

Protesters clash with police in Caracas last month.



# VENEZUELA IN CRISIS

With its economy in free fall and a government looking more and more like a dictatorship, Venezuela is on the brink of disaster **BY PATRICIA SMITH**



**K**evin Lara Lugo died last July, on his 16th birthday. With his mother and her boyfriend out of work and penniless, the teenager had spent the previous day foraging for food in an empty lot near his home in Maturín, Venezuela. The bitter yuca\* he found and ate made him gravely ill and sent him to the hospital.

Hours later, Kevin was dead on a gurney, his mother watching helplessly as doctors rolled his lifeless body away. She says the hospital lacked the most basic supplies needed to save her son.

Kevin's death and his family's struggle to survive (see "One Family's Tragic Tale," p. 15) are symbols of everything that's gone wrong in Venezuela, a once-prosperous nation that's now on the brink of collapse.

The economy has ground to a halt. Crime is out of control. And the former democracy seems to be descending into dictatorship, as President Nicolás Maduro tries to cling to power.

"This goes beyond an economic and political crisis," says Ian Vásquez, a Venezuela expert at the Cato Institute in Washington, D.C. "This has turned into a humanitarian crisis."

Venezuela's turmoil has been a long time in the making. With the world's largest proven oil reserves, it was once one



of Latin America's richest nations. But there's also been vast inequality between the rich and the poor. In 1998, those poor people rallied around a controversial socialist politician named Hugo Chávez and helped elect him president.

### An Anti-American Populist

Chávez was a charismatic populist who vowed to break the grip that the elite had on power and redistribute the country's wealth. He nationalized many parts of the economy, seizing the assets of American agricultural, oil, and power companies. He used oil revenue to fund health care, education, and food subsidies for the poor. At the same time,

\*Bitter yuca is a wild and poisonous relative of yuca, a common root vegetable eaten throughout South America.

Chávez became famous for his anti-American rhetoric. He once called former president George W. Bush “the devil.”

When Chávez died of cancer in 2013, Maduro, his vice president, took over. But Maduro lacked Chávez’s charisma, and the country’s many long-festering problems began to come to a head. For years, Venezuela’s economy had been kept afloat by oil exports. But the price of oil has plummeted in recent years, leaving the Venezuelan government effectively broke.

Even before the price of oil collapsed, Venezuela’s economy was in deep trouble, largely because of a system of government-imposed price controls. The policy was meant to keep Venezuelans happy by requiring that certain basic goods, such as cooking oil and milk, be sold at low prices. The problem is that most importers stopped bringing goods into the country since they couldn’t make a profit, and the price controls left no incentive for local producers to fill the gap either. This means factories haven’t been able to get the raw materials they need and stores have nothing to sell.

Hyperinflation has made the country’s currency, the bolivar, virtually worthless. The International Monetary Fund estimates that by the end of 2017, Venezuela’s annual inflation rate (the rate at which prices increase) will be 1600 percent. A decade ago, the 100-bolivar note was the highest denomination; the government recently discontinued it because it had so little value and introduced new, higher denominations, including a 20,000-bolivar note that’s worth less than \$5.

All this has wiped out people’s savings and prevented many middle-class Venezuelans from being able to purchase basic necessities like food. Things have gotten so bad that some office workers have abandoned their jobs in cities to pan for gold in illegal mines in the jungle.

The nation’s economic crisis has only worsened Venezuela’s already sky-high crime rate. Murders rose to more than 28,000 in 2016, the highest number ever recorded in the country, according to the



**Nearly 75 percent of Venezuelans** lost at least 19 pounds last year due to food shortages; empty store shelves in La Vela, Venezuela, in September 2016.

Venezuelan Violence Observatory, a group that tracks violence.

As the country has veered toward chaos, Maduro has become increasingly authoritarian, jailing opposition politicians and ordinary citizens who protest. In March, a court ruling by pro-Maduro judges effectively dissolved the elected legislature, which had been led by Maduro’s political opponents.

“They have kidnapped the constitution, they have kidnapped our rights, they have kidnapped our liberty,” says Julio Borges, an opposition lawmaker.

### 17-Year-Old Protester Killed

Last month, at least seven people, including a 17-year-old boy, died in a series of increasingly volatile clashes between protesters and security forces in Caracas and other cities. Protesters demanded elections and accused Maduro of trying to establish one-man rule.

“The people are hungry!” Arquímedes Orcé, a 41-year-old vendor, shouted at the security forces. “You are against the people!”

Despite all the misery in Venezuela, experts aren’t optimistic about forcing Maduro out.

“Right now Maduro’s hold on power is very strong,” says Matthew Taylor of the Council on

Foreign Relations in Washington, D.C.

