

Interview with the Operational Coordinator of "Operação Acolhida" (2021-2023): Lieutenant-General Sérgio Schwingel

General de Divisão Sérgio Schwingel
Exército Brasileiro.
Coordenador Operacional da Operação
Acolhida, entre julho de 2021 até março de 2023.

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1 PRESENTATION

Operação Acolhida is currently the largest Brazilian humanitarian operation focused on providing assistance to immigrants in vulnerable situations, especially Venezuelans, of whom we have seen a considerable increase in the migration flow due to the structural crises in Venezuela. The operation is a Brazilian response to the phenomenon of increased international migration, which mainly impacts the state of Roraima and its border municipalities. Furthermore, it was established via decree-laws that shaped the institutional design and enabled inter-ministerial and inter-agency cooperation and cooperation between the various federal, state, and municipal entities. The steering Committee is the space for deliberation and coordination, and the operational arm of *Operação Acolhida* is the Humanitarian Logistics Task Force (Hum Log TF), commanded by an Army Lieutenant-General, who holds the position on a rotating basis for a period that may vary from two to three years.

Table 1 – Hum Log TF commanders from 2018 to 2023

Commander	Period	Time
Lieutenant-General Pazuello	February 2018 to January 2020	24 months
Lieutenant-General Antonio Manoel de Barros	January 2020 to August 2021	19 months
Lieutenant-General Sérgio Schwingel	July 2021 to March 2023	20 months
Lieutenant-General Helder de Freitas	March 21, 2023, onwards	Current holder

Source: prepared by the authors

These commanders experienced unique challenges, such as setting up the first care structure, implementing shelters and internalization actions, addressing the COVID-19 crisis, and closing and opening borders.

This interview is the second¹ in a series that aims to learn about how these decision-makers dealt with *Operação Acolhida* and the demands that arose from it.

Lieutenant-General Sérgio Schwingel was Commander of Hum Log TF (*Operação Acolhida*) from July 31, 2021, to March 21, 2023. During this period, *Acolhida* went through several situations requiring sensitivity and competence in managing the operation, especially regarding assistance toward immigrants in vulnerable situations. Lieutenant-General Schwingel spoke about all these issues and answered questions about future perspectives and challenges, especially in the three axes of *Operação Acolhida*, while he was at the forefront of the action. This interview is a direct continuation of the one given by Lieutenant-General Manuel Barros, carried out between August and September 2023, showing the changes experienced by those who conducted the operation. At an opportune moment, the other officers who commanded the operation will be interviewed, thus totaling a collection of the main executors of this critical public policy. Enjoy reading!

2 INTERVIEW

Interviewers: General Schwingel, as a soldier, you had the opportunity to serve outside the country, which allowed you to come into contact with several soldiers from other countries throughout your career. Based on this international experience and your experience as Commander of Hum Log TF, do you see differences in the treatment given to refugees and immigrants in Brazil and abroad? What would be some of the positive and different aspects in relation to what is done abroad?

General Schwingel: As Operational Coordinator of *Operação Acolhida* and Commander of Hum Log TF from August 2021 to March 2023, I would initially like to contextualize the reader about the work carried out by *Operação Acolhida*, which is the Federal Government's response to the exponential increase in the migratory flow resulting from the humanitarian crisis that has been plaguing the Bolivarian Republic of Venezuela.

¹ Cf.: Barros; Simões; Franchi (2021).

Currently, more than 7 million Venezuelans have left the country, fleeing hunger and searching of jobs, security, healthcare, and other essential services, making it one of the most significant displacement crises on the planet.

Operação Acolhida, created in March 2018, is recognized as a humanitarian model of assistance and internalization. It is the helping hand that the Brazilians extended to our Venezuelan neighbors, bringing dignity, hope, and socioeconomic inclusion to immigrants and refugees who arrive in vulnerable situations in the cities of Pacaraima (border with Venezuela), Boa Vista, and Manaus.

When crossing the border, Venezuelans are welcomed, and they receive medical support, complete vaccination coverage, documentary support, and shelter. Once regularized, they are voluntarily moved to other states, where they have the opportunity to get a job and a new life, integrating into our society.

This is a joint, interagency, complex, and sensitive operation, which involves the participation of 13 ministries, state and municipal governments, the Armed Forces, national and international institutions, agencies, organizations, civil society, and people who do voluntary work, philanthropic, without expecting anything in return and, thus, they build a different, more humane, and supportive world.

