

STRANDED ABROAD DURING THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC



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RSM February 2021*



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INTRODUCTION

March 15, 2020 is a day that marked the lives of many of us Peruvians who found ourselves in the United States, because that night, the president of our country announced a mandatory quarantine and border closure to prevent the COVID-19 virus from spreading throughout the country. Peru was one of the first countries in South America to declare a state of emergency and close its borders, as announced by different national and international media.

That day, we became Peruvians stranded in the United States, although we erroneously held out hope that we would return home after 15 days. However, then we heard that it was extended for another 15 days, and months went by in this way and we were still in the United States. That is why in this document I try to relate my own experience of being stranded and the testimony of four of my friends who were also stranded for many months in the United States, along with thousands of compatriots and people from different countries.

We will describe our experiences, the actions of the Peruvian State vis-à-vis its compatriots, the role played by social networks in the relations that were established, religious congregations, etc.

We will also discuss the many dangers we faced while we waited to return home, as many compatriots had gone to the United States for a few days of vacation or a few months of work or study that turned into a months-long nightmare. Upon returning to the country, we had to quarantine in hotels and share a room for 14 days with a complete stranger. However, different initiatives emerged to provide mutual support among those who were stranded, which made it possible to cope with all of the difficulties.

Finally, we will present our conclusions and suggestions.

CHAPTER I: COVID-19

1.1. WHAT IS COVID-19?

In early 2020, the world heard the name coronavirus for the first time. Very few wondered what in fact was this coronavirus that was causing so much alarm among the population. The international bodies in charge of protecting public health began to offer concepts about the coronavirus, but the World Health Organization (WHO) provided the most accurate definition:

"Coronaviruses are a large family of viruses which may cause illness in animals or humans. In humans, several coronaviruses are known to cause respiratory infections ranging from the common cold to more severe diseases such as Middle East Respiratory Syndrome (MERS) and Severe Acute Respiratory Syndrome (SARS). The most recently discovered coronavirus causes coronavirus disease COVID-19." (WHO, 2020)

As WHO states, coronaviruses are a large family of viruses, and COVID-19 is the most recently discovered virus. So, what is COVID-19?

According to WHO, COVID-19 is the infectious disease caused by the coronavirus. Both this new virus and the disease it causes were unknown before the outbreak in Wuhan, China, in December 2019. Currently, COVID-19 is a pandemic affecting many countries around the world.

1.2. SYMPTOMS OF COVID-19

The symptoms are many, and not all of them are present in every patient. Much depends on the individual's particular body and the emotional state, but the most common symptoms are:

- Fever
- Dry cough
- Fatigue

Other less common symptoms affecting some patients include:

- Aches and pains
- Nasal congestion
- Headache
- Conjunctivitis
- Sore throat
- Diarrhea
- Loss of taste or smell
- Skin rashes or color changes in fingers or toes

Something notable about COVID-19 is that some people with the disease have only very mild symptoms.

On the other hand, it is appropriate to highlight the indications of the World Health Organization, which state that “most people (about 80%) recover from the disease without requiring hospitalization. About one in five people who get COVID-19 end up with severe symptoms and difficulty breathing. Older people and those with preexisting medical conditions such as high blood pressure, heart or lung problems, diabetes, or cancer are more likely to have severe symptoms. However, anyone can get COVID-19 and become seriously ill. People of any age who have a fever or cough and also have difficulty breathing, pain or tightness in the chest, or difficulty talking or moving should seek medical attention immediately. If possible, it is recommended that individuals first call a health care professional or medical office so that they can refer the patient to the appropriate health care facility.¹

¹ Accessed on the World Health Organization (WHO) website.
[https://www.who.int/es/emergencies/diseases/novel-coronavirus-2019/advice-for-public/q-a-coronaviruses#:~:text=LA%20COVID%E2%80%9119%20es%20la,China\)%20en%20diciembre%20de%202019.](https://www.who.int/es/emergencies/diseases/novel-coronavirus-2019/advice-for-public/q-a-coronaviruses#:~:text=LA%20COVID%E2%80%9119%20es%20la,China)%20en%20diciembre%20de%202019.)

1.3. THE MEDIA AND COVID-19

The media in our country play a central role in the prevention and control of COVID-19. Reporting on the pandemic has become a challenge, as it is not like reporting on an event occurring somewhere in the city, much less a matter of informing the population of news that perhaps not help at all in the recovery of those who suffer from the illness.

More than ever, it is essential for journalists to provide accurate and quality information to the public and avoid offering figures or information that are not based on a reliable source. What most people know about the impacts of COVID-19 is thanks to the media, so it is essential that the media assume a more serious and objective position.

Knowing that the media play a key role in the fight against the coronavirus, I suggest some tips to take into account when informing the population.

- ***Make content easy to understand*** - Find simple and attractive ways to focus on the facts and give concrete advice on the steps people can take.
- ***Direct readers to official sources of information*** - Direct readers to expert and reliable sources, such as the World Health Organization, that contribute to improving public information.
- ***Avoid speculating about the possible worst scenarios*** - We must focus on what we do know and be honest about what we do not.
- ***Avoid sensationalist language*** - Journalists must bear in mind their responsibility to manage the emotions of the public and avoid unduly spreading fear. It is therefore recommended to escape emotional or sensationalist terms such as “confusion,” “killer,” or “catastrophe.” However, we continue to see alarmist headlines every day that cause panic among the population (EASP, 2020).

1.4. THE POPULATION VERSUS COVID-19

Let us imagine what people's lives were like in the early days of March 2020, specifically before March 16th. These were ordinary days; perhaps some were bored of doing the same thing each day, and others simply went through their daily routines automatically. In short, everything was normal until the former president ordered a state of emergency for 15 days and the closure of the borders.

After March 15th, nothing was the same, although many resisted complying with the measures mandated by the government.

To better understand this, one must bear in mind that Peru is an informal country in all aspects. Although it has a very stable economy, this informality caused many small and medium-sized enterprises to fail in the second half of the year despite the government's "economic reactivation" program. This is because the reactivation involved meeting certain requirements that could only be met by formal companies with a certain number of workers on the payroll, and most small and medium-sized enterprises, as informal businesses, simply did not benefit.

And a country where household economies are often sustained by day labor, full compliance with the state of emergency was almost impossible; entire families had to go out and seek daily wage work, and as a result, the number of infected people multiplied quickly.

Meanwhile, a sector of the population was influenced by biased information claiming that the virus was an invention designed to implement certain international policies that are specific to developed countries (such as the United States, China or some European nations) in order to take control of the economies of developing countries.

After almost a year of global pandemic, some segments of the population still maintain that COVID-19 is nothing but a deception, which is why they urge the population not to use masks, much less to agree to get a vaccine.

