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CARACAS JOURNAL

## Chaos Prompts Exodus, Changing a Capital's Face

By SIMON ROMERO

CARACAS, Venezuela — Aida Antonel lived through Venezuela's economic ups and downs for more than three decades, but it was the brief, chaotic removal of President Hugo Chávez in April that pushed her to join the line stretching into the street outside the Italian consulate.

"I've sent out more than 500 resúmes in the last seven months," said Ms. Antonel, whose grandparents came to Venezuela in the early 1950's from Veneto, in northeastern Italy, as she filled out forms for an Italian passport. "I know Europe also has an unemployment problem, but I would rather look for a job in a place where I'm not afraid of getting shot."

The scene is similar at the nearby consulates of Spain and Portugal. In recent weeks, there has been a surge of people with ties to other countries who are taking steps to move to other countries as political and economic uncertainties escalate.

Unlike many people from other Latin American nations who emigrate largely for economic reasons, Venezuelans often cite their despair over deepening political divisions as one of their main reasons for leaving.

After his brief fall from power in mid-April, Mr. Chávez made some efforts to appease his critics. But those moves have done little to convince people that he is wavering in his goal of revolutionizing Venezuelan society with a mixture of populist ideas and exerting greater power over public institutions.

"This country that once welcomed us with its riches and hospitality is now coming apart at the seams and has become hostile and unlivable," Xulio Prado, an immigrant from Galicia, in northwestern Spain, wrote in Magazine Español, a weekly newspaper for Venezuela's Spanish population.

Most would-be émigrés have family ties in Spain, Italy and Portugal, the countries that provided Venezuela with the bulk of its European immigration in the oil-soaked economic boom of the 1950's and 60's.

The exodus is the latest chapter in a reversal for a country that was a magnet for immigrants. People came not only from southern Europe but from neighboring countries and the Caribbean.

Since the early 1980's, per capita gross domestic product has declined by an average of about 1 percent a year, leading to a pronounced deterioration in the economic prospects of the middle class, according to Venezuela Analítica, an economic analysis firm. This year, despite an increase in the price of oil, the economy is expected to shrink at least 1 percent because of capital flight.

Some, particularly those with Spanish and Portuguese backgrounds, owned small businesses — bakeries, furniture stores or fish markets — that were looted in the frenetic 48-hour stretch in April when the leadership of the country was unclear and police protection was scant.

"This episode was unlike others — the thieves came in groups and were well-armed," said António Vicente, the owner of a Portuguese butcher shop that was looted.

Others, like Ms. Antonel, a 34-year-old with a business administration degree and several years of experience in market research, have simply lost hope for leading a relatively normal life in a Venezuela plagued by violence and an unstable economy.

Venezuela is not the only South American country where people are seeking to move to the nations of their forebears. Many young people in Argentina have sought opportunities in Europe and elsewhere as its economic crisis worsens.

The current emigration wave, however, is more pronounced than earlier ones and less focused on the nation's elite, experts say.

**“Even if it’s an architect or engineer who knows they have to work at McDonald’s for six months, they’ll do it, said Esther Bermúdez, whose Internet company, Mequieroir, or “I want to leave”, assists people in their legal preparations for leaving the country.**

It is difficult to know exactly how many Venezuelans have left the country or are planning to leave since many do so on tourist visas or may only plan to live temporarily in their adopted nations, consular officials from several countries said.

Moreover, many people with ties to countries that allow dual citizenship even to children or grandchildren of emigrants are trying to obtain a second passport or to have their paperwork in order to emigrate in case things worsen again unexpectedly.

But leaving is not a clear-cut decision, or even possible, for everyone, said Aleixo Vieira, publisher of Correio de Caracas, a Portuguese-language newspaper here. "Imagine the situation for those without much capital to start again abroad or those who just think they owe Venezuela one more chance," he said.

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