As for the peculiarities of *Operação Acolhida* that could perhaps make it unique when compared with other responses to humanitarian crises, I could mention the effective participation of the Armed Forces in the operation.

This participation occurs with an operational coordinator, who is responsible for coordinating, at an operational level (*in loco*), the cooperative, cohesive, and synergistic action of all actors involved in the humanitarian response. Such a coordinator is a General selected by the Brazilian Army and appointed by the Federal Emergency Assistance Committee (*Comitê Federal de Assistência Emergencial* – CFAE), coordinated by the Civil House of the Presidency of the Republic.

In addition to the work of this General, the operation has a contingent of around 500 military personnel from the forces (Brazilian Navy, Brazilian Army, and Brazilian Air Force), selfless, committed professionals with a humanitarian spirit, making up a Hum Log TF that has the mission of cooperating with the Federal Government and the states of Roraima and Amazonas (municipality of Manaus) in emergency assistance actions, aimed at organizing the border, welcoming and internalizing people in vulnerable situations resulting from the migratory flow caused by humanitarian crisis.

Given the capillarity of the armed forces, in addition to the contingent mentioned above, other military personnel participate in the logistical support for internalization, which occurs in all corners of the national territory. Another peculiarity that makes *Operação Acolhida* unique refers to internalization, which involves the voluntary displacement of Venezuelan immigrants and refugees to other states in Brazil to promote their social insertion in Brazilian territory. In this effort, through agreements and partnerships, courses are made available to improve work skills, aiming to facilitate socioeconomic re-inclusion and family and social reunion.

Another *sui generis* characteristic of the operation concerns the location of shelters and emergency accommodations where food, healthcare, and social protection are provided, serving Indigenous and non-Indigenous groups per international humanitarian standards. In *Operação*

Acolhida, these structures are located in the heart of the urban centers of Boa Vista, Pacaraima, and Manaus. This fact brings essential conveniences to these people, such as proximity to the operation's service structures (screening centers, internalization coordination center, and training and education center), proximity to the public education network, and the health-care units of the Unified Health System (SUS) and, mainly, daily interaction with the Brazilian population of these municipalities, contributing to the integration of Venezuelans into our society.

Interviewers: *Operação Acolhida* is divided into three axes: border management, shelter, and internalization. During your tenure at the helm, what main actions did the operation perform in these three axes?

General Schwingel: As it is a joint and interagency operation, it is worth highlighting that all the actions carried out included the work of dozens of civil and military actors, who work in a respectful, humane, fraternal, cooperative, dignified, responsible, and supportive environment. Therefore, all institutions involved in this essential humanitarian response were united in overcoming each challenge and sharing success. Everyone contributed decisively to achieving the objectives established in recent years and to the recognized success of *Operação Acolhida*.

During the period referred to in the question, several actions were carried out, such as the internalization of more than 40 thousand Venezuelans throughout the national territory, integrating this vulnerable population into our society; application of more than 390 thousand doses of vaccine, preventing diseases, including some already eradicated in our country; improving the training process for Venezuelans, preparing them for the job market; implementation of the civilian hiring process for Hum Log TF, which led to a significant reduction in the number of military personnel in area military commands; adoption of several measures aimed at removing families from the streets of Boa Vista and Pacaraima; construction of new reception and support posts in Boa Vista and Pacaraima; execution, in coordination with the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), of the reunification and expansion of several shelters in Boa Vista; dismantling of rented, idle and poorly sized structures, generating considerable savings in public resources; implementation of optical fiber in *Operação Acolhida*, in Boa Vista and Pacaraima; restructuring of the health logistics function in the operation, bringing care closer to beneficiaries and integrating them into the SUS; implementation of the signaling project on the border with Venezuela; and complete transition to the government of Amazonas of the Transit Accommodation and the Manaus Reception and Support Post; among others.

Interviewers: When you took command in July 2021, and when you passed that command in March 2023, *Operação Acolhida* practically doubled the number of Venezuelans internalized, going from around 50 thousand at that time to reaching 100 thousand on March 31, 2023. To what factors do you attribute the success of this strategy? Do you see opportunities for improvement in the internalization strategy, aiming at the voluntary insertion of Venezuelans in other locations in Brazilian territory?