Therefore, as stated by the *Revista Habanera de Ciencias Médicas* (Pérez, 2020), attitudes toward the pandemic are shaped by knowledge about the pandemic, expected emotional reactions to the unknown and favorable actions within the family. Varying levels of trust in government policies and health guidelines may explain the social indiscipline still present in some individuals.

CHAPTER II: THE QUARANTINE PERIOD

Before expanding on the issue of the quarantine for COVID-19, let us recall what a quarantine itself is and why an individual or an entire population enters quarantine.

According to the different studies, quarantine is, in the words of the digital newspaper of the Universidad Nacional de Colombia (unal.edu.co): “*a preventive isolation that is adopted in the face of highly contagious and communicable diseases... and the duration of a quarantine is determined depending on the incubation time of the virus...*”

2.1. PERU DECLARES QUARANTINE AND CLOSES ITS BORDERS

In a message to the nation on March 15th, 2020, the president of our country declared a state of emergency and total quarantine for the whole country, announcing that from zero hour on March 16th, all borders would be closed. Peru was one of the first countries in Latin America to quarantine and close its borders.

“On the night of March 15, President Martín Vizcarra holds a series of documents, stares at the camera and announces what many Peruvians already suspect: a national state of emergency to prevent the spread of the coronavirus in the country. Measures: border closure and compulsory social isolation for 15 days.” (4)

“Peru was one of the first countries in Latin America to quarantine its citizens to try to contain the spread of the coronavirus. On March 16th, the government decreed a state of health emergency, closed the country’s borders, ordered people to leave alone for essential things like buying food and medicine, and decreed curfews at different times in all cities.” (5)

On the other hand, on the night of March 15th and the early morning of the 16th, thousands of Peruvians who were in the United States tried to change our flights back home, but unfortunately it was not possible, because the airlines began canceling their scheduled flights.

Testimony 1... “We put on the news from Peru, where we learned that the borders were closed on March 16 until further notice. We called the airline, but they couldn’t change our return tickets with them...”

Testimony 2... “At first, the closure was decreed for only 15 days and I thought that after that time I could go back, but the days kept increasing and the uncertainty of when I could return distressed me and made me sad.”

Testimony 3... “When I learned that Peru closed its borders, I couldn’t believe it, until I saw that my ticket back was canceled...”

Testimony 4... “my girls couldn’t stand it anymore... the stress was growing every day...”

As a certain song goes, the year 2020 was “the year that the time stopped,” because suddenly, from one day to the next, we were forbidden from returning to our country and thus began a real ordeal to return home, as we can see in the above testimonies.

Many of us mistakenly thought that those 15 days would be over very soon, and we took it as time to reflect, to be with family. I remember very well how my relatives shared photos of the various meals they prepared, photos of the family cleaning and organizing the house, sharing information about what the virus was, sharing remedies to prevent the virus.

Meanwhile, the print media published cartoons aimed at the general population, noting how humans are the cause of the epidemics that attack us, as we can see in this caricature in the newspaper *La República*.



[image: animal representatives announce: “In light of the danger faced by the senseless human species, we call on it to stop destroying the forests and change its eating habits and unhealthy methods of raising animals, all of which cause epidemics and viruses.”]

However, the anguish began to be felt when the president of our country extended the mandatory quarantine for another 15 days, and the number of infections and deaths was growing every day. Families living on daily labor wages begin to feel that they could not meet their families' basic needs, such as food and health. On the other hand, tension and uncertainty also increased among the Peruvian population outside the country.

Testimony 3... "At first, the closure was decreed only for 15 days and I thought that after that time I could come back, but the days kept increasing and the uncertainty over when I could return distressed me and made me sad..."

2.2. THE POSITION OF THE STRANDED

Many of us had arrived in the United States just a few days before Peru closed its borders, and some had their return tickets booked for the 16th or a few days later. The reasons why we were in the United States varied: a few days of vacation, meetings, family visits. The latter was the case of Testimony 1, by an individual whose relatives had their return flight to Peru booked for March 18, or young people on "work and travel" visas who were working in the United States for a short time.

"I am the father of two young men stranded in North Carolina... University students on the "Work and Travel" program with a J1 visa. They await a call from the consulate, always with the hope of returning soon, but after 43 days of isolation, there is no news... both my children, as well as the hundreds of [other] young Peruvians in their condition are at risk of becoming infected by the apparent results of the pandemic in the United States." (4)

Testimony 3... "What was going to be a ten-day trip ended up being 68 days."

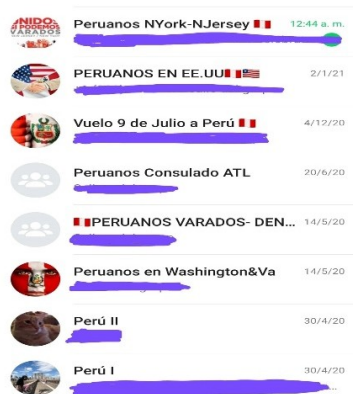
I arrived in Philadelphia on March 11 to participate in various meetings that began in New York and other states, and unfortunately, I was unable to participate in any of these scheduled activities, since activities in enclosed spaces were also banned in the United States.

21 THE STRANDED ORGANIZED THROUGH SOCIAL NETWORKING

As human beings, it is in our nature to seek community, and that is why we automatically try to come together, especially when we feel that we are in danger.

In my case, after 15 days of quarantine at a retreat house for my community, Sisters of Mercy, I began to worry because the quarantine was being extended again and again. Thanks to the initiative of my Sister Mary Trainer, I began to contact the Peruvian Consulate in Paterson, New Jersey, and I searched the internet for information about people who were in the same situation as me. I found groups that were already organized through different media, such as:

WHATSAPP, in this medium, there were a myriad of groups that had organized themselves in different parts of the United States, as seen in the image below.



These groups have been very important to many of us who were stranded for months and have become a community of emotional support and a source of much solidarity, since we shared a common reality of being away from our country and often away from our families.

*Testimony 1... "In March, I joined a WhatsApp chat group called **Peruano Varados en New York / New Jersey [Peruvians Stranded in New York/New Jersey]**. In this group, I learned a lot from the other cases and shared mine and [that of] my family. This group restored my faith in humanity because many Peruvians like me that live in the United States guided [other] Peruvian compatriots. Through this medium, we also learn about the various situations of pain that our compatriots were experiencing"*

Testimony 3... “What really struck me was seeing the support, concern and help I received not only from the Peruvian Consulate, but also from other Peruvians who were in my same situation.”

FACEBOOK and TWITTER and social media groups that allowed us to connect with each other and with the different organizations, authorities, etc., where we shared our daily realities, wanting to make our voices heard and demanding a return home.

