

Venezuela: Pervasive poverty compounds human disaster from floods and mudslides

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Tens of thousands of people are feared dead from the torrential rains, flash floods and mudslides that have devastated Venezuela's Caribbean coast over the past week, government officials said Monday. In one of the worst disasters to hit South America this century, entire towns have been buried beneath tons of rubble and earth, and the total number of victims may never be known.

Air Force physician Augustin Martinez, who was working at Venezuela's main airport outside the capital as part of a military rescue operation, said armed forces officials have estimated that as many as 30,000 people may have died. This would make it the country's worst ever natural disaster, and surpass the estimated 10,000 people killed in Central America by Hurricane Mitch in 1998. The mayor of La Guaira told the country's leading newspaper that 25,000 could be dead in the port city alone.

An estimated 150,000 to 200,000 people were made homeless by the floods that affected Venezuela's entire northern coast, stretching from the tourist resort of Margarita Island to the western Zulia state bordering Colombia. The government has collected more than 1,000 bodies and thousands more are missing. The hardest hit region was Vargas, just north of the capital Caracas, where unseasonal heavy rains have lasted for 10 days.

Many of the victims were poor people who built makeshift homes of tin, wood and cinderblock at the foot of Mt. Avila. With a staggering 80 percent of the population living below the poverty level, millions of Venezuelans from the countryside settle near urban centers in shantytowns constructed on mudslide-prone hillsides and ravines.

The steady rains turned the normally calm mountain streams on the El Avila range into raging torrents. By

the time the churning rivers reached the slums on the lower mountain flanks, they had turned into a tidal wave of mud. The mud, trees and other debris poured down these slopes, stripped by local residents of natural vegetation that prevents erosion, and took houses, people and animals along with them. In some lower-lying areas, slums that had grown up along the banks of rivers and streams for easy access to water were obliterated when waterways burst their banks.

Vargas, an industrial and tourist state with a population of 350,000, was buried under yards of mud, boulders and rubble. According to one army spokesman, the death toll is likely to be 1,000 in the coastal state alone. Authorities said Vargas would have to be evacuated and razed to the ground.

In the plush resort of Caraballeda, one of the worst-hit places in Vargas, eyewitnesses as recently as Saturday spoke of corpses still uncollected and sticking out from the hardening mud. On a golf course, 10,000 survivors are waiting to be evacuated. Eighteen doctors attending them have been working for five days without a break, and the grim task of dealing with large numbers of rapidly decomposing bodies is now threatening to overwhelm the authorities.

Shantytowns in and around the capital city of Caracas were also devastated. In the overflowing southern cemetery in Caracas soldiers were helping dig a mass grave yesterday with capacity for 1,500. So far 85 bodies, in an advanced state of decay, have been buried there, but no one knows how many more to expect. The cemetery's gates were covered with photos of the dead so that relatives might identify them.

Most towns along the coast were virtually deserted Monday, evacuated to reduce the growing epidemic risk caused by blocked drains, lack of running water and rotting corpses.

One victim, Marta Iriarte de Salvatierra, 46, said her family's shack was swept away by an avalanche of water, mud and boulders. She said they grabbed what belongings they could and fled to the nearest structure still standing—a luxury apartment building near the beach. The family spent two nights in one apartment, amazed by its opulence, and ate the food in the refrigerator. They were rescued on Sunday and were waiting to be bused to an inland city.

President Hugo Chavez, a former army paratrooper, said late on Sunday he would order home thousands of troops to free up space in military barracks for the homeless. He also called on wealthy Venezuelans to “adopt a family for Christmas.” At the same time, the President, who won election last year by making a demagogic appeal to the country's poor, imposed a dawn to dusk curfew and dispatched members of his heavily armed paratroopers' unit to control widespread looting along the coast.

The Government warned on Sunday that it would take “the necessary measures” to restore public order. Chavez also suggested that the disaster could be an opportunity to move people from the crowded shantytowns in the capital region into the interior of the country.

International aid is being sent to Venezuela. Cuba sent eight tons of medical supplies and other equipment, along with 200 medical personnel. Mexico contributed two Boeing 727s and two Hercules transport planes along with 220 soldiers and disaster relief experts. The US, which receives most of Venezuela's exported oil, sent only token aid, including some airplanes and helicopters. This is particularly insulting given that the US is providing millions of dollars in military aid for counter-insurgency operations in neighboring Colombia.

The devastating floods and mudslides are the latest blow to Venezuela, which is suffering from the worst recession in recent history. Economists estimate that about \$3.6 billion has left the country since Chavez was elected. The country's nearly \$30 billion debt is the fourth largest in Latin America, consuming fully 40 percent of the national budget.

Over the past year nearly 600,000 jobs have been lost, pushing the official unemployment rate to 15 percent and forcing increasing numbers of people to seek jobs in the underground economy, which now employs

about half of the nation's work force.



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