

A Venezuelan Pastor Pleads for Prayer

While people in the United States are arguing about immigration, health care and President Trump's wall, a once-prosperous nation 1,200 miles from Miami is imploding. It would be an understatement to call Venezuela a nightmare. The once-prosperous South American nation is now hell on earth.

Venezuela's socialist economy collapsed in 2014 under dictator Nicolas Maduro's regime. Today, hyperinflation is so bad that most people can't eat. At least 8 percent of the population has fled the country. Those who stay stand in lines for hours every day to buy rationed food—or they rummage through garbage dumps for scraps.

Many school-age boys have chosen to live in storm drains or public parks since they don't have food at home. Some end up in violent gangs.

The New York Times reported in late 2017 that thousands of Venezuelan children are dying from malnutrition. There is no infant formula on store shelves. More than 1,100 children under the age of one died in 2016, but the government has now declared a blackout on reporting medical statistics.

"Infant malnutrition is as high as 30 percent for children under 2," says a pastor living in Venezuela whom I will refer to as Lucas Jimenez. "The brains of these children are irreversibly damaged. They won't be able to go to school and learn like children in other countries." I cannot use this man's real name because pastors who speak out against the government face the real threat of imprisonment.

Pastor Jimenez began his church when Venezuela was known for its booming economy and rich oil fields. But under dictator Hugo Chavez—a disciple of Fidel Castro—the nation became a

textbook case of economic failure. Maduro made it worse.

I interviewed Pastor Jimenez last week and learned that the Venezuela's crisis is worse than it has ever been. Here are parts of that conversation:

How has the crumbling economy affected you and your family, as well as the people in your church?

Pastor Jimenez: Hyperinflation has made food, medicines, vehicle parts and everything else that is imported extremely expensive. We have cut down our church budget as much as possible, but it's difficult to keep up with the acceleration of prices, which rise almost daily.

The economy is in such disarray that the current socialist regime has been forced in the last 11 years to take away 8 zeros from our currency. One U.S. dollar was worth 5,000 bolivars at the end of 2007; at the end of 2018 the same dollar rose to 80,000,000,000 bolivars. Yes, 80 billion!

How has the mass exodus of millions of Venezuelans affected the country?

Pastor Jimenez: Studies by the United Nations show that at least 2.3 million people have left the country—but the number could be as high as 3 million. Young parents are leaving their children behind; they send money back home to feed them. This exodus has created complex immigration problems for nations like Colombia, Ecuador, Peru, Brazil, Chile and Argentina. Many immigrants who fled Venezuela sleep in the streets and work any job they can find to survive.

How do Venezuelans survive with no money or food?

Pastor Jimenez: A Venezuelan engineer who graduated recently earns the equivalent of \$23 a month. An engineer with a Ph.D. and 30 years of experience earns less than \$100 a month. Many people in the cities live on less than \$6 a month, and rural

workers can earn as little as \$3 a month. This is barely enough to buy two dozen eggs!

Our church has supported my family and me for several years. But they cannot pay me a salary now because our church income goes to maintenance, utilities and a secretary's salary. The Lord has provided for me through offerings we receive from family and friends abroad. Many people that survive in this country depend on family members who have left the country.

Many Christians actually supported the Chavez regime, and now Maduro's government. Why?

Pastor Jimenez: For a long time, Christians were ill-treated in this country. Chavez began to pay attention to evangelical churches in his speeches, and he started seducing them with his leftist discourse. Then evangelical pastors began to receive financial support from the government. Other pastors were just prosperity preachers who supported the regime because they love money and power more than the truth.

They did this in spite of the fact that Chavez openly admired Fidel Castro and the Cuban communist regime. Today, about 50 percent of Venezuela's pastors support Maduro, either openly or quietly.

Can you describe the hunger crisis?

Pastor Jimenez: People who don't have help from families or friends survive by eating only once or twice a day. Those who live in rural areas can grow vegetables and fruit. In urban areas, it's common to see people searching garbage dumps for food. Even middle-class people with university degrees have been seen searching for food in the garbage. Studies have shown that more than 60 percent of Venezuelans have lost an average of 18 pounds since the crisis began, because of the lower intake of food.

How has the crisis created spiritual opportunities?

Pastor Jimenez: People are much more open to the gospel now. The brokenness has opened the hearts of people so that churches are growing and more and more new churches are being planted. Our church has planted other congregations in recent years.

How can Christians in the United States pray for your nation?

Pastor Jimenez: This is a big spiritual battle. Chavez promoted the occult religion of Santeria in Venezuela. He participated in witchcraft to retain his power. Aided by Cubans, all kinds of sacrifices, pacts, spells and curses have been cast and are being cast. This witchcraft has brought our country to this nightmare.

Our divided church has not been able to keep up in this war, mainly because many church leaders helped to establish this regime. They were seduced by Chavez' charisma, craftiness and occult practices. Some of these leaders realized the consequences and results of their error, but it was too late.

Instead of assuming the responsibility and repenting, some pastors distanced themselves from the regime—but they are afraid to confront the battle head on. They are afraid to speak, pray openly and make a stand against the widespread evil. Instead of repenting of their past idolatry of Chavez, they prophesy that revival and prosperity is right around the corner.

I have heard these so-called prophecies for years, and things have only worsened. So we ask for intercession. Please pray that leaders will repent of idolatry, love of money and power. Pray that the Lord will cleanse us, so that we can have victory in this spiritual war. Pray that this regime falls and that God will raise up competent leadership.

American Christians can also help Venezuelans financially. Many pastors and missionaries feel they have no choice but to leave the country to survive. A gift of \$100 a month (although

any amount will help) could make the difference for a pastor's family. We must keep laboring in this field, because it is ripe for harvest.