

# BACKSTORY: CARACAS'S RETAIL DETAIL - ALL UNDER ONE SEA OF TARPS

Get your haircut and firecrackers here where middle-class shops have morphed into a hawker's free-for all.

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**NO LONGER ON THE RUN:** Nearly half of the Venezuelan workforce is employed in informal street peddling. A woman selling plastic shopping bags, unlicensed, might well have been cited by authorities in another era.

**CARACAS, VENEZUELA** – It's possible here to get a haircut, repair the soles your shoes, or buy a custom birthday cake without ever stepping foot in a store. Street vendors, called *buhoneros* have become permanent fixtures across the sidewalks of Venezuela's capital, feeding an informal economy that, government statistics suggest, employs nearly half of the workforce.

The stalls - tarps and folding tables - have brought opportunity to thousands who might otherwise be jobless. They've also altered the city. In downtown Caracas, the La Hoyada market has turned a grand avenue of specialty shops into a cacophony of hawkers.

Liliana Acosta set up "shop" three months ago with a fringe of cellphones dangling from her stall - enticing passersby with 15-cent-per-minute mobile to mobile calls. Her wares also include skin cream and firecrackers. "What else would I do?" she says, writing up a customer's tab on the palm of her hand.

Shopkeepers, who pay taxes and utilities, are angered by *buhoneros* who don't and who effectively pull a curtain of tents in front of their stores and siphon off business. Francisco Mattheus, a longtime La Hoyada convenience-store owner, blames it on an economy that, while flush with oil wealth, has only enough jobs for the elite. "It used to be a paradise here," he says. "Now it's just the opposite."

A recent study by the think tank Cedice found that on 358 of 531 commercial blocks in Caracas, more informal businesses exist than formal ones. While the country's official unemployment rate is 10 percent, Carlos Granier, a Cedice economist, says that estimate includes people who only work five hours a week and can't support themselves. Some criticize President Hugo Chávez's government for turning a blind eye to *buhoneros* while failing to address the roots of poverty.

But for Maria Solanos, who has sold pajamas for seven years at La Hoyada, barring *buhoneros* would be the real economic blunder: "If they get rid of us, we have nothing to eat, and no one wants that."



SHAVING PRICES: Caracas's informal street sellers - *buhoneros* - don't just provide the standard market trinket. At Catia, a large informal market in one of the most dangerous parts of town, cheap haircuts (left) and Chinese sneakers (right) are for sale.