

Thousands feared dead in Venezuela after strongest earthquake in 125 years

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Just after 6 p.m. on Wednesday evening, the Venezuelan northern coast was struck by two massive earthquakes, a 7.2-magnitude foreshock followed 39 seconds later by a 7.5-magnitude mainshock.

Across the capital Caracas, and Trujillo, Carabobo, Aragua and La Guaira, dozens of buildings—with their inhabitants still inside—were reduced to rubble.

The confirmed death toll has risen to 188 people, with 1,520 others injured, according to the latest numbers provided by Acting President Delcy Rodríguez.

The US Geological Survey immediately issued its most severe alert of “high casualties and extensive damage,” indicating a high likelihood of casualties in the thousands or even tens of thousands.

Civil society organizations compiling lists of the missing in La Guaira alone had already registered several hundred names, and a website linked to right-wing opposition parties had gathered over 37,600 missing person reports.

Seismologists have described the magnitude as the result of a century of accumulated energy, with the USGS concluding that it was the strongest quake since 1900.

But the scale and deadliness of the catastrophe have been shaped not by the seismic waves alone, but also by decades of imperialist sanctions, military aggression, corrupt capitalist rule under Chavismo and now the open recolonization of the country by Washington.

Hours after the tremors, wide swaths of Caracas and surrounding areas remained without electricity.

Rodríguez addressed the nation hours after the quakes, declaring a state of emergency, suspending schools and public transportation, and confirming that Simón Bolívar International Airport located on the outskirts of Caracas was closed due to “serious damage.”

A veteran structural engineer, Kenneth O’Dell, told CNN that older buildings constructed before the early 1970s, under prior and weaker building codes, were particularly vulnerable to collapse. The USGS noted that many structures in the region are built of reinforced brick masonry and adobe blocks—materials with well-documented susceptibility to seismic destruction.

A Venezuelan official told the Colombian network Caracol

that the hardest hit city was La Guaira, where dozens of buildings collapsed, including many structures erected after the 1999 Vargas tragedy.

The Vargas mudslides and flash floods of December 1999 killed tens of thousands along the same northern coastal corridor that bore the brunt of Wednesday’s destruction. That disaster obliterated what is today the state of La Guaira, destroying over 8,000 homes and 700 apartment buildings.

In the 26 years since, La Guaira was rebuilt but, as Wednesday night has now revealed, without the seismic resilience that the location and the science demanded.

There was no lack of prior warning either, but it went unheeded by those in positions of power. A Penn State-led study found that the Caribbean–South American plate boundary was “primed” for a powerful earthquake and that locked faults along the Boconó–Morón–El Pilar Fault System could generate an event of up to magnitude 8, with catastrophic consequences for Caracas and surrounding urban areas.

Argentine geologist Andrés Folguera explained to A24 that earthquake science is only recently approaching the ability to predict when an earthquake will occur but right now, “the only thing we can know is where it will occur, so what’s missing here are earthquake-resistant buildings that are appropriate for the seismic hazard level of the area.”

As the WSWWS wrote in analyzing the 2023 Turkey–Syria earthquakes, the response to and impact of such events is always socially determined. “The common denominator,” David North stated at the time, “is always the subordination of life to profit.” The deaths in Venezuela Wednesday night did not have to happen.

Search and rescue teams from across the continent are traveling to Caracas, while numerous aid collection efforts have already been set up internationally. Reports from Caracas, however, point to the woefully inadequate character of rescue operations, with what few emergency responders deployed going house to house asking residents to volunteer shovels and basic tools to dig out survivors from the rubble. Heavy equipment needed to accomplish this task is nowhere to be seen.

US imperialism bears direct responsibility

The earthquake has exposed the decrepit state of the country's broader social scaffolding—especially the housing, healthcare and public infrastructure—that has been systematically strangled by over a decade of US economic and political sabotage.

Washington's sanctions regime against Venezuela—sustained across multiple administrations—has been explicitly designed" to subjugate Venezuelans through hunger, illness and mass suffering. As far back as 2021, UN Special Rapporteur Alena Douhan found that US sanctions had "exacerbated pre-existing crises" and blocked the importation of "machinery, spare parts, medicine, food, agricultural supplies and other essential goods."

As a result, the capacity to treat thousands of injured victims is virtually nonexistent.

For years, these sanctions prevented Venezuela from importing construction materials capable of upgrading the housing stock, medical equipment to treat mass-casualty events, water treatment chemicals, and components to maintain the electrical grid. When the earthquakes struck Wednesday evening, the hospitals were already crippled, the infrastructure already degraded, the population already weakened by years of deliberately imposed deprivation.

Now Trump has announced on social media: "The two major earthquakes that just hit the great people of Venezuela are both massive in scale and have left a devastating number of deaths. The U.S.A. stands ready, willing, and able to help!" Washington announced it would send search-and-rescue teams, medical and humanitarian supplies, and other resources.

This is the same Trump administration that on January 3, 2026 dispatched US special forces to abduct President Nicolás Maduro in what constituted an unprovoked war of aggression launched in flagrant violation of international law. Trump himself boasted of the operation as a "snatch and grab" and declared that Venezuela would be "run" by his cabinet officials.

Just as Washington used the 2010 earthquake that devastated Haiti as the pretext for sending in some 20,000 US troops, so the current disaster will undoubtedly be seized upon to facilitate the deployment of occupation forces to Venezuela to better control the country.

In the six months since the invasion, Venezuela has been turned into a semi-colony, wholly subordinate to the imperialist strategy of US imperialism, and which has surrendered control over the extraction and commercialization of the world's largest proven oil reserves to Washington and its corporate partners.

In recent weeks, US and Venezuelan military forces have conducted joint operations in the mineral-rich interior of the country, targeting informal gold mining operations in the

Orinoco Mining Arc to clear the way for transnational mining corporations seeking uncontested access to Venezuela's vast deposits. These operations, which culminated in the extrajudicial killing of Héctor Guerrero Flores, known as "Niño Guerrero," the alleged leader of the Tren de Aragua cartel, reveal with brutal clarity the actual priorities of both governments.

This is the context in which Acting President Rodríguez—who had secretly assured US and Qatari officials in advance that Venezuela's ruling circles would welcome Maduro's removal—now declares a state of emergency, which will serve to intimidate or repress social anger and to further the interests of her imperialist overlords.

The criminal neglect of Venezuela's housing stock also falls at the feet of the Chavista governments of Hugo Chávez, Nicolás Maduro and now Delcy Rodríguez, that have held power since 1998.

For nearly three decades, they presided over one of the world's largest oil-export revenues and proclaimed themselves the vanguard of a "Bolivarian Revolution" and "Socialism of the 21st Century." Yet the mid-20th century concrete-and-adobe apartment blocks that pancaked Wednesday night in Los Palos Grandes and La Guaira stand as a monument to their legacy.

A genuinely socialist government committed to placing human life and safety above profit considerations would have used those decades of petroleum wealth to systematically retrofit, rebuild, and bring the country's housing, healthcare and public infrastructure into compliance with modern seismic codes.

When oil prices collapsed and US imperialism escalated its sanctions, having failed to develop the country, the Chavistas imposed the crisis on the backs of the working class.

The pseudo-left organizations—the Pabloites, the Morenoites, and the academic defenders of "Bolivarianism" across Latin America and beyond—bear a heavy share of responsibility for this debacle. For two decades, they channeled working-class opposition into illusions in bourgeois nationalism, promoting *Chavismo* as a progressive alternative and blocking workers from an independent and internationalist socialist program.



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