For example, the group PERUANOS VARADOS EN USA [PERUVIANS STRANDED IN USA] has 4,214 members.



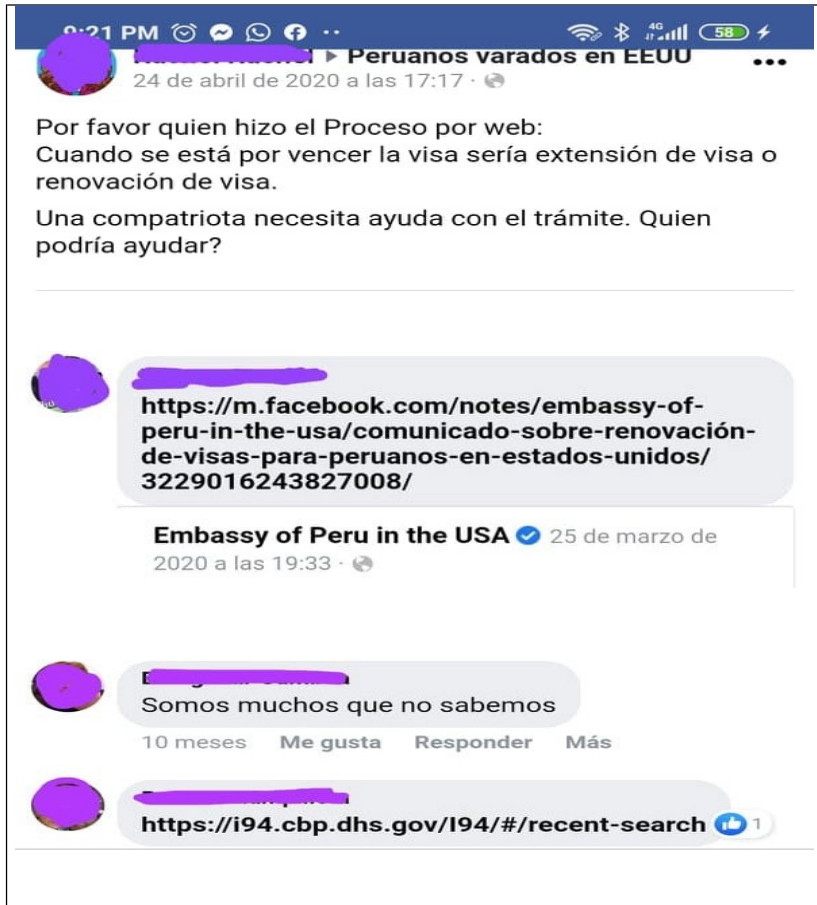
[image: Peruvians stranded in US]

These spaces have allowed us to accompany one another daily, to inform one another about what was happening in our country, and constantly publish the various hardships that were going on among so many families and young people who came to the country for just a short time.



[image: Today I must thank God, because the cries of some families have been answered and they will be returning on the following flights, but our happiness will be complete when all have returned home...]

Other very important information received through this medium had to do with the length of stay, since many of our compatriots who had their return tickets for the 16th or the following days were approaching the limit for their stay in the United States. The information and guidance came from the compatriots themselves, and most of the time it was very accurate.



[image: Please, whoever did the Process online: When the visa is about to expire would it be an extension of visa or renewal of visa. A compatriot needs help with paperwork. Who could help?]

22 THE STRANDED AND THE DANGERS TO WHICH THEY WERE EXPOSED

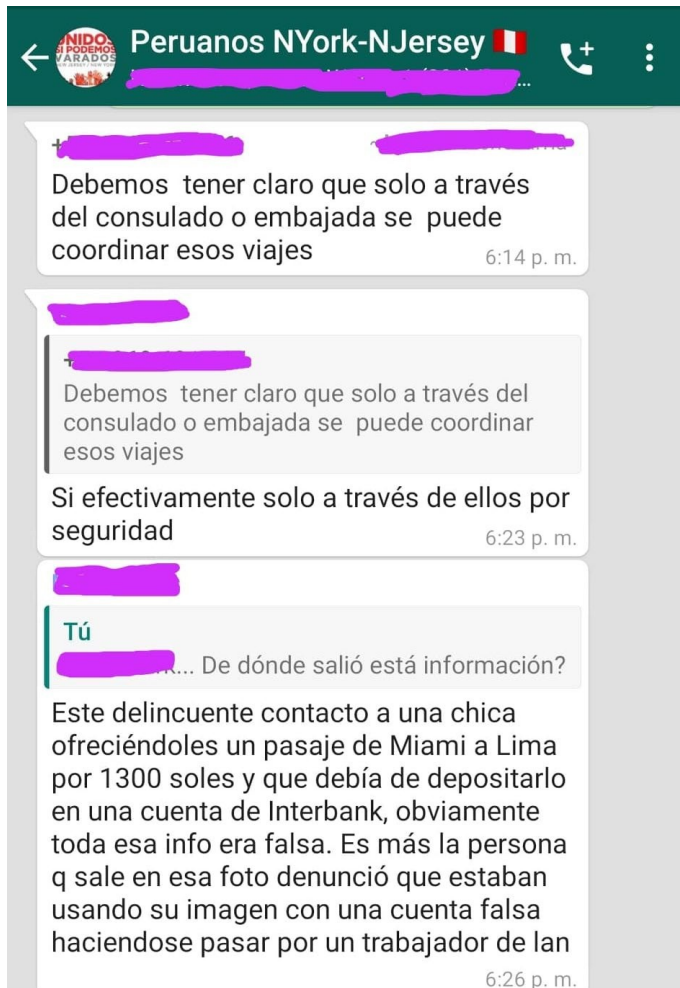
Just as we received much support from these spaces, we were also exposed to many dangers, because there were people who wanted to make a profit and take advantage of the anguish and despair of those who were stranded.

As we were in a situation of high vulnerability, we did not realize the dangers we were exposed to, which I would like to mention in the following paragraphs.

We were exposed to extortion. I say this because we often had people infiltrating the WhatsApp and Facebook groups and asking us for personal information such as our national ID number, passport number, the city where we lived in Peru and in the

United States, and the airline, the number and date of our return flight. All this was under the pretext of requesting a humanitarian flight. But after a few days, we learned that these

people had contacted some of our colleagues' relatives and said they could help their family member get a humanitarian flight, but for a fee. Many situations like these occurred.



[image: We should be clear that these trips can only be coordinated through the consulate or embassy.

Yes, in fact, only through them for security.

