain manager at a multinational dairy company, recounted unpleasant encounters with Osorio. In one case, officers forced the company to buy fructose it didn't need because they wanted to unload merchandise he suspected was ill-gotten. Another time, he said, national guardsmen took four trucks of goods without paying. Sanchez fled to Florida in 2014.

"I spent a year living in the U.S. not being able to sleep remembering all the risky situations I lived through," he said.

Osorio did not respond to requests for comment. But in the past he threatened to sue opposition lawmakers for staining his honor with false accusations of corruption. He blamed an economic war for the food shortages.

The Defense Ministry and presidential press office refused to answer repeated calls, emails and hand-delivered letters requesting comment. In the past, officials have accused the opposition of exaggerating the problem of corruption

*In January, the government quietly arrested  
40 state employees for stealing  
large quantities of food from open-air markets.*

for political gain. They have said that the military's hierarchical structure makes it ideally suited to combat the real culprits: Right-wing businessmen trying to bring down the economy.

From time to time, the government carries out raids of warehouses holding smuggled goods and arrests lower-ranking military officers accused of graft. For example, the night market in Carabobo state where Campos bought his corn flour was eventually shut down and 57 tons of smuggled food seized. Now Campos buys staples from intermediaries he suspects are working with the same military officials.

In January, the government quietly arrested 40 state employees for stealing large quantities of food from open-air markets. One of those still in jail is a colonel who had been named by Osorio to serve as president of a state agency that imported food.

"We have the moral fortitude and the discipline to take on this task of protecting what belongs to the people," the defense minister, Gen. Vladimir Padrino Lopez, said in September. "The state has an obligation to root out corruption in all levels of public administration."

## “IT’S THE CUSTOMER WHO PAYS”

And yet the corruption persists from the port to the markets, according to dozens of people working in Puerto Cabello, the town that handles the majority of Venezuela’s food imports.

Sometimes the officials who control access to the docks keep ships waiting until they are paid off, said a stevedore at the port, who spoke anonymously because he feared losing his job.

The stevedore said clients give him envelopes of dollars to pass on to officials. He described visiting the sergeant in charge and making small talk while placing an envelope in the wastebasket. Then he slides the basket under the table and leaves. That night, his client’s ships are allowed in, he said.

After ships unload their cargo, customs officials take their share, according to four customs workers. They said that without a payment equivalent to a month’s minimum wage, officials will not start the process of nationalizing goods.

Bribes are also required for any missing paperwork, and can exceed \$10,000 for a single shipping container, customs worker Aldemar Diaz said.

“Sometimes you actually want to do it legally, but the officials will say, ‘Don’t bother,’” he said.

Luis Pena, operations director at the Caracas-based import business Premier



Ariana Cubillos • AP

**A man carries bags of recyclable material he collected at the dump in Puerto Cabello, Venezuela, the port city where the majority of the country’s imported food arrives.**

Foods, said he pays off a long roster of military officials for each shipment of food he brings in from small-scale companies in the U.S.

“You have to pay for them to even look at your cargo now,” he said. “It’s an unbroken chain of bribery from when your ship comes in until the food is driven out in trucks.”

Worst of all, he added, is that he is forced to pay to skip a health inspection. Officials make him buy a health certificate and don’t even open the containers to test a sample, he said.

A version of this process also takes place on the border, said Alcala, the retired general who was once in charge of border control. He said officers allowed smugglers to pay bribes to bring in food without proper health and safety checks. This year, Venezuelans began posting photos and videos showing magnets pulling tiny iron shavings out of freshly opened bags of sugar smuggled in from Brazil.

*“It’s an unbroken chain of bribery  
from when your ship comes in until the food is  
driven out in trucks.”*

Pena said his contacts at the port have offered to illegally sell him government-imported staples like sugar and rice, complete with falsified papers and a military escort.

“The military was supposed to step in and make sure the food got to the people, but it’s been the exact opposite,” said Pena, sitting in his warehouse. “They’ve made it into a business, and there’s no one to appeal to. In the end, it’s the customer who pays.”

If he tries to get through the process without bribes, he said, the food sits and spoils.

Rotting food is a problem even as 90 percent of Venezuelans say they can’t afford enough to eat. In some cases, partners buy food that is about to expire at a steep discount, then bill the government for the full price. The government has sometimes acknowledged that food it imported arrived already expired.

