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# Venezuelans Throng Grocery Stores Under Military Protection

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Shoppers thronged grocery stores across Caracas today as deepening shortages led the government to put Venezuela's food distribution under military protection.

Long lines, some stretching for blocks, formed outside grocery stores in the South American country's capital as residents search for scarce basic items such as detergent and chicken.

"I've visited six stores already today looking for detergent -- I can't find it anywhere," said Lisbeth Elsa, a 27-year-old janitor, waiting in line outside a supermarket in eastern Caracas. "We're wearing our dirty clothes again because we can't find it. At this point I'll buy whatever I can find."

A dearth of foreign currency exacerbated by collapsing oil prices has led to shortages of imports from toilet paper to car batteries, and helped push annual inflation to 64 percent in November. The lines will persist as long as price controls remain in place, Luis Vicente Leon, director of Caracas-based polling

firm Datanalisis, said today in a telephone interview.

Government officials met with representatives from supermarket chains today to guarantee supplies, state news agency AVN reported. Interior Minister Carmen Melendez said yesterday that security forces would be sent to food stores and distribution centers to protect shoppers.

### **'Into Desperation'**

"Don't fall into desperation -- we have the capacity and products for everyone, with calmness and patience. The stores are full," she said on state television.

President Nicolas Maduro last week vowed to implement an economic "counter-offensive" to steer the country out of recession, including an overhaul of the foreign exchange system. He has yet to provide details. While the main government-controlled exchange sets a rate of 6.3 bolivars per U.S. dollar, the black market rate is as much as 187 per dollar.

Inside a Plan Suarez grocery store yesterday in eastern Caracas, shelves were mostly bare. Customers struggled and fought for items at times, with many trying to skip lines. The most sought-after products included detergent, with customers waiting in line for two to three hours to buy a maximum of two bags. A security guard asked that photos of empty shelves not be taken.

Police inside a Luvebras supermarket in eastern Caracas intervened to help staff distribute toilet paper and other products.

### **'Looming Fear'**

"You can't find anything, I've spent 15 days looking for diapers," Jean Paul Mate, a meat vendor, said outside the Luvebras store. "You have to take off work to look for products. I go to at least five stores a day."

Venezuelan online news outlet VIVOplay posted a video of government food security regulator Carlos Osorio being interrupted by throngs of shoppers searching for products as he broadcast on state television from a Bicentenario government-run supermarket in central Caracas.

"What we're seeing is worse than usual, it's not only a seasonal problem," Datanalisis's Leon said. "Companies are not sure how they will restock their inventories or find merchandise, with a looming fear of a devaluation."

The price for Venezuela's oil, which accounts for more than 95 percent of the country's exports, has plunged by more than half from last year's peak in June to \$47 a barrel this month.

"This is the worst it has ever been -- I've seen lines thousands of

people long," Greisly Jarpe, a 42-year-old data analyst, said as she waited for dish soap in eastern Caracas. "People are so desperate they're sleeping in the lines."

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