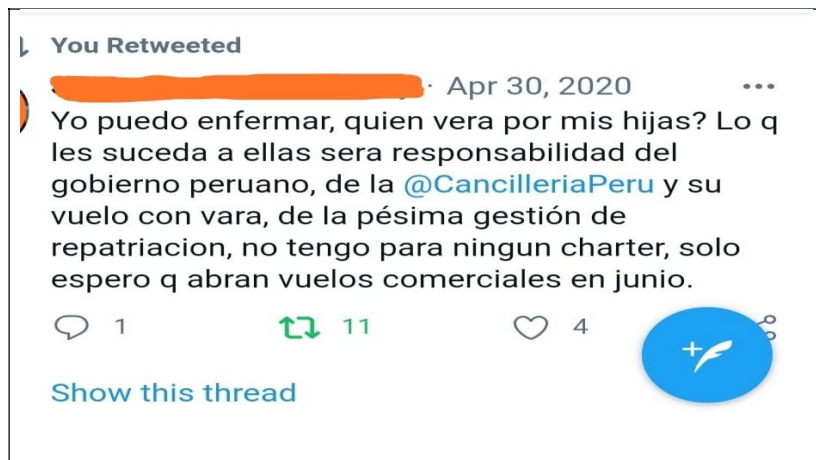
This delinquent contacted a girl offering them a ticket from Miami to Lima for 1,300 soles and that it should be deposited into an Interbank account, obviously all that info was false. What is more, the person in the photo complained that they were using their image with a false account trying to pass for a LAN employee”]

Testimony 1 “A journalist from an online newspaper asked us for testimony but he came with the lie that he was organizing a humanitarian flight. The list we provided ended up being ammunition in the hands of a political party that only used it to attack the government. We never heard again of the help that this man offered us.”

Another danger to which we were exposed is human trafficking because we very easily shared all types of personal information.

Testimony 5 “In the WhatsApp group, a mom said that she had a daughter who is alone and that she had gone to the United States with this Work and Travel program and that now she was doing very badly... then I contacted her mom to ask for more information about her daughter, she gave me her daughter's cell number, and I contacted her and in the first conversation she gave me all the information I asked her for because of the possibility that someone would give her support with food... after the conversation I was completely surprised and because with such ease she gave me all the information I asked for... and I asked myself over and over again... what would happen to this young woman if the person who contacted her were a trafficker?...”

On the other hand, we were exposed to the possibility of contagion and what it could mean to get sick in a foreign land without health insurance. *La República* reported on May 6th, 2020, “Hundreds of students, professionals, employees, seniors, some of them with pre-existing conditions, were living in distress because it was increasingly difficult to live in that country, and all that was left for them was a humanitarian flight.” The whole situation was even more difficult for families with children, as we can see in the tweet below.



[caption: I could get sick, who will look out for my daughters? What happens to them will be the responsibility of the Peruvian government, of @CancilleriaPeru and its flight, of the terrible management of repatriation, I don't have anything for any charter, I just hope that they open commercial flights in June.]

During this time of quarantine, those of us who were stranded experienced various moments of pain as well as joy. In one way or another, we managed to have our voices heard.

CHAPTER III: THE ACTIONS OF THE PERUVIAN STATE AND CIVIL SOCIETY IN LIGHT OF THE SITUATION OF THE STRANDED

The Peruvian state believed that a strict country-wide quarantine would control the spread of COVID-19. However, it was quite the opposite. Since our economically active population is mostly informal laborers, as the newspaper tells us, in Peru has been very difficult or impossible to keep the population working remotely to prevent the spread of the coronavirus; seven out of ten people earn a living in the informal sector, many of them as street vendors, and many of them lack a stable internet connection.

“...however, the quarantine imposed by the government of Martín Vizcarra to contain the disease led to an increase in unemployment between April and June of 8.8%.” (6)

In addition, in large cities such as Lima, Arequipa, Trujillo and others, the population lives in settlements where housing spaces are very small, which is not favorable, and for that reason, residents of these cities were forced to return to the provinces that they are originally from.



Families leaving Arequipa. Photograph disseminated on social media.

This internal situation did not help with the immediate repatriation of those stranded outside the country, and on the other hand, there was poor management on the part of

the authorities responsible for repatriation. Most of the compatriots were left to their own fate.

Testimony 3... “On the part of the authorities in Peru, I did not feel much support as I barely saw this issue addressed in the media, and besides that, there were very few humanitarian flights and many of us had to buy return flights that were too expensive.”

3.1. THE MINISTRY OF TRANSPORT AND COMMUNICATIONS

The Peruvian state, through the Ministry of Transport and Communications, issued a supreme decree authorizing the arrival of the humanitarian flights to transport our compatriots, as well as the foreigners who had been stranded in our country. All this was done only at the request of the Ministry of Foreign Relations, which, in coordination with the various embassies and consulates, would begin the repatriation of Peruvians from different countries.

“The Executive has issued Supreme Decree No. 045-2020-PCM allowing the repatriation to Peru of Peruvians stranded abroad, and the departure of foreigners to their respective countries... the MTC will provide all the facilities of the case for the realization of flights for these purposes, which are managed through the Ministry of Foreign Relations.” (7)

However, the system was overwhelmed because thousands of Peruvians were stranded and it turned into a chaotic situation, especially for those Peruvians who already had their return tickets and were abroad for only a few hours or a few days.

Due to the lack of humanitarian flights, many Peruvians in the United States became undocumented because their length of stay had already ended. Requesting a visa extension is expensive, and many compatriots were almost unable to afford food.

Moreover, there was no assurance that it would be granted by immigration authorities.

[Redacted]
Pueden informar algo de los vuelos humanitarios? somos varias personas varadas y nadie nos toma en cuenta, Creen que nuestro salud es un chiste?

10 meses Me gusta Responder Más



Autor

Consulado General del Perú en Paterson

Buenas tardes, lamentablemente aún no contamos con información sobre vuelos, ni humanitarios ni comerciales, hacia el Perú. Cuando tengamos información procederemos a contactar a las personas que se han empadronado. Saludos.



[image: Can you let us know anything about humanitarian flights? there are many of us stranded and nobody is taking us into account, Do you think our health is a joke?

Consulate General of Peru in Paterson: Good afternoon, unfortunately we still do not have information about flights, neither humanitarian nor commercial, to Peru. When we have information we will proceed to contact those persons that have registered. Regards.]

3.2. THE ACTIONS OF THE CONSULATES

The actions of the consulates have mostly been rather deficient, although it is true that, at the beginning of the border closure, they created an electronic format to register all those compatriots who had been stranded, but many were not aware of it.

[Redacted]
Sr Cónsul informenos sobre los vuelos humanitarios hacia PERÚ, yo me he inscrito varias veces y he ido también al consulado a informar mi caso, pero nada hasta ahora, me urge regresar a Perú ya llevo más de cuarenta días esperando y ya no tengo recursos y tengo un padre de 95 años que me espera pues yo vine solo por dos semanas, agradeceré sus gestiones para regresarnos a Lima pues somos muchos todavía en esta situación lamentable, gracias muchas gracias ...

