

## After Years of Denial, Venezuela's President Allows Aid to Enter

By Anatoly Kurmanaev and Ana Vanessa Herrero  
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Red Cross workers distributing water containers and purification tablets in Caracas. Meridith Kohut for The New York Times



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CARACAS, Venezuela — After denying for years that Venezuelans were suffering a humanitarian crisis, the government allowed the Red Cross to send in 24 tons of medical equipment on Tuesday, marking the beginning of a large-scale relief campaign intended to ease malnutrition and the spread of disease in the crisis-stricken country.

An airplane landed in Caracas's international airport transporting the first in a series of planned shipments of medical supplies and power generators for hospitals that are intended to eventually help 650,000 Venezuelans, according to the International Federation of the Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies. The material is expected to be distributed in the coming days.

Despite the enormity of the population's need, the delivery of humanitarian aid has become a political battle between the president, Nicolás Maduro, and Venezuela's opposition.

On Tuesday, the president of the Red Cross in Venezuela said the aid should not become embroiled in a political dispute, and asked for the cooperation of politicians.

“It will be distributed in conformance with the fundamental principles of our movement, especially neutrality, impartiality and independence,” Mario Villarroel, president of the Venezuelan Red Cross, said of the supplies. “Don’t allow the politicization of this great achievement.”

Venezuela’s president, Nicolás Maduro, center, had in the past turned away offers of basic medication and food, saying his was not a nation of “beggars.”Ariana Cubillos/Associated Press



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The agency estimates its Venezuelan campaign could become its biggest relief effort since the beginning of civil war in Syria.

*[The [United States’ efforts to tighten oil sanctions against Venezuela and Iran](#) risks unsettling global oil markets.]*

A [recent United Nations report](#) found about a quarter of the country’s population is in dire need of food and basic supplies — and the need is expected to grow. The

International Monetary Fund estimates the Venezuelan economy will shrink by 25 percent this year as [infrastructure continues to crumble](#).

Around 5,500 Venezuelans flee the country daily in what has become [one of the world's biggest refugee crises](#), according to the United Nations.

The arrival of the aid shipment constitutes an about-face by Mr. Maduro's government, which for years had denied the existence of a humanitarian crisis despite the nation having endured the deepest economic depression in modern history among countries not at war.

As Venezuela's revenues have plummeted, control over aid supplies became one of the main [political disputes](#) between Mr. Maduro and a parallel government set up by [Juan Guaidó](#). Mr. Guaidó, a leader of the opposition and of congress, invoked an article of Venezuela's Constitution in late January and claimed the country's leadership after pointing out widespread irregularities in the elections that gave Mr. Maduro a second term.

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In February, [an ambitious plan](#) by the opposition, led by Mr. Guaidó, to bring humanitarian aid into Venezuela from neighboring countries degenerated into bloody skirmishes as the trucks ran into blockades set up by security forces loyal to Mr. Maduro.

Mr. Guaidó had hoped the plan would at once bring some relief to Venezuelans, strengthen his credibility as the country's new leader, and convince troops to turn against Mr. Maduro rather than use force to keep food and medication beyond the reach of a needy population.

Although some military officials did cross the lines to join Mr. Guaidó, it was a trickle, not the sea change the opposition had envisioned. The blockade largely succeeded, with little aid entering the country.

Since then, the crisis has been compounded by the impact of [American sanctions](#) on Venezuela's oil industry. The measures are aimed at weakening Mr. Maduro and forcing him to cede power to Mr. Guaidó, who has the support of the United States and about 50 other countries, but the pain they inflict is felt first by the population.

Mr. Maduro's decision to accept the Red Cross aid has hobbled this parallel effort to deliver supplies that was mounted by the opposition. Still, it was celebrated by Mr. Maduro's opponents as a victory brought about by their persistence.

"Today, the first shipment of humanitarian aid arrived for our people," Henrique Capriles, a leading figure of the opposition, posted on Twitter. "It's a reality thanks to the pressure of Venezuelans and the support of our interim president Juan Guaidó and the legitimate National Assembly."

Isayen Herrera contributed reporting.

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