The problem of rotting food got so bad at Puerto Cabello that it drew rebuke in the most recent state comptroller’s report, which expressed particular dismay that thousands of tons of state-imported beans had been allowed to spoil.

When the food is no longer usable, the military tries to get rid of it quietly.



Ricardo Nunes • AP

**Above: A National Guard soldier watches over cargo trucks leaving the port in Puerto Cabello in Venezuela.**

**Right: A woman holding her baby waits outside a supermarket to buy government-subsidized food in Caracas.**

Puerto Cabello crane operator Daniel Arteaga watched one night last winter as workers at a state-run warehouse buried hundreds of containers of spoiled chicken and meat imported by the government.

“All these refrigerated containers, and meanwhile people are waiting in food lines each week just to buy a single chicken,” he said.

Photos taken at the Puerto Cabello dump last year show men in green military fatigues helping bury beef and chicken. Residents at a slum down the hill said after the military visits the dump, they dig up animal feed, potatoes, even ham to give their children.

The docks are hidden behind high concrete walls, and guards watch every entrance. AP gained rare access in November. The low-ranking military members assigned to guard the port can be seen collaborating with thieves to steal what little food comes in, according to eight people who work behind the walls.



Ariana Cubillos • AP

“You see people making off with whole sacks of flour or corn on their shoulders, and paying the guards on their way out,” logistics coordinator Nicole Mendoza said. “You see the money changing hands, and you just lower your eyes and don’t say anything.”

Lt. Miletsy Rodriguez, who is in charge of a group of national guardsmen running security at the port, said people are just looking to scapegoat the military. If her unit wasn’t around, looting would be even more widespread, she said.

“The majority of us are doing our best. And sooner or later we’ll catch people who are not doing the job right,” she said.

### **BRIBES ON THE ROAD**

Just as bribes are needed to get food into the port, they are also required to move food out, truckers said.

The roads near the port are lined with trucks waiting to be let in. Drivers sling hammocks in their wheel wells and sometimes wait several days in the

*Trucking bosses recently banded together to stop paying bribes to port officials, and the officials are now punishing them by delaying the movement of cargo.*

thick tropical heat. Trucking bosses recently banded together to stop paying bribes to port officials, and the officials are now punishing them by delaying the movement of cargo onto vehicles, said Jose Petit, president of the Puerto Cabello trucking association.

When the food is finally loaded onto the trucks, soldiers come by to take a cut. Photos and videos taken by truckers show officials taking sacks of sugar and coffee. As the trucks rattle off down the highway, hungry women in clothes that no longer fit chase after them to pick up anything that falls out.

Billboards lining the highway feature a drawing of an enormous ant beside a nonworking phone number to denounce corruption, and the warning, “No to bachaqueros.” That’s what Venezuelans call people who make a living illegally reselling food, after the leafcutter ants that haul many times their weight through the jungles.

On the roads, truck drivers face an obstacle course of military checkpoints, ostensibly set up to stop bachaqueros. Truckers say soldiers at about half the

checkpoints demand bribes. Some invent infractions such as an insufficiently filled tire, and take cash along with sacks of pantry items, produce and even live chickens, the drivers said.

“It used to be you’d go your whole route and not have to pay any anything. Now at every checkpoint, they ask for 10,000 bolivars,” said trucker Henderson Rodriguez, who was waiting for a third day to get into the port to pick up a load of sugar.

The surest way to move food through the network of checkpoints is to transport it under military guard. For a percentage of the product’s value, military officers on the take will assign a moonlighting soldier to ride along in the truck, according to five store and restaurant owners.

Sugar and flour are among the items most in demand because they have become virtually impossible to find legally, and some businesses, like bakeries, cannot function without them. A half dozen bakery owners across the country said in interviews that military officials regularly approach them with offers to sell supplies in exchange for a bribe.

In the city of Valencia, bakery owner Jose Ferreira cuts two checks for each purchase of sugar: one for the official price of 2 cents a pound and one for the kickback of 60 cents of pound. He keeps copies of both checks in his books, seen by AP, in case the authorities ever come asking.



Ariana Cubillos • AP

**Above: New government cargo trucks used to transport imported food wait outside the entrance of the Laramar warehouse in Puerto Cabello, Venezuela.**

“You make the legal payment, and then you pay the kickback,” he said. “We have no other option; there’s no substitute for sugar.”