9 meses Me gusta Responder Más

[image: Mr. Consul, inform us about humanitarian flights to PERU, I have registered many times and I have also been to the consulate to report my case, but nothing until now, I must return to Peru I have been waiting for more than forty days and I now have no resources and I have a 95-year-old father waiting for me because I only came for two weeks, I appreciate your efforts to return us to Lima because there are many of us still in this lamentable situation, thank you thank you very much...]

Photo taken from the Facebook page of the consulate in Paterson

Testimony 1... "The Consulate... At the beginning everything was very confusing and many of the interactions were even very rude, to the point I had to start my conversations with 'I am just asking, I am not arguing.' It was just so that I could establish a professional and correct way of communicating with many of these people."

Testimony 4... "I was stranded for three and a half months, during which the uncertainty of not knowing when [I would] return home pushed me to try to make my voice heard by all the necessary means, whether on social networks or by calling the Peruvian consulates in the USA."

The communication from our representatives abroad such as the consulates was quite poor. When we managed to receive a response to our calls or emails, they simply told us to be patient, that there were thousands of Peruvians in the same situation and that they would contact us when there was the possibility of humanitarian flights, as we can see in this email that I received in response to a message to the consulate in New Jersey:

From: Yvan Solari Calvo <YSolari@conpernj.org>

Submitted: Tuesday, April 21, 2020 14:49

[Redacted]

Subject: Re: Carmen Rosa Ccallomamani

Mrs Ccallomamani, there are still no scheduled flights. Have patience and accept this reality that affects us all equally. We will notify you when there is a flight to Peru....

attn.

Yvan Solari.

Instead of promoting humanitarian flights, more flights were organized by travel agencies, and these were costly. Nearly all of the flights left from Miami, which entailed another

expense, for compatriots in different states had to travel to Miami and there were very few flights from other airports. Some of these flights cost \$1,500 one way.

Testimony 3... "To return I had to register at the Consulate of Peru in New York and pay a New York-Lima ticket that cost me \$1,500".

3.3. THE MEDIA

The media at the time did a lot to publicize the many difficult realities faced by those who were stranded outside the country. For example, the newspaper *La República* published the testimonies of many Peruvians who were in situations of vulnerability.

Meanwhile, people also denounced on social networks how travel agencies were taking advantage of the vulnerability of our compatriots:



[image: Sirs at MINCETOUR and INDECI, why in most cases is a single travel agency organizing th charter flights? What is happening? Many of our compatriots are living in situations of great risk, waiting five months to return to the country. The cost of the charters is too expensive, many of them do not have a way to pay...

Es muy triste que muchos de nuestros compatriotas no consigan vuelos en el lugar donde se encuentran, se consiguen en otro estado y sería más desembolso que muchos ya no tienen, son los famosos vuelos chárter, que por cierto son montos elevados. Ojalá , les den la mano para su retorno.

Please hear the cries of our compatriots.]

[image: It is very sad that many of our compatriots cannot get flights in the places where they find themselves, they are in other states, and it would mean more costs for many who now have nothing, these are the famous charter flights that of course are high priced. I hope you lend a hand for their return.]

Some of us who were very active on social media posting messages of encouragement to our fellow Peruvians and denouncing the irregularities we saw were silenced because we could no longer post anything on Facebook, or the consulates blocked us. In one sense, we were glad that our messages had certainly reached the authorities or at least people close to them. On the other hand, we were sad that we could no longer make complaints and demand the right to return home.



Carmen Rosa Callo Mamani



2 de junio de 2020 a las 12:18 · 🌐

Me da mucha pena que se aprovechen de la desesperación de nuestros compatriotas que están esperando volver al país... El gobierno debería gestionar vuelos humanitarios o en todo caso subsidiar una parte del costo de retorno y la cuarentena.. pienso en las familias y me pregunto despues de casi tres meses de espera ya no tienen dinero ni para su alimentación y cómo podrían pagar los costos elevados de los pasajes? Como dice Rosa María Palacios.. no es un favor que están pidiendo.. es un derecho que se exige..



36

41 comentarios

[image: It pains me that people take advantage of the desperation of our compatriots that are waiting to return to the country... The Government should manage humanitarian flights or in any case subsidize part of the cost of returning and quarantine.. I think of the families and wonder if after almost three months of waiting they can no longer afford food and how would they pay the elevated costs of tickets? As Rosa Maria Palacios says.. it is not a favor that they are asking.. It is a right that is being demanded..]

3.4. RELIGIOUS CONGREGATIONS

I belong to a religious congregation called the Sisters of Mercy, and as someone stranded in the United States, I had some advantages compared to my friends and compatriots. I say this because I have my Sisters in the community whose homes I could easily go to for quarantine, but upon hearing so many stories of pain, nobody could remain indifferent to this reality, much less a Sister of Mercy.

That is why I spend many hours emotionally accompanying many of my compatriots and looking for ways to get some financial help or food to those who were already living in an extreme situation.

Sometimes one creates certain expectations about what it means to be part of an international congregation, and I say this because I mistakenly believed that the community would help me organize the mass return of my compatriots, as we can see in this humble message sent to our Sisters:

*Carmen rosas
ccallomamani Wed
6/05/2020 17:28*

Thank you for responding as soon as possible.

The CCASA team will meet tomorrow and hopefully we will be able to coordinate as soon as possible. I am not in the same situation as all my Peruvian brothers and sisters. As a religious [representative], I have the blessing and privilege of having a place to stay and feed myself. But I can't sit idly by, I feel so powerless and indignant about this situation... I very much hope we can do something not only for some but for all those who are stranded and want to return home.

Thank you once again

Of course, they listened to me very kindly, but I realized it was not as easy as I thought to help my compatriots. Community leaders took several days to respond to my request, because they--especially the leaders of the community of which I am a part--had to engage in dialog and reach an agreement, which was to recommend the matter to the Justice Team of the Institute. Finally, letters were sent to the consulates on behalf of the Justice Team of the Institute of the Sisters of Mercy:

From: Jean Stokan <jstokan@sistersofmercy.org>
Posted on: Friday, May 29, 2020 01:49 p.m.
To: Consulate <consulado@conpernj.org>; Yvan Solari Calvo <YSolari@conpernj.org>
Subject: To: Consul General

Dear Min. Counselor Yvan Rafael Solari Calvo, greetings. I write to you from the Catholic religious congregation known as the Sisters of Mercy of the Americas, with ministries in Peru, to express our concern and ask about Peruvians who are stranded in the United States, unable to return home.

First, we offer solidarity, as we know that Peru has been hit hard by COVID-19, as we are, especially in NJ, NY and Washington, DC, where our headquarters is located.