General Schwingel: Internalization is the central structuring axis of *Operação Acolhida* since, in addition to allowing immigrants and refugees to resume their lives, integrated into our society by family reunification, social gatherings, signaled and institutional job vacancies, it provides a reduction in the flow of Venezuelans in the operation's structures and on the streets of Pacaraima, Boa Vista, and Manaus.

Internalization is a complex challenge that can only be overcome by the combined efforts of many civil and military actors dedicated to guaranteeing the rights and dignity of Venezuelan citizens, especially those most vulnerable.

It is worth highlighting that the internalization is under shared and collaborative management with agencies and partners. Since the beginning of the operation, efforts have been made to improve the processes for searching for job vacancies, logistics, and human resources, as well as mapping indicators of the quality of this initiative.

Some recent actions have contributed to improving this strategy. A new Internalization Coordination Center (CCI) was built, bringing more functionality, work capacity, and spaces for specific services, which resulted in a considerable increase in the volume of services. Creating a Training and Education Center adjacent to the CCI was also possible, preparing more beneficiaries for the job market and greatly enhancing the signaled job vacancy modality.

In the human resources area, we hired administrative assistants (civilian employees) for the CCI, increasing the workforce and mitigating the discontinuity risks due to the expected rotations of military contingents.

Internalization involves a complex logistics chain, mainly concerning intercity, intracity roads, and air transport. It is worth noting that all internalizations involve air travel, given the continental dimensions of the Brazilian territory. In this context, priority was given to purchasing tickets for immigrants and refugees on commercial flights through the Daily Rates and Tickets Concession System (*Sistema de Concessão de Diárias e Passagens*) of the Ministry of Management and Innovation in Public Services concerning the support from the Brazilian Air Force and aircraft charter. This initiative resulted in an economy, increased internalized people's volume, and expanded capillarity to the receiving municipalities.

Regarding opportunities for improvement related to internalization, I could emphasize the continuity in implementing public policies focused on migration issues, which is now a reality in Brazil. Strengthening the receiving municipalities regarding the reception structures and initiatives contributing to Venezuelans' economic integration and social inclusion is still important. Finally, it is extremely important to seek greater engagement of civil society and educational institutions with the migration cause, particularly with the institutional modality, training, and offer of job vacancies.

Interviewers: In the interview with General Barros, who preceded you in command of *Operação Acolhida*, he spoke of the "crisis within the crisis" when referring to the health crisis caused by the COVID-19 pandemic and the humanitarian crisis as a result of the increased flow Venezuelan migration. Although the pandemic had more critical moments in 2020 and early 2021, you went through the entire process of mobilizing and demobilizing personnel, medical

infrastructure, and vaccination campaigns, in addition to fluctuating contamination rate increases. What did COVID-19 mean for the progress of the actions carried out by *Operação Acolhida* during the years you were at the helm?

General Schwingel: I could not start this topic without highlighting the herculean and successful work of General Barros, my predecessor, and all the civilian and military members of *Operação Acolhida* in facing a health crisis within a humanitarian crisis, obtaining excellent results in preventing and combating COVID-19. At the time, the measures adopted in *Operação Acolhida* saved many Venezuelans and Brazilians lives.

My arrival at the operation coincided with the slowing down of the pandemic and the consequent opening of the border between Brazil and Venezuela, which was closed for around two years. The closure of the border created a large pent-up demand from Venezuelans in vulnerable situations who needed help.

In this sense, after the opening of the border on June 23, 2021, thousands of Venezuelans occupied the streets of Pacaraima and Boa Vista in search of basic needs of food, health, security, and shelter, in addition to document regularization as a refugee or resident, generating huge queues and creating dissatisfaction among residents of the municipalities mentioned above.

The normalization of the flow occurred approximately eight months after the opening of the border, in February 2022, as a result of the adoption of several measures taken by the agencies and by Hum Log TF, such as increasing daily productivity in administering vaccines and providing care at screening posts, specifically in the control and migration registration of residents and refugees; expansion of shelter capacity in accommodation and shelters in Pacaraima and Boa Vista; construction of emergency accommodation in Pacaraima; increasing road capacity to transport Venezuelans from Pacaraima to Boa Vista and Manaus; and implementation of fiber optics in the structures of *Operação Acolhida* in Pacaraima, improving the speed and efficiency of service at the screening center in that municipality. All of these measures required extraordinary effort and commitment from all civilians and military personnel, seeking to remove the most vulnerable Venezuelans from the streets as a matter of priority and quickly, such as older people, minors, pregnant women, the sick, Indigenous people, and people with disabilities, among others.

