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New Web Site Helps Venezuelans Emigrate

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By Pascal Fletcher

CARACAS, Venezuela (Reuters) - Venezuelans wanting to flee the crime, poverty and political turbulence of their homeland can now visit a new Web site, aptly named "I want to leave," to help them seek a new life abroad.

The site, <http://Mequieroir.com>, which means "I want to leave" in Spanish, was launched this month and offers advice on foreign visa regulations, work permits and even culture and climate for citizens of whatever age who are considering emigrating.

Its creators say the private initiative aims to satisfy the needs of growing numbers of Venezuelans seeking to leave the South American nation, which is oil-rich but suffers chronic poverty, political jitters and violent crime.

"Every day there are more people seeking opportunities to study and work abroad. It's not just our site mequieroir.com saying that, it's a reality, and that's what we're responding to," project manager Esther Bermudez told Reuters.

Mequieroir.com currently concentrates on the United States, Canada and Australia as the most popular destinations for Venezuelans, but Bermudez said the site was also preparing pages, by popular demand, on Spain, Italy and Britain.

Its pages cite recent opinion polls that show that more than 30 percent of Venezuela's 24 million inhabitants would emigrate if they had the opportunity. This figure is reported to be even higher -- 51 percent -- for those aged 15 to 24.

JOBS, SECURITY AT ISSUE

"Recent polls show the biggest reasons for people leaving are unemployment, personal insecurity and not being able to see a promising future in their country," Bermudez said.

Emigration by Latin Americans, especially to the United States, has accelerated in recent decades.

But Venezuela's history is one of incoming migration and it has large communities of Spanish, Italian, Portuguese and other European immigrants who flocked there in the last century, especially during and after the 1940s and 1950s oil boom.

However, the country was now experiencing the reverse phenomenon and the Web site quotes unofficial estimates saying 150,000 Venezuelans emigrated over the last 18 months to seek a new life elsewhere, especially in the United States.

Opponents of left-leaning President Hugo Chavez say his revolutionary rhetoric and public diatribes against wealthy "oligarchs" are fomenting class war in Venezuela, convincing many upper- and middle-class professionals to emigrate.

Chavez, an ex-paratrooper who won a landslide 1998 election six years after staging a failed coup bid, denies this and says his "peaceful, democratic revolution" aims to correct social, economic and political "chaos" inherited from previous rulers.

Bermudez deflected suggestions that the mequieroir.com Web site could be considered "unpatriotic".

It quotes the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and Venezuela's own 1999 constitution as upholding the right of individuals to seek their future anywhere opportunities lie.

"We don't want to demonize the theme of emigration, we want it to be seen as something normal," Bermudez said.

The site includes a questionnaire to help would-be emigrants make up their minds and offers a chat page where Venezuelans already living abroad can offer advice.

"Carolina" urges would-be emigrants to think twice. "I've been living in Miami for six years and the truth is it's not the paradise that people think... Compatriots, if you don't have your papers in order, take my advice, don't come,"

"Sam" is more upbeat. "Take the plunge and don't waste more time thinking about it," he wrote.