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Venezuelan Doctors Are an Unexpected Boon for Latin America's Poor

An exodus of more than 22,000 physicians in the past five years is reshaping medicine in the region.



Dr. Juan Carlos Riera.
Photographer: Cristobal Olivares/Bloomberg

By **Daniela Guzman**
9. Februar 2019, 12:00 MEZ

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Juan Carlos Riera's melodic Venezuelan accent coaxed a smile from his


octogenarian patient even as he told her she needed surgery. Thanks to Riera's quick diagnosis at the hospital in Chile's rural central valley, the woman's wait would be cut by a year.

Crossing patients off lists has become Riera's mission in La Calera, Chile, where he emigrated in 2015. After hyperinflation under Venezuelan President Nicolas Maduro slashed his once-robust salary and drained supplies of medicine and equipment, he saw no alternative but to leave. Indeed, the exodus of more than 22,000 doctors from 2012 to 2017 is—for now—closing a healthcare gap across Latin America.

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
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
Venezuela has be
constitutional right to the presidency after accusations that Maduro stole last year's election. If Guaido
succeeds and Venezuela's economy stirs to life, some of the 3 million people who left might return. For now,
however, the human deluge offers regional governments an unexpected wellspring of talent.


The influx offers an opportunity to strengthen public services in a region of deep inequality, said Andrew Selee, president of the Migration Policy Institute in Washington.

“This is Latin America's moment to utilize human capital from Venezuela, providing access outside of the capital cities and, in the meantime, helping the migrants find work,” Selee said. “It's a win-win, but you have to make sure you provide a way for professionals to obtain credentials and get those professionals to areas where there is need for their services.”

Brazil hired Venezuelan doctors last year in Roraima, a border state that receives many of their desperate compatriots. Some Argentinean provinces welcomed Venezuelans willing to work where specialists are few. In Colombia, which has taken in about 1 million Venezuelans, many work for ambulance companies, the worst-paid branch of medicine with the toughest conditions, including 24-hour shifts. Still, one doctor there said he is making 800 times Venezuela's minimum wage.

In Chile, a temporary permit allows the migrants to work in public hospitals in high-need areas while they validate their credentials, which can take years.

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Rodrigo Torres, a Chilean surgeon in Concepcion, said northern mining towns and the southern Patagonia have a chronic need for specialists. The aging population has also amplified pressure on a stressed public system. In December 2017, 1.6 million patients whose conditions weren't life threatening were on the list for consultations and 285,625 awaited surgery, according to the Ministry of Health.

"Patients in marginalized regions have to wait months for a specialty consultation and more than a year for surgical interventions," Torres said.





Source: Natural Earth

Despite Chile's need, the influx of doctors has caused friction with the local medical community. The temporary permit program was suspended in January after complaints, and the government recently required foreign physicians to get certification from the University of Chile or the Ministry of Foreign Relations in addition to the test they already must take to work in the private sector, Riera said.

Chile isn't the only country to balance medical needs with protectionism. In Peru, Daniel Martinez, president of the Venezuelan doctors association, said about 2,000 are there, with half in private clinics and the rest working outside medicine. As more Venezuelans arrive, it's increasingly difficult to obtain permission to practice.

Local physicians "see 2,000 doctors as competition, but the way I see it, we should work as a team," Martinez said.

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In La Calera, Riera follows by the mi... news, which he string," he said.

Riera's life in Venezuela unraveled after Maduro's economic policies set off the humanitarian crisis. In 2015, he had finished the night's last surgery and walked out of his clinic when he felt a gun barrel at his head. The feeling was familiar: It was the third time in two months that he had been robbed leaving the hospital.

His patients were suffering from the lack of medicine. Buying supplies in dollars from across the Colombian border solved the problem temporarily, but the bolivar was becoming less valuable each day and Riera feared he would soon be putting patients at risk.

The breaking point was when he couldn't afford the extortion payments that were keeping his then 12-year-old daughter from being kidnapped.


He left Venezuela alone, looking for work in Colombia, Panama and the Dominican Republic and then the Chilean Andes, dropping off a resume at each public hospital. He finally got a call to work in La Calera, two hours from Santiago, bringing his daughter and her mother as soon as he could rent an apartment.




Dr. Riera operates inside a surgical room at a Chilean hospital. Photographer: Cristobal Olivares/Bloomberg

Mario Sanchez Vergara Hospital renovated an abandoned surgery ward when Riera arrived. Before that, one out of 10 patients on waiting lists were dying before their appointments, he said. Often, Riera takes home bags of avocados, meats and pastries as gifts from patients who have finally been treated.

