

Brazil's Unspoken Humanitarian Crisis: "Refugee" Camp Holding Over 800 Haitians in Inhuman Conditions

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The Brazilian government has for months now been playing a word game – between “immigration” and “refugee” – to minimize the severity of the humanitarian crisis unraveling in the small town of Brasiléia, in the northern state of Acre and on the border with Bolivia, some 240 kilometers southwest of the state capital Rio Branco.

More than 830 immigrants – nearly all of them Haitians – are living inside a warehouse built for just 200 people, in extremely unhygienic conditions. They are required to share just 10 lavatories and 8 showers, where there is no soap and no toothpaste, sewage leaks outside in the open air and people have been packed for months inside an area of 200 square meters under a metal roof, with black plastic sheeting for curtains, in temperatures that can reach 40 degrees. The local hospital reports that 90% of the patients from the camp have diarrhea. The shelter is already operating at 4 times capacity and 40 new Haitians arrive every day.

✖ “It’s unhealthy, inhuman even. The Haitians spend the night lying closely together, in sweltering heat, on pieces of foam that were once portable mattresses, surrounded by bags, shoes and other personal belongings. The lavatories are flooded with fetid water, there is no soap for people to wash their hands and nearly everyone we spoke to complained of abdominal pain and diarrhea. Many spend months in these conditions,” said João Paulo Charleaux, coordinator of communication at Conectas, who visited the camp.

Conectas organized a mission to Brasiléia from August 4 to 6, when it recorded 20 interviews with people living in the shelter. The interviews were conducted in Haitian Creole by Gabrielle Apollon, a guest researcher of Conectas. Apollon had already interviewed 27 Haitians who managed to get to São Paulo, in a total of 20 hours of recorded testimonies. In these interviews, the Haitians tell their story of how they arrived in Brazil after spending as much as US\$4,000 to middlemen for the journey from Haiti.

The Haitians also claim that the “humanitarian visa” process at the Brazilian Embassy in Port-au-Prince is not functioning as promised – middlemen charge fees, there is no clear information about the procedure, it is difficult to get an appointment and the authorities have been requesting resumes to give preference to so-called “qualified immigration” to Brazil, without taking into account the “humanitarian” nature that these visas, according to the Brazilian government, are supposed to have.

“I can say that what we are experiencing here in Brasiléia is not fit for human beings. They

may as well have put us back in Haiti just after the earthquake: the same filth, the same type of shelter, water, food. This hurts me and scares me. I knew that the journey here would be tough, because you're dealing with criminals, but to get to Brazil and be put in a place like this is unbelievable," said Osanto Georges, a 19-year-old Haitian.

✖ In the overcrowded camp, fights are constantly breaking out among people in the long lines. "The day we arrived, the police drew their weapons to control a disturbance. It is clearly too complex a task to be handled the way it is being handled. The situation in the camp is similar in many respects to what I saw myself when I was in Haiti, shortly after the earthquake in 2010. It is a regional matter that involves at least five countries: Brazil, Peru, Bolivia, Ecuador and Haiti. We shall request a thematic hearing in the Inter-American Commission on Human Rights of the OAS and we shall submit our findings to two independent UN rapporteurs, one on migrants and another on the human rights situation in Haiti," said Charleaux.

Members of Conectas also interviewed, on site, doctors from the hospital in Brasília, police officers, staff at the Federal Prosecutor's Office and the Child Protective Services office, government officials in Rio Branco, and several residents of Brasília. Conectas has also used the Freedom of Information Law on two occasions to obtain accurate information on the situation from the federal government in Brasília. In most cases, the names of the sources have been withheld at the express request of the government employees who do not have the formal authority to speak on behalf of the organizations they work for.

'90% have diarrhea'

Nearly all the Haitians interviewed by Conectas between August 4 and 6 complained of abdominal pain and diarrhea. Conectas visited the Raimundo Chaar Hospital, which has 46 beds and is responsible for handling emergency cases in the town. According to members of the hospital staff, there have been outbreaks of diarrhea that have sent 40 Haitians to the emergency room all at the same time. One of the employees explained that the hospital does not receive any additional funding to treat the inflow of Haitians. "The politicians are handling this as if it were a diplomatic issue, but in the meantime, every day, we are importing misery and sickness without being able to cope with it," said the employee, revealing some of the prejudice and rejection in the town that is cause for concern. The information was confirmed by the attending physicians who confessed to being alarmed by the inflow of new patients. They explained that they receive an average of four Haitians per day, although when Conectas visited the hospital, 10 Haitians from the camp were admitted for treatment in the morning alone. Treatment is administered without the help of translators and, according to sources at the hospital, "90% of the cases are for diarrhea and 10% are for respiratory illnesses". The staff responsible for administering the treatment said they had never been inside the camp and were surprised when they were told about the hygienic conditions there.