Do you have information about how many Peruvians are stranded here? We are concerned for those who may be vulnerable because of low incomes--especially the danger of becoming victims of human traffickers and more. We have heard some stories and are worried.

How is the Consulate responding to those in need? Is the Consulate providing basic assistance?

What is the status of humanitarian flights back to Peru? We understand that the cost of charter flights is excessive to which most cannot achieve for lack of economic means. Also, another concern is that many of these have to apply for a stay extension have to pay \$480.

Thank you for any information you can give us.

Here is the Consul's response to the letter from the Justice Team:

From: Yvan Solari Calvo <YSolari@conpernj.org>

Sent: Friday, May 29, 2020 2:24 PM

To: Jean Stokan <jstokan@sistersofmercy.org>

Cc: Diego Arbulu Perez <darbulu@conpernj.org>; William G.. Arevalo Medina

<garevalo@conpernj.org>; Alejandro J. Beoutis Candabana <abeoutis@conpernj.org>

Subject: RE: To: Consul General

Dear Mr Stokan. I thank you very much for the concern expressed in your message. You can be sure that we at the general consulates of Peru abroad, and in this case, in the United States, have it as a priority to strive to relieve the 4,000 Peruvians who are still against their will unable to return to our country.

So-called humanitarian flights, because they are free of charge, are becoming increasingly scarce. There have been some and the U.S. govt. has processed the overflight permission and landing in Peru of aircraft so that U.S. citizens can return to Peru, paying a rate that is not

cheap. It is on these flights that several thousand people have been sent to Peru, including people in situations of high vulnerability, with pre-existing and high-risk diseases. Of these people with varying degrees of vulnerability, there are still several hundred remaining.

Today, charter flights are being provided for a fee, and are cheaper when originating in Miami or Houston, more expensive if originating in New York or Los Angeles, but although they do have a cost, it is a good alternative and opportunity for those who want to return to Peru [.....] to have to stay until September or October. It is a cost/benefit issue for many people who need to return as soon as possible. With regard to the extension of stay for those whose visas have expired, the Embassy of Peru in Washington has been making efforts to have the corresponding authority agree to enable a mechanism that could be free of charge. In the meantime, such a service exists, but it has a cost.

Greetings,

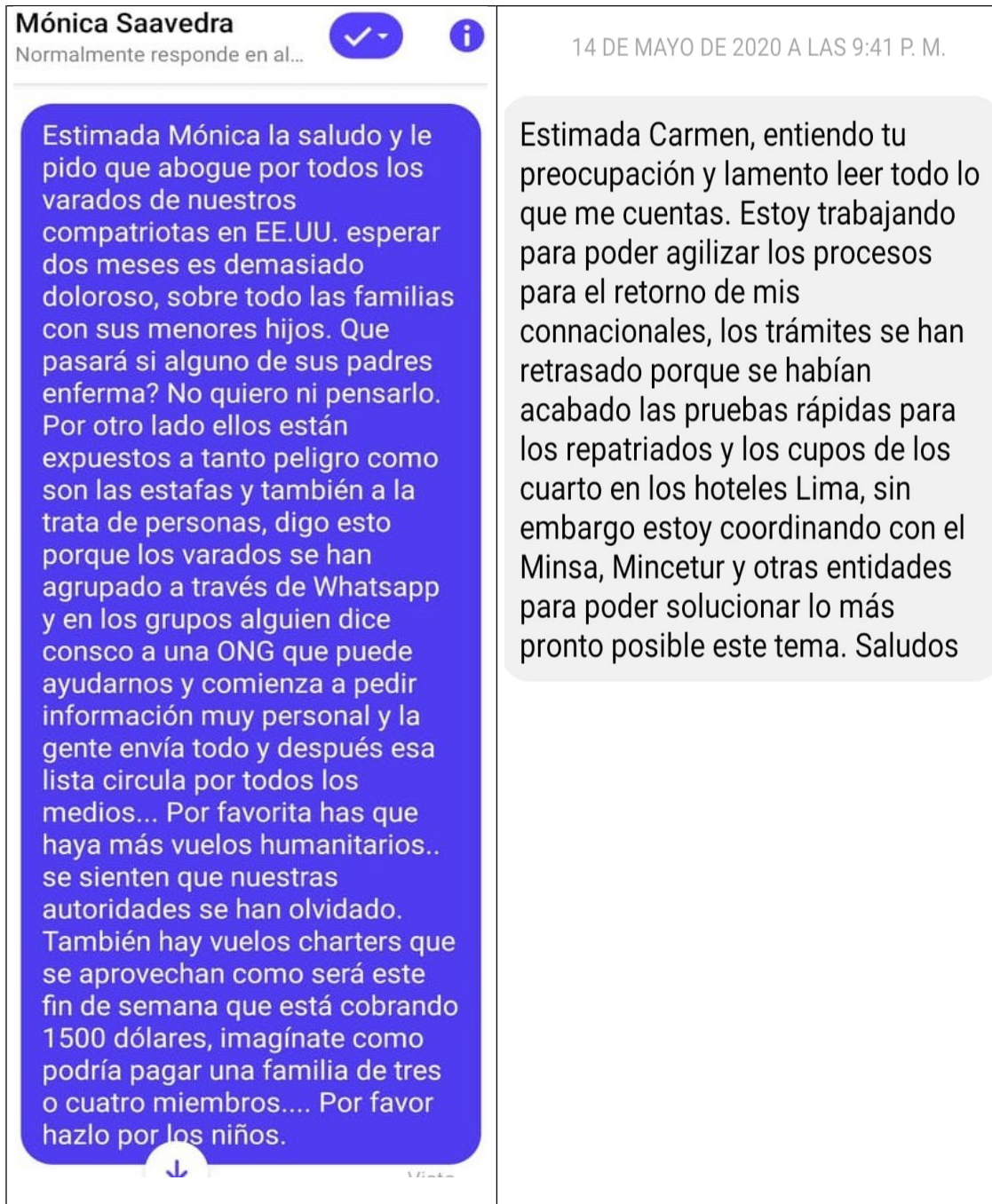
Yván R. Solari Calvo

Consul General of Peru in New Jersey and Pennsylvania

Meanwhile, the needs of those who were stranded continued to increase, and many posted messages on WhatsApp or Facebook. That they said they could no longer afford food or that they had been infected with COVID-19. On the other hand, a quote from our founder echoed in my heart: **“The poor need help today, not next week.”** I began to make contact with some of my compatriots that were going through very hard times. Their basic need was food, and so I called some Sisters who were friends and who thank God responded immediately. We sent support, and in some cases, Sisters went in person to the houses where my friends were staying to bring supplies. I very much remember an expression of thanks from a young woman who said, “I feel like it’s Christmas.”