With the sustained drop in new cases of COVID-19, indicating a slowing down of the pandemic, the process of dismantling and reducing health structures and isolation areas that were becoming idle began.

Interviewers: The Armed Forces, especially the Brazilian Army, regularly contribute a number of military personnel on a rotational basis, in which, every five months, a new contingent of 450/500 military personnel takes on missions. You currently serve as Deputy Commander of Land Operations, a position within the Brazilian Army body responsible for preparing and employing the Land Force, the Land Operations Command (COTER). How do you evaluate the preparation and use of troops in Operation Acolhida? What actions could be taken to improve the preparation of these contingents?

General Schwingel: The employment in *Operação Acolhida* of a contingent of military personnel from the three forces that make up Hum Log TF is preceded by a process of selection, preparation, and recognition.

The Land Operations Command, the operational management body of the Land Force, guides the planning and execution of measures relating to personnel selection, organization, preparation, and replacement of contingents.

The selection of personnel to compose the contingent is careful, taking into account the characteristics of the mission (humanitarian, logistical, joint, and interagency), the operational environment, and the length of stay in the operation, among other aspects.

Soldiers undergo physical, health, and psychological evaluations to form the contingent, and they must also have an up-to-date vaccination schedule. Psychosocial aspects are also considered in personnel selection, seeking to select soldiers fully capable of dedicating themselves to the mission.

Concerning leadership duties, the selection of the military personnel who will perform them aims toward older personnel with professional experience and expertise in the positions they will hold and who have already performed similar functions in other situations.

The area military commands designated for each period coordinate the first phase of contingent preparation, which occurs before the military embarks on the trip to the state of Roraima and the municipality of Manaus. This preparation lasts approximately two weeks, with one week in the organization of each soldier and the other centered in the garrison, headquarters of the area military command.

Hum Log TF coordinates the second phase of preparation, which occurs upon the contingent's arrival in Boa Vista. Representatives from UN agencies give specific lectures during this phase, which lasts approximately one week.

Since the beginning of the preparation, some fundamental themes have produced instruction for the military contingents, such as psychosocial aspects of the Venezuelan population, respect for human rights, relevant legal elements in a humanitarian operation, social protection of vulnerable people, and the actions of the agencies that participate in the *Operação Acolhida*.

We are currently preparing the 17th Contingent. Therefore, regarding the opportunities for improvement necessary to prepare contingents, actions have been taken throughout the course of over five years of the operation. Improving preparation is a continuous process resulting from experiences, best practices, and lessons learned from the troops' performance in this type of operation.

Interviewers: *Operação Acolhida* is an emergency action by the Federal Government. However, more than five years have passed, and there is no prospect of ending the operation in the short or medium term. Reasoning that, in the future, the duties of receiving refugees should be the responsibility of other ministries and responsible bodies, how do you see *Operação Acolhida*'s performance in this context?

General Schwingel: It is essential to highlight the importance of maintaining the *Operação Acolhida* response while the significant migratory flow continues, resulting from the humanitarian crisis in the neighboring country. On the other hand, the future invites us to several reflections.

Reflect on the future of *Operação Acolhida*, a model of operation in a non-war situation that welcomes everyone and equalizes opportunities regardless of race, creed, political alignment, economic condition, or social level.

Reflect on a sustainable transition of *Operação Acolhida*, with the implementation of efficient public policies, with the involvement of the Federal Government and state and municipal governments.

Reflect on the success of this unique humanitarian response and the altruism of its members, who certainly have no idea of the magnitude of their work.

Reflect on the lives of more than seven million Venezuelans who left their country for opportunity, dignity, freedom, and a better life.

Reflect on the fact that there is a human being behind every number—a sister, a brother, a daughter, a son, a mother, or a father.

Reflect on this migration from another angle as a driver of economic growth and development. To do this, we just need to look, for example, after more than 100 years, at the benefits of German and Italian migration in the country's southern region.

Reflect on the rights of immigrants and refugees, which are indisputably human rights. They must be respected without discrimination or xenophobia.

After over five years of operation, reflect on the search for a solution in the country of origin to ensure that migration is a choice and not a necessity.

Finally, I conclude by praising *Operação Acolhida*, an example of a humanitarian response that overcame all obstacles and is currently recognized on the national and international scene as a successful operation. This is Brazil recognized as a welcoming nation.

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