'It'll get worse'

According to the camp coordinator, Damião Borges of the Acre state government, the camp has been receiving 40 new Haitians per day, even though the most recent structural alterations were made four months ago. He explained that the increased number of new arrivals, combined with the reduced number of jobs available at companies that used to look for workers at the camp, is creating a social chaos for the Haitians in Brazil. "This needs to

come to an end, because we have run out of resources. The state of Acre has a debt of R\$700,000 with the company that provides food to the shelter and the deadline for payment is August 15. We urgently need help from the federal government. In two years and eight months, we have received R\$4.5 million from the state government and R\$2 million from the federal government. But the real burden is being carried by the town of Brasiléia. This should not be borne a small and modest municipality like this one,” he said. Conectas was informed, during its visit, that the state of Acre has not received any funds from the federal government to look after the Haitian immigrants for three months. More seriously, no new funds are anticipated.

Complaints about food and water

Most of the complaints received at the camp are related to the quality of food and water. The site has just one source of drinking water, an industrial filter with three taps. According to the camp administrators, the abdominal pains are caused by the chlorine in the water, which “causes diarrhea for three days in people who have lots of amoebas in their bodies”. Another common complaint was the poor quality of the food, which can be explained by the difference in palate between Brazilians and Haitians. Even though this is the reason for the complaints, little has been done to substantially alter the menu. Meals are served in aluminum containers as the military police stands guard over the line of more than 800 people. Reports of fights among people waiting in line are frequent.

Unaccompanied and undocumented children

Another place visited by Conectas was the Child Protective Services office in Brasiléia, where 20 Haitian children who are undocumented or separated from their parents have been registered. However, on August 7, when the mission of Conectas had already returned to Rio Branco, five Haitian children arrived at the camp. “We are way beyond our modest capacities. This, for me, is the worst it’s been since the Haitians started to arrive,” said one of the staff members at the office. Despite the increased workload, said the source, there has been no additional allocation of funds, material items or employees since the start of the crisis. In all, five counselors work at the office, handling all the problems involving children and adolescents in the town. “All of a sudden, a small town like this has to cope with a phenomenon of this scale, without even receiving any training,” added the source. Among the Haitians, there are numerous accounts of theft of documents – and other belongings – on the journey to Brazil.

Local community

“Brasiléia is a powder keg just waiting to explode. The residents of the town have had enough, and this could result in acts of hostility,” an official from the Acre state government told Conectas in Rio Branco. The statement reflects the state of mind of the inhabitants of this small town of just 20,000 people. Although the residents have expressed sympathy and solidarity with the Haitians, their weariness and discontent have been growing more apparent. The inhabitants of the camp compete with the local residents for places at the town’s public health clinics, supermarkets, bakeries, banks, pharmacies, post office and other public services.

Staff

Another element of concern is the disproportion between the number of employees and the

number of inhabitants at the camp. Over the course of the three days that Conectas spent in the town, only two employees were working full time at the camp, catering to 832 Haitians in a small trailer with a computer and a fan. Despite their dedication and willingness to help, the employees are local residents who do not speak Creole and do not have the necessary training or any prior experience in handling humanitarian issues. As such, they apply to this complex situation the same logic used to settle small town problems. Despite the constant trips to the town by members of the Acre state government, which is based in Rio Branco, a group of employees familiar with humanitarian crises is urgently needed to oversee the camp.

Communication

Neither the camp nor the hospital has a translator. The employees try to speak Spanish, but the vast majority of Haitians only speak Creole. Instructions for waiting in line or submitting documents are shouted, which increases the confusion and anxiety of the Haitians, who very often crowd around and fight for a place in front of the small military police trailer that serves as the camp administration office. There are no electronic ticket or loudspeaker systems at the camp. The few posters in Creole are handwritten. There are no posters with information about STD/AIDS or hygiene, or leaflets about their rights or any other communication material with orientation for new arrivals.

Refugee Status vs. Humanitarian Visa

All the inhabitants of the camp are officially applying for refugee status, following the orientation given by the Brazilian government. However, after spending six months analyzing the applications, and extending this period for a further six months, the same government denied refugee status to all the Haitians.

This legal arrangement, part of a policy that the Brazilian government has called a “humanitarian visa” prevents Haitians arriving in the country from being deported, since the law bans the deportation of refugee applicants for the duration of the application process. However, this improvisation is allowing a serious humanitarian crisis – triggered by a situation of internal violence, followed by several natural disasters, the last of which was an earthquake that killed some 220,000 people in Haiti – to be treated like a simple immigration problem in Brazil. “The main consequence of this is an improvised, amateur and uncoordinated approach that has overburdened the small municipality of Brasiléia and its population, when, in fact, it should be being overseen by specialists in humanitarian emergencies of this complexity. From a humanitarian point of view, the name of the visa for these Haitians is now less urgent than the brutal conditions they face in the camp. Indeed, this humanitarian visa policy is anything but humanitarian,” said Charleaux.

Conectas is a non-governmental and not-for-profit organization founded in São Paulo/Brazil in September 2001 whose mission is to promote the realization of human rights and consolidation of the rule of law in the Global South – Africa, Asia, and Latin America. It seeks a more just world, with a truly global, diverse, and effective human rights movement, where national institutions and the international order are more transparent, effective and democratic.

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