And even if Maduro did step down, Taylor adds, the opposition is so divided that it’s likely someone even more hard-line would take his place. There’s also very little the United States can do to influence things.

Many Venezuelans aren’t waiting to see what happens next; faced with starvation, they’re leaving the country by whatever means necessary, including piling into rickety boats headed to nearby Caribbean islands like Curaçao and Aruba.

The country’s biggest neighbors, Brazil and Colombia, have already seen a huge influx of refugees, and numbers are growing in other South American countries as well. The region isn’t prepared for this, experts say, and the situation could blossom into a full-blown crisis as things continue to deteriorate in Venezuela.

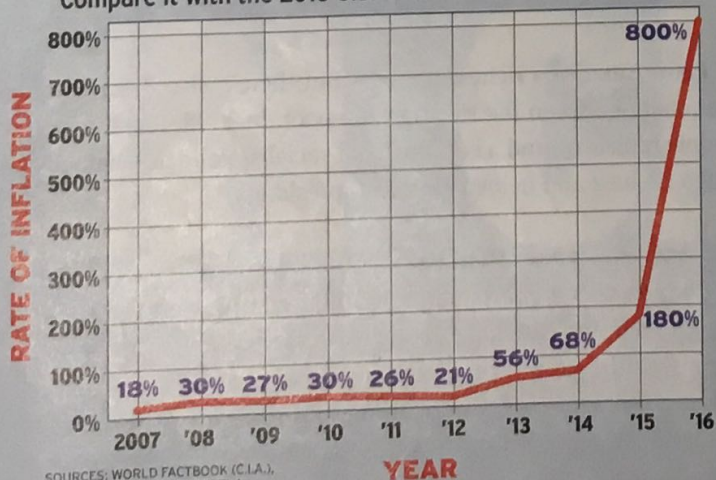
“When you think that Venezuela hits bottom,” says Vásquez, “it keeps going further and further down.” ●



**24%**  
PERCENTAGE of Venezuelans who approve of the job President Maduro is doing.  
SOURCE: THE ECONOMIST

## Soaring Prices

Venezuela has the world’s highest annual rate of inflation. Compare it with the 2016 U.S. inflation rate of 2.1 percent.



With reporting by Nicolas Casey and Patricia Torres of The Times.



**Kevin Lara Lugo** (inset below); and his school uniform laid out on his bed.



# One Family's Tragic Tale

Their story became a symbol of the nation's collapse

**Kevin Lara Lugo**, the 16-year-old boy who died from eating foraged food to ward off starvation, lived in Maturín, a once-prosperous oil boomtown in northern Venezuela.

His mother, Yamilet Lugo, worked at a cutlery factory until it shut down in May 2016, unable to get the raw materials to make plastic. It joined many factories across the country that have gone idle.

Then came the next blow. José Rafael Castro, Yamilet Lugo's boyfriend and the only other breadwinner in the household, came home with bad news: The construction supply factory where he worked making cinder blocks had let him go because the owners could no longer find cement.

That left the family unable to buy what little food was available. First, they ate mangoes. By summer, the family had turned to yuca, a common root vegetable, which grew in a plot owned by a relative a short bus ride away.

"This was our food morning, noon,

## After three days with no food, the family was growing weak.

and night," Yamilet Lugo says. By July, there was no money even for the bus fare to the field, so they looked elsewhere. By July 25, the day before Kevin's birthday, the family hadn't eaten in three days and everyone was growing weak.

Kevin and Castro heard about an abandoned field a 45-minute walk from their home where other neighbors had been foraging for bitter yuca. But bitter yuca is dangerous to eat because, unlike regular yuca, it contains toxins. The plant can be dried to extract the toxins, which they tried to do.

"We had nothing else to eat," Castro says.

The gamble didn't pay off. By 11:30 p.m., the bitter yuca was making the family very sick. Kevin had collapsed. An hour passed before they

found a neighbor's car to take him to the hospital.

But the hospital could offer little help. Bitter yuca intoxication is treated primarily with stomach pumping and intravenous solutions. Like so many clinics throughout the country, the one in Maturín had run out of basic supplies, leaving the family to haggle with black-market sellers as Kevin's condition worsened. Kevin's family says he waited for hours in the crowded halls of the hospital before he was even examined.

Finally, another family with extra bottles of the intravenous solution gave two to Kevin, but it was too late. By 4:45 on the morning of his birthday, he was dead.

Staring at Kevin's grave, with his name crudely etched in wet concrete by a friend's fingertip, his aunt, Lilibeth Díaz, summed up the tragedy of her family and her nation. "This boy," she said, "dies this way for no reason at all."

—Nicholas Casey

MERIDITH KOHN/THE NEW YORK TIMES/REDUX (CLOTHES ON BED); FACEBOOK (KEVIN LUGO)