The theft extends to the very end of the food supply chain, vendors said. At one market in Valencia, the military members who were appointed in August to stop contraband confiscated vendors’ produce. They said the vendors did not have the right permits. The food was piled in an olive green cargo truck.

In Puerto Cabello, hungry residents said it feels like corrupt soldiers are taking food off their children’s plates. Pedro Contreras, 74, watched more than 100 trucks carrying corn rattle onto the highway, and walked stiffly into traffic to sweep up the kernels that had sifted out. He planned to pound them into corn flour that night to feed his family.

“The military is getting fat while my grandchildren get skinny,” he said. “All of Venezuela’s food comes through here, but so little of it goes to us.”

*Associated Press writers Stan Lehman in Sao Paulo, Brazil, and Gisela Salomon in Miami contributed to this report.*

**EXTRA:** *AP correspondent Hannah Dreier has been living through chaos this year as Venezuela edges toward collapse. **This interactive** collects her tweets to show daily happenings around the country.*

*Hannah Dreier is on Twitter at <https://twitter.com/hannahdreier>.  
Joshua Goodman is on Twitter at <https://twitter.com/APjoshgoodman>.  
More of AP’s reporting on Venezuela’s problems can be found at <https://www.ap.org/explore/venezuela-undone>.*

July 12, 2016

# Life on the line in Venezuela as economic crisis worsens

By **HANNAH DREIER**  
Associated Press

CARACAS, Venezuela (AP)

**T**he people waiting for hours in front of the drugstore were dazed with heat and boredom when the gunmen arrived.

The robbers demanded a cellphone from a 25-year-old in black shorts. Instead of handing it over, Junior Perez took off toward the entrance to the pharmacy. Eight shots rang out, and he fell face down.

The dozens of shoppers in line were unmoved. They held their places as the gunmen went through Perez's pockets. They watched as thick ribbons of blood ran from the young man's head into the grooves of the tiled walkway. And when their turns came, each bought the two tubes of rationed toothpaste they were allowed.

"These days, you have to put the line above everything," said pharmacist Haide Mendoza, who was there that morning. "You make sure you get what you need, and you don't feel sorry for anyone."

As Venezuela's lines have grown longer and more dangerous, they have become not only the stage for everyday life, but a backdrop to death. More than two dozen people have been killed in line in the past 12 months, including a 4-year-old girl caught in gang crossfire. An 80-year-old woman was crushed to death when an orderly line of shoppers suddenly turned into a mob of looters — an increasingly common occurrence as Venezuela runs out of just about everything.



Ariana Cubillos • AP

**People wait in line outside a supermarket to buy food in Caracas.**

The extent of the country's economic collapse can be measured in the length of the lines snaking through every neighborhood. The average Venezuelan shopper spends 35 hours waiting to buy food each month. That's three times more than in 2014, according to the polling firm Datanalisis.

"As the economy breaks down, life is telescoping to be just lines," said Datanalisis president Luis Vicente Leon. "You have masses of people in the streets competing for scarce goods. You're inevitably going to get conflict, fights, tricks, you name it."

Venezuela's vast oil wealth once fueled a bustling economy. But years of mismanagement under a socialist government ground much of the nation's production to a halt, and the country grew ever more dependent on imports.

The supply chain broke down — first slowly, then all at once, as a steep drop in the price of oil left no money to pay for even some of the most basic necessities.

Shortages now top voters' lists of concerns, surpassing even safety. That's stunning in a country with one of the world's highest homicide rates.

Desperation fuels the violence. Medical student Maria Sanchez looked as timid and absent as anyone else in a Caracas line for flour, but when a woman tried to cut in front of her and her mother, she threw the first punches. She didn't let up until the would-be intruder limped away. Sanchez passed the rest of the wait with her lips pressed together, her mother quietly weeping.

“You have to go out with your batteries fully charged or people take advantage,” Sanchez said. “Need has an ugly dog’s face.”

The need is everywhere.

On Wednesdays, residents of one of Caracas’ wealthiest neighborhoods line up with empty five-gallon jugs, hoping to catch a truck that comes through weekly with potable water. Poorer people wait at the foot of the green mountain that towers over the city, competing to siphon water from its springs.