When I returned to Peru, I continued to seek support for my friends who were still in the United States, so I contacted the secretary of the Conference of Religious Women of Peru, who again recommended that I talk to the Justice Commission. I sent an email to the father who is the coordinator of this commission, who very kindly answered me and promised to communicate with the Episcopal Commission for Social Action. Unfortunately, though, we had no answer.

As a member of the Kawsay Network, a network that aims to prevent human trafficking, I shared the situation of the stranded, and as they were in danger of falling into the hands of traffickers or extortioners. They gave me phone numbers and e-mails for Members of Congress and the ombudsman, so I began writing to them, sharing the harsh situations of those who were stranded in the United States.



[image: left side: Dear Monica, greetings, I ask you to advocate for all of our compatriots stranded in the U.S., waiting two months is too painful, especially [for] families with young children. What would happen if one of their parents gets sick? I don't even want to think about it. On the other hand, they are exposed to so many dangers like scams and also human trafficking, I say this because the stranded have formed groups on WhatsApp and in the groups, someone says I know an NGO that can help us and they begin to ask for very personal information and people send everything and then that list circulates in all the media... Please make there be more humanitarian flights.. they feel like our authorities have forgotten us. There are also charter flights that take advantage [of people] like the one this weekend that is charging 1,500 dollars, imagine how a family of three or four could pay for that... Please do it for the children.

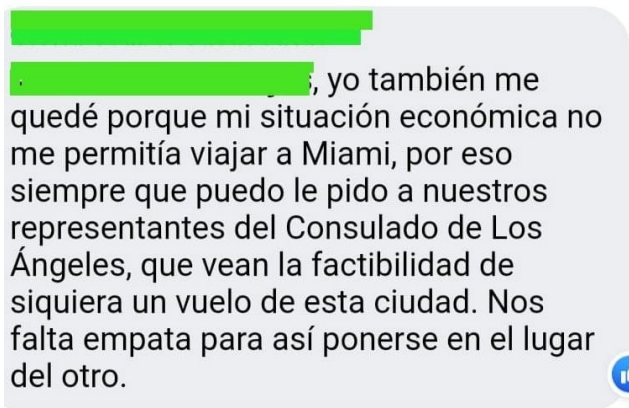
Right side: Dear Carmen, I understand your concern and I am saddened to read all that you are telling me. I am working to be able to streamline the processes for the return of my fellow citizens, the paperwork has been delayed because they ran out of rapid tests for those repatriated and spots in the hotel rooms in Lima, however, I am coordinating with Minsa, Mincetur and other entities to solve this issue as soon as possible. Greetings]

It can be said, then, that the actions of religious institutions were carried out at different levels: individual efforts to seek support in various places, actions at the institutional level, and finally actions by existing networks within religious communities.

CHAPTER IV: THE RETURN HOME AND QUARANTINE AT HOTELS

Finally, the voices and cries of some of us were heard and humanitarian flights were arranged, although we will never know what criteria the consulates used to decide who would go and who would not. They always stated that it would be the most vulnerable first, such as seniors, families with young children, or people in delicate health. However, I personally do not fit into any of these categories. While I was happy to return to my country on the one hand, on the other, I felt some guilt because I wondered if I were occupying the seat of someone who needed it more than me.

To catch the flight that brought us home, we had to travel to Miami, because most of the flights left from there. We arrived in Miami from different states--of course, those who were able to pay for a domestic flight did so; many of my friends and compatriots rejected this flight as they were with their families and they simply could not afford to buy plane tickets from California or other states. They waited weeks and months, requesting any humanitarian flight departing from the west or from New York. For many compatriots, waiting for humanitarian flights became a true ordeal. Here is a testimony:



[redacted], yo también me quedé porque mi situación económica no me permitía viajar a Miami, por eso siempre que puedo le pido a nuestros representantes del Consulado de Los Ángeles, que vean la factibilidad de siquiera un vuelo de esta ciudad. Nos falta empatía para así ponerse en el lugar del otro.

7 meses [Me gusta](#) [Responder](#) [Más](#)

[image: I also stayed because my financial situation did not allow me to travel to Miami, that is why whenever I can I ask our representatives at the Consulate in Los Angeles to look into the feasibility of at least one flight from this city. We lack empat[hy] to put ourselves in another's shoes]

On the other hand, some travel agencies organized charter flights, flights authorized to land in the country but that were not humanitarian, since passengers had to pay for the cost of the trip as well as the 14 days of quarantine in a hotel chosen by the travel agency. These trips back home cost \$1,500 to \$1,800. The flights could only take those who were

able to pay or took out loans because they had an urgent need to return to the country.

← Peruanos varados en EEUU

Carmen Rosa Callo Mamani ▶ Peruanos varados en EEUU ...
25 de julio de 2020 a las 13:31 · 🌐

Buenas tardes a todos... En esta oportunidad quisiera dirigirme a la Agencia de Viajes INTEJ puesto que hemos visto durante estos meses es casi la única agencia que viene organizando los vuelos charters. Y quisiera pedir si podrían hacer una rebaja del costo de los vuelos... Pues como comprenderán hay muchísimos compatriotas que ya no tienen recursos económicos. Sabemos que poquísimos consulados han apoyado a los varados... ojala puedan ponerse en el lugar de nuestros compatriotas... La verdad no se que más podemos hacer para ayudar a nuestros compatriotas... 🙏🙏🙏❤️

Me gusta Comentar Compartir

y 32 personas más

1 vez compartido

No creo que ayuden...o si ayudan sera a sus familiares o a sus argollas...ese es su negocio ahorita...pues cuando abran la frontera ya nadie viajara ahi 6

7 meses Me entristece Responder Más

Solicitamos que abran ya las fronteras **Ministerio de Transportes y Comunicaciones del Perú** 2

7 meses Me gusta Responder Más

[image: Good afternoon, everyone... On this occasion I would like to address INTEJ Travel Agency, since we have seen in recent months that it is practically the only agency that has been organizing charter flights... As they may not understand, there are many compatriots that do not yet have financial resources. We know that very few consulates have supported those who are stranded... I hope they can put themselves in the shoes of our compatriots... I really don't know what else we can do to help our compatriots...]

Testimony 3... "To return, I had to register at the Consulate of Peru in New York and pay a New York-Lima ticket that cost me \$1,500".

Because of lack of financial resources, many families remained stranded for months, exposed to various dangers, as mentioned in the previous chapters.

4.1. SHARING A ROOM WITH A STRANGER

At the airport, there were buses waiting to transfer us to different hotels in Lima, and upon arriving at the hotels, we learned that we would share rooms in groups of two or three. In some cases, if family members had to share a bed, and this was not just for married couples; if you were travelling with a family member, they asked you to share the bed.