"If things get better in Venezuela and if it were possible to return, I would think about it," Riera said. In the meantime, "our agenda is full every day, and each patient is someone who would not have been treated

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– With assistance by Oscar Medina, and John Quigley



The port of Genoa.
Photographer: Federico Bernini/Bloomberg


This City Once Ruled the Mediterranean. Now It's Eyeing a Comeback


In the wake of tragedy, Genoa's mayor sees an opportunity.

By **Chiara Albanese**
19. Februar 2019, 06:00 MEZ

You'd never guess it now, but slumping, sagging, demoralized Genoa was the richest city in the world just 700 years ago.

Genoa's commercial fleet and powerful navy dominated the Mediterranean for over 100 years, and the independent city state had its own empire stretching from Syria to the Crimea. Its merchants and financiers helped bankroll the vast palazzos and other architectural treasures that led proud locals to call the city "the Superb."

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Today, things are... largest city. Jobs... European peers... Bank administrat...

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Police shot and k... city in flames. Mudslides surged down the overdeveloped hillsides in 2011, killing six, and flash floods followed three years later, angering residents as rescue and coordination was mishandled. At one point in 2017, the city was so overrun by wild boars that authorities invited Genoese to shoot them.

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


? Brought to you by Zurich

To many, last summer's Morandi bridge disaster looked like just another chapter in the sad decline of the once-grand city. But Mayor Marco Bucci saw things differently.

Within minutes of the Aug. 14 bridge collapse, which killed 43 people and split the city in half, the 59 year-old mayor was in a crisis mode, gathering together civic leaders and plotting the city's resurgence.

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Even with the bridge destroyed, transport disrupted and links to the rest of Italy and France imperiled, “we realized the city was not on its knees at all,” Bucci recalled in an interview at City Hall, offering a passing visitor fresh-baked focaccia dripping with olive oil, a famous regional delicacy like its signature Pesto alla Genovese.

In the wake of the tragedy, the 59-year-old mayor reasoned that if the municipal government “played its cards right, the city could become even greater—that moment was the beginning of Genoa’s comeback.”

While his city mourned, Bucci eyed an opportunity.

Step one: the Morandi, hailed as a triumph of modern engineering at its 1967 opening, would be rebuilt in record time, and by one of Genoa’s most famous citizens: architect Renzo Piano.

Step two: the mayor would use the nationwide sense of solidarity with the stricken city to unlock funds for long-planned infrastructure upgrades that had languished in red tape for years. With refurbished roads, rail links and port improvements, Genoa would return to its heyday as a European maritime power.



Marco Bucci, second from right, speaks to Giuseppe Conte ahead of the demolition of the Morandi bridge.

Photographer: Federico Bernini/Bloomberg

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“It’s an important moment, it’s the rebirth of Genoa,” Prime Minister Giuseppe Conte added at the event, donning a construction worker’s helmet and assisting with the initial labor.

Looking around Genoa, signs of rebirth still appear pretty far off. The economy is sputtering and the city is leading a regional population [decline](#). The job market is stagnant.

The main engine of growth is still the harbor where native son Christopher Columbus first plotted his naval adventures. With more than 55 million tons of goods moving through Genoa last year, it’s still Italy’s busiest port, but traffic is down by about 8 percent since the disaster.

In many ways, slicing the coastal city in half exacerbated its natural state as a place of two often mismatched parts. The Morandi bridge was the link between them.


Squeezed between Alpine foothills and the Mediterranean, Genoa stretches almost 35 kilometers along the shoreline. Renaissance palaces clash with the functional architecture of the commercial port, and soccer fans follow one of two rival clubs, Sampdoria or Genoa. The city is even formally divided into an eastern section and a western half, with fresh sea breezes running into noxious fumes from shipyards and steel plants drifting over the industrial grime.


“We need to clean up the mud that has covered our lives, our land, our traditions,” Cristiano De Andre, son of “Italy’s Bob Dylan,” Genoan singer-songwriter Fabrizio De Andre, sang at a benefit concert the day after the tragedy.

For some residents and businesses, that cleanup cannot come soon enough. The headquarters of Ansaldo Energia SpA, a \$1.1 billion energy company, were located literally under the bridge. On Aug. 15, the business was cut off and about 400 employees had to be relocated. Total losses came to almost 50 million euros (\$56 million).

The city’s airport has lost about 20,000 passengers since Aug. 14, according to Paolo Odone, the facility’s president and a former head of the Chamber of Commerce. “Hotel owners are scared”, he said.

Only a fraction of the 14 billion euros of infrastructure investments planned by the municipality will go to bridge reconstruction, as the city looks to ease its chronic gridlock by building a new bypass, overcoming decades of opposition by Five Star, egged on by its founder Beppe Grillo, another Genoa native.

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
Teresa Marasso, a 49 year-old mother of two, has considered leaving many times to search for work elsewhere. So far, she's stayed home.

"Genoa is human," Marasso said. "She is trying to remind us that she's hurt, but still alive."

– *With assistance by John Follain*

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