On Fridays, bank lines grow long because ATM limits capped at \$8 daily have not kept up with the world’s highest inflation, and the machines are not restocked on Saturdays or Sundays. Venezuelans now mostly avoid using cash, and even sidewalk orange juice peddlers have acquired credit card machines.

On Mondays and Tuesdays, the lines outside immigration offices spill down



Hannah Dreier @hannahdreier · 5 May 2016

A 70 year-old woman just literally collapsed in my arms in a Caracas food line. I was asking her how hard the waiting is when she passed out

the street as if people suddenly decided over the weekend that they could not handle one more week standing around while life passes them by.

Each night, men push broken-down gas guzzlers along a river to line up at a warehouse that sells car batteries, but always runs out of stock by mid-morning.

All Venezuelans, including children, are assigned two shopping days a week based on their state ID number. They line up before supermarkets open, guided by rumors and where they’ve had luck in the past. Some use fake IDs to score extra shopping days. Pregnant women and the elderly get their own priority lines, and everyone is limited to two units of whatever is on offer.

The longest lines are for what is in the shortest supply: food.

Nine out of 10 people say they can’t buy enough to eat, according to a study by Simon Bolivar University. Prices have been driven impossibly high by scarcity, hoarding and black market resellers.

Venezuelans line up again and again for subsidized goods, not always knowing what they’ll get when they finally reach the front. When supply trucks arrive, workers throw open the doors, game-show style, to reveal whether shoppers will be taking home precious pantry staples, or a booby prize like dog food.

Sometimes the disappointment is too much to bear. Hundreds of people stormed a market in Caracas last month after the food truck they spent hours waiting for was diverted. “We’re starving,” they cried as shopkeepers lowered metal gates over their doors and windows.

Queues thousands of people long are targets for muggers, who will sometimes work their way down person by person. Soldiers armed with tear gas and assault rifles often stand guard over supermarkets and supply trucks to maintain order. But the National Guard has killed three people and arrested hundreds this summer while trying to control nationwide food riots.

A few blocks away from where Perez died in the toothpaste line, shoppers waiting to buy groceries watched a mob set fire to an accused thief. After the man was taken away in an ambulance, some of his assailants got in line to do their shopping.

Although the threat of violence hovers in the air, the line also is a place of ordinary and sometimes extraordinary life.

Merlis Moreno gave birth to a baby girl this spring while waiting to buy chicken in the oven-hot plains town of El Tigre. The skinny 21-year-old suspected she might be having contractions as she applied her heavy blue eye shadow and boarded the pre-dawn bus. Still, she said, she had no choice



Ariana Cubillos • AP

**Eder Noriega, 25, teaches numbers to his 3-year-old son Santiago as they wait in line to buy food. As lines in this South American country grow longer they have become a stage for everyday life.**

but to go. She was out of food. She delivered her daughter with the help of a supermarket janitor, and used a dusty sheet from the backroom as a swaddling blanket.

On hour eight of a Caracas line for toilet paper, sweaty strangers sang nursery rhymes and cheered as they watched a 1-year-old learn to walk.

Kids do homework on the curb. Some young men use the empty hours to meet women and score phone numbers. More often, though, love stories end in line.

Sasha Ramos broke up with her boyfriend of five years amid a spat over a blocks-long line for razors. He'd spent the morning complaining that they were hardly moving, which only underlined that he never helped with the shopping. They argued and he stormed away, leaving her staring at the ground next to strangers who had heard it all.

"He was so inconsiderate," Ramos said. "I'd even forgiven him for cheating. These lines are not good for love."



Hannah Dreier @hannahdreier · 5 Jul 2016

Another Venezuelan dies while trying to collect the mangos growing wild in cities here, this time by touching a power line hidden in a tree

For older shoppers, standing in the heat can be too much to bear.

Irama Carrero had been staring blankly ahead for hours in a grocery line for the elderly in an upscale Caracas neighborhood this May when her gaze suddenly became more fixed. She tilted backward. No one broke her fall and her head smacked the concrete. She came to and started vomiting.

While most in line stayed put, a young man volunteered to take her to the emergency room. On the taxi ride over, Carrero said she hadn't eaten since the day before.

"There's no retiring from this," she said, leaning back and closing her eyes.

