



**Woodrow Wilson Center
Latin American Program**

**GTB The Coronavirus Response in Colombia: Views from Leading Practitioners
April 16, 2020**

Introduction:

Jane Harman, Director, President, and CEO, Wilson Center

Speakers:

Luis Guillermo Plata, Manager for Comprehensive Attention to the Covid-19 Pandemic, Office of the Presidency (Gerente para la Atención Integral de la pandemia del COVID-19)

Felipe Muñoz, Presidential Advisor for the Colombian-Venezuelan Border, Office of the Presidency

Moderator:

Cynthia Arnson, Director, Latin American Program, Wilson Center

(04:18) Arnson: Colombia, Latin America’s fourth largest economy, has seen over 3,100 confirmed cases of coronavirus as of yesterday and 131 deaths. These figures from the Ministry of Health aren’t the highest in the region. But Colombia is also home to the largest number of Venezuelan refugees anywhere in the world—over 1.8 million by the end of last February, according to the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees. Some Venezuelans...have opted to return to Venezuela in the face of the pandemic. The returns, by the busload and also by plane, have in many cases been brokered by local officials on both sides of the border. But the number of returnees is small in comparison to those who are remaining. And many more may still come as Venezuela’s economy collapses even further.

(11:18) Luis Plata: We are attacking this from several different angles. One is the economy. We don’t believe that you sacrifice the economy in order to save lives or that you save the economy and then you sacrifice people’s lives. No, I think, we think that there is no such dichotomy. That really you need the economy to help you save lives and you need the resources, you need things working, in order to do, and you need the health system, obviously, for the economy to continue to operate....

(12:28) Luis Plata: The second big pillar we are working on is supply and food... You need to be able to maintain supply lines, to maintain supermarkets well stocked and all those supply chains working

(15:08) Luis Plata: We have to make sure that nobody goes hungry, because the social upheaval of having millions of people going hungry, after three or four days without food or without access to food, would be a disaster... If people go hungry, they will go into stores, they will go into supermarkets, and take what they can and there’s not much as a society we can do there. So the first priority is to ensure that people are properly fed.

(15:29) Luis Plata: Obviously the third pillar is health... The health situation is deteriorating but thankfully we were able to do a lockdown...the quarantine has helped us contain the spread of the disease. Of course, this will continue to increase by 105-120 cases per day and say maybe 8-10 deaths per day, because that is more or less what we are averaging. We know that things will get uglier, we know that the curve tends to get steeper.

(18:17) Luis Plata: Obviously, everyone is talking about testing and how Korea has done testing... This is an important part of our strategy and we are increasing our testing capacity.

(20:25) Luis Plata: The second thing we are working on is ventilators. What we are doing now is buying ventilators on the open market. That has been extremely challenging because it is a market that is totally over demanded so we are competing against 180 countries to get ventilators. The world doesn't help much when the U.S. says 'we will not export ventilators' and Germany says 'we will not export ventilators,' and we don't produce them so obviously getting ahold of that has been much more challenging... There are 26 local initiatives of building ventilators in Colombia and we're hopeful that companies like GM, Ford, and others will be able to increase the ventilator supply shortly.

(25:21) Felipe Muñoz: We have received 1.8 million Venezuelan migrants and refugees in the last three years. It accounts now for four percent of the population of Colombia. In normal times it is a very hard task, it puts a very heavy burden on all our social services. But now with the pandemic, we got a consensus in the government and especially the president: this pandemic doesn't ask for passports, then the government support can't either.

(26:05) Felipe Muñoz: As you already know, we had to close the border with Venezuela because there is the high epidemiological risk posed by crowds at the border crossing points, but especially because [we] have limited information available from Venezuela about what is the reality of the health conditions there.

(26:25) Felipe Muñoz:... We have to establish a humanitarian corridor to let so many people that just want to return to Venezuela, to let them go. From the close of the border to now we have let more than 33,000 people return to Venezuela...

(26:46) Felipe Muñoz: The second and most important thing, and this is following some of the recommendations of UNHCR, IOM, or WHO is to guarantee health care access for all the migrants. The Minister of Health signed an order to all the public health sector that any migrant, in any condition, regardless of regular or irregular status, has guarantees to receive health services as COVID is concerned.

(27:24) Felipe Muñoz: We have to adjust all the cooperation programs that are in place, we need to transform these programs to three main focus ideas.

(27:38) Felipe Muñoz: The first is trying to improve the water and sanitation programs... The second one, which is really important, is how to increase the capacity for the programs [of] cash transfers. Cash transfers [are] the best way in this specific situation to provide people money so that they can buy food and pay rent.

(35:02) Luis Plata: I think that the image of President Duque has improved a lot, he is gaining a lot of public support for this, I haven't seen any recent polls on the image or the popularity of the president, but the comments that I hear, and obviously I have to say that my universe, the universe of people I interact these days is quite smaller, but generally speaking the comments are very good.

(39:13) Luis Plata: I like when Americans say "hope for the best but prepare for the worst" and I think that is the mood we are in, we are hoping for the best of course, but hope is not an strategy, so we need to prepare for the worst and be ready to whatever comes because we are seeing prosperous countries and cities being brought down to their knees, and that is the case in places like Italy, Spain, and in the U.S., in New York, and we really need to be careful here, in developing countries, where we don't have the resources that others have to contain this.

(41:00) Felipe Muñoz: Obviously, we are thinking that we are going to receive more people. Although some of the people are returning now, we also are thinking that they will return again to Colombia in some weeks. The conditions of the people that are returning that are receiving there are absolutely a disaster.

(43:15) Felipe Muñoz: I have to say that the United States has been the main donor here, we want to thank not only the government but also the congress, which in a bipartisan way has been supportive of that process, with more than 50 percent of the money that we have received in the last three years. Also the European Union and some other countries in Europe, but of course we need more money. In per capita terms if you compared this migratory crisis with other migratory crises we are far below from the money that we are receiving. We need more because we don't only have to attend our people, and you know, we need to maintain an equilibrium in the support for programs for migrants and the support for programs for our local people. We need money, and we are asking, and the president has said in many times in many international forums [that] we need more international support. We have the commitment to continue with this policy with open arms and to receive the people, but we need more money.

(53.47) Luis Plata: Let me divide into two types of private sectors. The first one [is] the big Colombian companies, the banks and conglomerates. Their response has been fantastic, from donations and funding building ventilators, to supporting us with medical equipment and talented people. I have people in my team who are here because their companies allow them to be here. Some of them are paid by their companies but they work with us and we thank them. The response has been tremendous.

(54:50) Luis Plata: But there is another part: Colombia also has SMEs and they're having a really hard time. They are the people that have small shops or restaurants. They are having to cut down their expenses, so we put together programs to help them take loans and guarantee support. They are having a very hard time and we know that SME mortality is going to be big, that is a fact. It's a very sad thing but it's something that is going to come with this crisis.