

VENEZUELA COUNTRY BRIEF

1. The Country

1.1 Geography

Following Brazil, Mexico and Argentina, Venezuela is one of the larger countries of Latin America. Bordered by the Caribbean (on the north), Colombia (west), Brazil (south) and Guyana (east), it has an area of 916,442 km² and is composed of four distinct regions: the Andean highlands, the Maracaibo lowlands, the central plain (Llanos), and the vast Guyana highlands. The country is extremely rich in petroleum and other mineral resources.

1.2 The People

The population of 20 million is heavily concentrated in the northern area, and 85 percent live in towns and cities, the chief ones, in order of size, being Caracas, the capital with 5 million, Maracaibo (oil industry centre), Valencia (vehicle assembly centre), Barquisimeto (a market town), Maracay (agricultural centre), and Ciudad Guyana (heavy industry including aluminum, steel and hydro power).

The large majority of the population is ethnically mixed, with strains of native Indian, black, and European blood. The significantly unequal income distribution tends to be skewed in favour of the lighter-skinned groups. There was a significant influx of Europeans (Italians, Spanish, Portuguese, Germans) in the fifties and sixties who now comprise a large part of the middle class. In recent times a very large number of Colombians have settled in Venezuela (variously estimated between one and two million!) plus lesser numbers of Ecuadorians, Guyanese and Dominicans. There are also about 300,000 of middle Eastern origin. The general education level is relatively high. Fifty percent of the population is under 20 years old.

1.3 History and Governmental System

Venezuela, first settled by Indians, was then discovered by Columbus in 1498 with European settlement beginning in 1502. Spain retained control of the country until 1821 when, after a long war, independence was achieved under the leadership of Simon Bolívar, who is venerated by Venezuelans as their outstanding national hero. With the exception of a brief period