The lines are driven by scarcity and poverty, but they also reflect how much people have given up on traditional employment. With the minimum wage at less than \$15 a month and inflation running well into triple digits, it barely pays to go to work. It makes more economic sense to fill one's pantry, and then sell or barter anything not vitally needed.

So fields lie fallow while farmers spend their days waiting to buy imported



Ariana Cubillos • AP

**People wait in line to buy food outside a supermarket in Caracas, Venezuela.**

goods. Teachers walk out of classrooms to search for food they can eat or resell. Government offices close in the early afternoon because officials need to go shopping, too.

“Most of these people make more money doing this than their other jobs,” said David Smilde, a Venezuela expert at the Washington Office on Latin America.

The most enterprising have turned the line itself into a business. Former housewife Maria Luz Marcano rents plastic stools and charged-up cellphones, and also checks bags at an improvised line concierge stand. She makes half a month’s minimum wage in a day.

“I’m making all this cash. I love being an independent businesswoman,” she said, grinning opposite her grim-faced customers.

The bleakest lines are at the Caracas morgue, overlooking the city. While the other lines are about shortages, this one stems from an excess of death.

When Perez’s body arrived at the morgue in mid-April, families were waiting days to collect their loved ones. The morgue handled 400 bodies that month from homicide cases alone. That’s normal for Caracas, but it’s more than the

annual number of homicides in New York or Los Angeles.

As they pass the hours outside the morgue, red-eyed relatives cover their noses with handkerchiefs to blunt the acrid stench. The cooling system has broken down and embalming chemicals have run out.

Then it's off to the city cemetery.

The wait to be buried there: Three days.



Fernando Llano • AP

**A man waiting in line at a grocery store argues with a Bolivarian National Police officer.**

July 11, 2016 • Video

# Amid Food Crisis, Life on the line in Venezuela

SHOT AND EDITED BY RICARDO NUNES

Associated Press



Amid Food Crisis, Life on the Line in Venezuela

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July 18, 2016

# Middle-class Venezuelans liquidate savings to stockpile food

By HANNAH DREIER

Associated Press

SAN CRISTOBAL, Venezuela (AP)

**T**ebie Gonzalez and Ramiro Ramirez still have their sleek apartment, a fridge covered with souvenir magnets from vacations abroad, and closets full of name brand clothes. But they feel hunger drawing near.

So when the Venezuelan government opened the long-closed border with Colombia this weekend, the couple decided to drain what remained of the savings they put away before the country spun into economic crisis and stock up on food. They left their two young sons with relatives and joined more than 100,000 other Venezuelans trudging across what Colombian officials are calling a “humanitarian corridor” to buy as many basic goods as possible.

“This is money we had been saving for an emergency, and this is an emergency,” Ramirez said. “It’s scary to spend it, but we’re finding less food each day and we need to prepare for what’s coming.”

Gonzalez, 36, earns several times the minimum wage with her job as a sales manager for a chain of furniture stores in the western mountain town of San Cristobal. But lately, her salary is no match for Venezuela’s 700 percent inflation. Ramirez’s auto parts shop went bust after President Nicolas Maduro closed the border with Colombia a year ago, citing uncontrolled smuggling, and cut off the region’s best avenue for imported goods.

The couple stopped eating out this year, abandoned plans to buy a house and put a “for sale” sign on their second car. There is no more sugar for coffee, no more butter for bread and no more infant formula for their 1-year-old son.



Ariana Cubillos • AP

**Venezuelans cross the Simon Bolivar bridge that links San Antonio del Tachira, Venezuela, with Cucuta, Colombia. More than 100,000 Venezuelans crossed what Colombian officials are calling a "humanitarian corridor."**

When Ramirez, 37, went to get a late night snack on Friday, he found nothing in the refrigerator.

So Sunday, the couple donned their nicest clothes and hid fat wads of bills in their bags. Before heading to the border, they surveyed the stocks in their renovated granite kitchen: An inch of vegetable oil at the bottom of a plastic jug. A single package of flour. Some leftover cooked rice. No coffee.

Then they set off in a 2011 Jeep SUV onto bandit-plagued highways, the lights of hillside shantytowns glinting in the blue darkness like stars.

At the crossing, scowling soldiers with automatic weapons patrolled a line that wrapped around more than a dozen blocks. The couple considered turning back. But within minutes, people started shouting that immigration officials were waving everyone through, and the line broke into a stampede.

