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A group of Cuban migrants starts the seven-day trek into Panama through the Darién Gap rainforest in Capurganá, Colombia, Aug. 7, 2021. (OSV News photo/CNS file, Manuel Rueda)

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Violence and conflict leave people's homes uninhabitable and force them to flee, said experts while discussing the root causes of migration.

The June 28 webinar "Make Peace, Not War: The Role of Conflict in Displacement" was organized by the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops' Migration and Refugee Services. Panelists included Christopher Ljungquist, adviser on Latin America at the USCCB's Office of International Justice and Peace; Jean Stokan, justice coordinator for immigration and nonviolence for the Sisters of Mercy of the Americas; and Rachael Davis, senior program manager for Jesuit Refugee Service.

Ljungquist emphasized the need to address the Venezuelan crisis that has caused over 7 million people to leave their country. UNHCR, the U.N. refugee agency, has reported that 6 million have migrated to Latin America and the Caribbean. Many are pouring into Colombia's politically fragile eastern regions, where decades of narco-trafficking and guerrilla activities have eroded civil society, Ljungquist explained.

No refugee crisis of this magnitude is one dimensional, Ljungquist said. Venezuela has experienced a "multilayered, systemic collapse" since 2016, with "crippling inflation and lethal shortages" that lead to extreme poverty, as well as violence and repression.

Ljungquist spoke of three pillars of the current Venezuelan government, which he said play a role in driving migration: a fractured opposition that is unable to provide an alternative to an unpopular government; the government's cultivation of allies such as Russia and China as well as Iran; and the presence of criminal organizations like the Mexican Sinaloa cartel.

"Venezuela has been called a cocaine superhighway," he said. "The criminal organizations -- including drug and human traffickers, smugglers, illegal mining operations, money laundering, extortion, kidnapping -- all of these groups are terrorizing the civilian population."

However, he cautioned that Venezuelans need "more pragmatic political processes" instead of international "moral vigilantism."

"Ostracized, isolated governments like the Venezuelan government have very few choices," he said, recommending a dialogue that includes the bishops of that

country.

Meanwhile, Stokan stressed that "no one leaves home unless home is the mouth of a shark," a line by British-Somali poet Warsan Shire. Before diving into migration drivers in two Central American countries, she listed underlying factors for violence and poverty, including corruption, interventionist foreign policy, unjust trade agreements and unequal distribution of resources.

She said the Mercy Sisters are aware of migration push factors and the impact U.S. foreign policies have in the Latin American countries the sisters serve in. She presented examples of ways economic and or military policies could have "contributed to the conditions of violence or poverty in these countries or exacerbated those conditions."

She talked about El Salvador's civil war (1979-1992), which some estimate caused more than 25% of the population to flee. "There was tremendous repression, torture, disappearances. It was called a death squad regime," she said.

Stokan added that, before he was martyred in 1980, St. Oscar Romero urged President Jimmy Carter not to send arms to the Salvadoran government. Not too long after St. Romero's assassination, four U.S. church women working in El Salvador were brutally killed by members of the Salvadoran National Guard.

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"Over the next 12 years, approximately 75,000 people were killed. And the U.S. kept arming that government in the early '80s," said Stokan. "What if our U.S. presidents listened to Archbishop Romero?"

Stokan also discussed the crisis in Honduras, where the Sisters of Mercy have served for 60 years. Political conflict and financial interests have resulted in violence, she said, which along with escalating poverty, led to scores of Hondurans joining large migrant caravans making their way on foot across Guatemala towards Mexico and the U.S.

She said that one driving factor was how the 2009 coup that ousted President Manuel Zelaya, "opened the doors to criminality."

"It opened the door to drug cartels, where many came in; judges were paid off; the military from the highest levels had people working with the drug cartels," she said, adding, "It was estimated 70% of the police were corrupt."

She said that despite claims of corruption and human rights violations, the U.S. supported the governments that followed that 2009 coup and militarized the police.

"How do you address the root causes of migration?" Stokan said. "Cut off U.S. military and police aid to such a corrupt government."

In addition to international solutions, faith organizations provide vital aid. Jesuit Refugee Service's Rachael Davis said JRS provides Sudanese refugees, who fled to South Sudan, accompaniment and psychosocial support, as well as food and non-food items. In Chad, JRS is the primary education partner at refugee camp schools, registering new arrivals and ensuring the students' safe adjustment, she said.

Davis explained what is driving 500,000 Sudanese out of their country -- mainly to Egypt, Chad and South Sudan -- and has displaced 1.9 million. Sudan's current challenges result from the fighting between the Sudanese Armed Forces and the paramilitary Rapid Support Forces. The armed conflict became full-blown combat on April 15, after months of tensions between the generals leading the two sides over plans to transition the country into civilian rule.

However, she added, the roots of this humanitarian crisis go beyond this conflict. "In the modern history of Sudan, they've had many military leaders and really have never had a full democracy," she said.

"Poor economic conditions and reliance on oil and material resources have exacerbated this," she added.

All three panelists agreed that the international community needs to do more to eradicate root causes of migration. Webinar moderator Todd Scribner, assistant director of education and outreach at Migration and Refugee Services, said Pope Francis has emphasized in his May 11 message for the upcoming World Day of Migrants and Refugees that "to make a migration choice that is truly free, efforts must be made to ensure that everyone has an equal share in the common good, respect for his or her fundamental rights, and access to an integral human development."

"War and conflict disrupt all those things," Scribner said.