In my case, I met one of my WhatsApp friends and when we found out we had to share rooms, we decided to share one together, and the hotel wanted us to share a bed. We had to threaten to file a complaint against them or call the media, and only then did they give us a room with two beds. We arrived at that room on May 12th and did not leave it until May 23rd. Luckily, we had a room with windows facing the street, so at least we could amuse ourselves by looking at the street.

There were many very painful stories during the quarantines. We heard that the father of one woman who was in quarantine had died and she wanted to go be with her mother, but they did not let her leave because she had to complete the 14 days. My roommate found out that her father had COVID-19 and was doing very poorly, and her mother was very fragile. The only one who could take care of her father was her sister, who was eight months pregnant. There were just two days left of quarantine, but when she asked if she could leave the hotel to be with her father, they said she had to stay.

No sé en qué hotel estabas pero en el que yo estaba, me daban un pan de yema y un minivaso de quaker de desayuno. Yo quise irme a terminar mi cuarentena en mi casa al saber que si negativo en la prueba (además para ir al funeral de mi padre) y no quisieron. Tanto dinero que se puede ahorrar y los hoteles están aprovechándose de toda la coyuntura. Al final, el dinero que el Estado invierte sale de nosotros mismos. No nos están regalando nada pero se puede manejar mejor los costos y las prioridades como aquellos que realmente necesitan.




2

8 meses Me gusta Responder Más

Mincetur Perú Sería importante responder estos post. Por ser de justicia. **Ministerio de Relaciones Exteriores del Perú.**

8 meses Me gusta Responder Más

Carmen Rosa Callo Mamani

Así es  **Jenny Zuniga Mourão**. Si se cumpliera lo que dice Ministerio de Relaciones exteriores. Ya no tendríamos tantos compatriotas clamando por retornar al País... No entiendo porque siguen insistiendo con hacer la cuarentena en un hotel.



1

8 meses Me gusta Responder Más

Carmen Rosa Callo Mamani es por quienes cobran esta estadía. Uds. Deben averiguar todo antes por favor y detallar responsabilidades. Estas denuncias sin de trato inhumanos.

[image: I don't know what hotel you were at, but in the one I was at, they gave me an egg bread and a mini container of Quaker [oats] for breakfast. I wanted to go and finish my quarantine at my house after finding out that my test was negative (as well as to go to my father's funeral) and they did not want to let me. So much money could have been saved and the hotels were taking advantage of the whole situation. In the end, the money that the State spends comes from us. They are not giving us anything for free, but the costs and priorities could be managed better like [for] those who really need it]

As a result of so many complaints, the number of days of quarantine have decreased. In addition, this favored more frequent humanitarian or charter flights because there were more hotel rooms available in which to quarantine.

4.2. THE RAPID TEST

On the tenth day of quarantine, health workers came to do the rapid test. In the meantime, we lived with the uncertainty that a roommate might be infected and asymptomatic. These were days of great tension. There were situations in which people did become infected, so the complaints continued on social networks, and thank God they were heard. That is why in later quarantines, the rapid tests were done on the second day at the hotel, and if the result was negative, then you could go home.

4.3. FRIENDSHIPS EMERGE AND COMMUNITIES OF SUPPORT ARE CREATED

All of these difficult and painful experiences have also brought us many pleasant moments, especially because very close friendships emerged. Although we do not know one another personally, our communication is constant, and the desire to one day meet in person and celebrate life keeps us very united.

On the other hand, different support groups also emerged:

- ✓ Those who sent messages and letters to our authorities or the media to make public everything those of us who were stranded or quarantined were experiencing.
- ✓ Those who sought out humanitarian aid organizations or groups, especially seeking food for those who were nearly unable to feed themselves.
- ✓ Those who shared information on how to request an extension of stay in the country so that we did not become undocumented.
- ✓ Those who helped people figure out where they could buy medicines.
- ✓ Those who announced possible humanitarian flights or charters.

All of us who experienced this unique time in our lives will always feel like family, and one day we will have the opportunity to meet in person and thank one another for the words of encouragement and hope, for that flame that said do not lose faith, we will soon be in our homeland. Once again recognizing our nature as community-minded beings, we need each other to continue on our path.

CONCLUSIONS

When I look at this whole experience I went through alongside thousands of Peruvian women and men stranded in the United States, I wonder: What would have been the correct response by the central government and local authorities such as the various consulates in the United States? From this reading, I offer the following conclusions.

1. The Peruvian State, faced with a completely unprecedented situation that was also dangerous for the health of the population, took extreme measures such as closing the borders, however, there was a lack of broader analysis of what all this would entail and whether the 15 days were sufficient to control the pandemic and thus open up the borders.
2. The actions of the consulates were largely quite deficient, and there was a notable lack of empathy with the stranded, lack of communication, and inappropriate use of the consular websites and social networks like Facebook, because there was no up-to-date information on humanitarian flights or charters. Most of the time, we remained informed from the networks where we formed groups for ourselves.
3. The media played a very important role, most of the time in a positive way, sharing the voices of those who were demanding a return home, as well as the irregularities that were occurring in the various hotels and the emotional impacts on those who had hoped to return to the country and now felt that they were in jail or treated like a leper because they could not see anyone or leave their room for 14 days.
4. Social networks during the time of the pandemic have been spaces allied with the stranded in the sense that, through them, we were able to communicate, support one another and organize to sustain ourselves emotionally, provide support at different levels and make our voices heard.
5. Religious congregations in one sense also failed to inform us and to be more supportive and empathetic with the stranded, and to respond in an organized and correct way. It is not that there was no solidarity, but such gestures were more individual, and not part of a community response, at least in the first few months. On the other hand, the Justice Commissions and Red Kawsay (a network of

religious people dedicated to preventing TDP) were in direct communication with the consulates, Members of Congress, Ministry of Foreign Relations and Ombudsman's Office, requesting immediate attention to the situation of the stranded. On the other hand, within religious spaces, bureaucracies still exist that do not allow for an immediate response to emergency situations.

- 6 Finally, I recognize that empathy, unity and organization made the stranded feel sustained throughout this difficult time.

SUGGESTIONS

In times like this, the Peruvian government should not rush to make extreme decisions such as closing borders and leaving so many compatriots outside the country. The best thing would be to give a few days warning, indicating that borders will soon be closed to prevent the spread of the virus, so that people are able to make their own decisions about whether to return immediately or stay put.

Civil society organizations should implement protocols to respond to emergency situations, addressing issues such as humanitarian aid, ensuring that people's rights are not violated, preventing possible human trafficking, etc.

Public and private institutions without exception must keep their institutional web pages up to date so that the population has accurate information that allows them to carry out the necessary procedures.

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