Gonzalez and Ramirez ran with thousands of others toward a bridge barely wide enough for two cars to pass. Soon, it was packed as tightly as a rush-hour subway train. Some people cradled newborns, others toted dogs as they headed



to a new life in Colombia. Most carried suitcases and backpacks to fill with groceries.

The couple held hands to stop the crowd from pushing them apart. Two hours passed. People sang the national anthem. Gonzalez's feet ached in Tommy Hilfiger wedge heels. People who couldn't stand the claustrophobia and heat doubled back to try to swim across the river, but soldiers stopped them.

At last, the Colombian flags came into view. Soon, the bridge opened out onto a road lined with officials waving, cheering, even doling out cake.

No one checked ID cards. Beyond the reception line, folk music played and kiosks sold products that have become treasures in Venezuela: rice, toothpaste, detergent, and sacks of sugar.

Gonzalez was crying behind her oversized aviator glasses.

"I thought the crossing would be easier. It made me feel so humiliated, like I was an animal; a refugee," she said.

*A TV report flashed on the store television:  
It was an aerial shot of the bridge she had crossed  
over, crammed with people.*

"But look how different things are on this side. It's like Disneyland," responded Ramirez. Not only was the town filled with prized groceries, but everything was much cheaper than on Venezuelan black market, now the only alternative for people who don't have time to spend in the hours-long lines for scarce goods that have become the most salient feature of the oil country's economic crisis.

They changed their Venezuelan money into Colombian currency at a mall, where Gonzalez luxuriated in the clean, air-conditioned space as she window-shopped for watches and handbags.

As she browsed past the shoes, a TV report flashed on the store television: It was an aerial shot of the bridge she had crossed over, crammed with people. "Humanitarian crisis," the headline said.

"Oh no," Gonzalez whispered.

Other shoppers were indignant.

"That isn't Venezuela. That isn't us," said a woman who was looking at sneakers.

Gonzalez crossed herself and left. It was time to go food shopping and get home.

The variety at the mall supermarket felt unreal after so many months of scrounging in near-empty stores.

The couple debated over the best baby toothpaste. Gonzalez ran her hand over seven varieties of shampoo. She examined each option in an aisle of pasta.

But while things were cheaper than in shortage-hit Venezuela, they were pricier than they had expected.

They decided to skip the flour and sugar, instead choosing seven packages of the cheapest pasta. They went for cloudy off-brand cooking oil instead of the more expensive canola. Every price was checked and rechecked as the couple spent three hours deciding how to allocate their emergency fund.

“It’s more expensive than we had hoped, but what matters is that it’s available at all,” Ramirez said.



Ariana Cubillos • AP

**Ramiro Ramirez pushes a shopping cart as he shops for food with his wife Tebie Gonzalez in Cucuta, Colombia.**

Other Venezuelans in the store — teachers, small business owners and office workers — pored over prices and reluctantly put things back.

In the end, the couple bought enough food to fill two suitcases and a duffel bag, then slipped into the stream of exhausted shoppers filing back to Venezuela. Colombian officials said Monday there would be no more one-day border openings.

Colombian soldiers shook hands with the departing Venezuelans and wished them well. But the kindness didn’t lift the shoppers’ spirits the same way it had when they entered Colombia hours earlier.

At home, Ramirez and Gonzalez stacked their hard-won supplies into gleaming white pantry cabinets. They still looked pretty bare.

## ABOUT THE WRITER



**HANNAH DREIER** is the Caracas correspondent for The Associated Press. She came to Venezuela in 2014 amid a bloody nationwide protest movement, and has told the story of the country's unraveling from inside prisons, hospitals and factories. She was previously AP's gambling correspondent in Las Vegas, where she broke news on U.S. law enforcement investigations and hotel worker safety issues. She joined AP as a political reporter in the Sacramento bureau, covering the 2012 election, Gov. Jerry Brown and a string of municipal bankruptcies. Before joining AP, Dreier worked at the San Jose Mercury News, where her stories on illegal immigrant patients and organ transplants prompted policy changes and helped a man get a life-saving transplant. She was a finalist for the Livingston Award, and her stories have also won awards from the National Headliners, APME, the Society of Professional Journalists and Best of the West. She graduated with honors from Wesleyan University in Middletown, Conn.