

The earthquake disaster in Venezuela: A crime of US imperialism

Andrea Lobo
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The double earthquakes that struck Venezuela on June 24 have exposed a massive crime by US imperialism. Six months ago the United States invaded the country, abducted its president, Nicolás Maduro, and reduced his government to a puppet of Washington to seize its oil. Having occupied Venezuela and declared itself the power 'directing policies' there, Washington bears direct responsibility for the catastrophe—and for the criminal refusal to answer it.

The invasion, the removal of Maduro and the chaos and disorganization it has thrown the country into are a major factor in the catastrophic response to the earthquake. They followed years of economic sabotage that had already crippled the country's hospitals, power grid and ability to import the most basic supplies.

The Trump administration has exploited the disaster to deepen its control over Venezuela, sending warships, transport planes and troops to take over the airport while families dig through concrete with their bare hands.

By Sunday the confirmed death toll had risen to 1,430, and the United Nations' humanitarian office cited unconfirmed reports that up to 50,000 people may be missing. An analysis of satellite images published by *El País* found that the destruction follows precisely the line of the San Sebastián fault—from Catia La Mar through La Guaira and the international airport to Caraballeda—a densely populated coastal corridor. Decades of warnings about catastrophic seismic hazard and the need to rebuild or reinforce buildings according to modern engineering standards went entirely unheeded.

Four days after the earthquake, families are still digging through reinforced concrete with machetes, crowbars, hydraulic car jacks and bare hands. Rescuers report hearing children crying beneath the rubble until the sounds stop, amid the unbearable smell of corpses.

Child survivors arrive at hospitals alone, identified only by adhesive tape with their names on their wrists, while hospitals and morgues overflow with victims.

"No machinery has arrived, nothing," one Catia La Mar resident said Friday. "We are without power, without water. The apartment blocks have begged to be evacuated because the damage is so severe." A woman who lost everything in Caracas told reporters: "Nobody has come to tell us anything about shelter. Here, everything is up to the neighbors."

The thousands who have died are victims not merely of a natural catastrophe. The decrepit state of Venezuela's housing stock, the collapse of its healthcare system, the degradation of its electrical grid, and the incapacity of the state to organize any meaningful emergency response are the product of the semi-colonial oppression of Venezuela by US imperialism since the Venezuela Crisis of 1902-1903.

In that crisis, a fleet of German, British and Italian warships

bombarded Venezuelan ports over unpaid debts. President Theodore Roosevelt intervened not to defend Venezuelan sovereignty but to assert that if any Latin American nation required "disciplining," the United States would do it. The conflict gave rise to the Roosevelt Corollary to the Monroe Doctrine, arrogating to Washington the exclusive right to exercise "international police power" in the Western Hemisphere.

Washington swiftly applied this doctrine in Venezuela, engineering a regime-change operation in 1908 that installed the dictator Juan Vicente Gómez, who ruled until 1935 through torture, chain gangs and mass executions while handing vast oil concessions to the Rockefellers' Standard Oil and other US corporations, transforming Venezuela into the world's largest oil exporter.

Washington subsequently backed yet another brutal dictatorship under Marcos Pérez Jiménez, whose secret police imposed a reign of terror through assassinations, disappearances and concentration camps. For services rendered in suppressing the masses, President Eisenhower bestowed upon Pérez Jiménez the Legion of Merit.

The nationalization of the oil industry in 1976 changed nothing fundamental. The same structures, the same US corporate subsidiaries, and the same single-commodity dependency remained. When oil prices collapsed in the late 1980s, President Carlos Andrés Pérez imposed IMF-dictated shock therapy, triggering the *Caracazo* uprising, met by martial law and the summary execution of protesters in the streets.

The election of Hugo Chávez in 1998 provoked mounting hostility from Washington, culminating in a US-backed coup in April 2002 that briefly deposed him before mass protests forced his reinstatement. Following Chávez's death and Nicolás Maduro's succession, the Obama administration declared Venezuela a "national security threat" and imposed punishing sanctions.

The US economic war escalated relentlessly under the first Trump administration and was maintained by Biden, deliberately strangling Venezuela's capacity to import machinery, spare parts, medicines, food and construction materials. UN Special Rapporteurs concluded that the sanctions regime produced mass suffering and contributed to over 100,000 excess deaths.

All of this culminated in the events of January 3, 2026, when the Trump administration dispatched special forces to abduct President Maduro in what amounted to an unprovoked war of aggression to gain control over oil and key minerals.

In the six months since, Venezuela has been transformed into a semi-colonial protectorate under the so-called "Trump corollary" to the Monroe Doctrine. Laws rammed through the Chavista-led National Assembly have surrendered the world's largest proven oil reserves

and major gold deposits to Washington and its corporate partners. Treasury Secretary Scott Bessent stated publicly: “The United States is directing policies in Venezuela at the moment.”

The collapse of dozens of buildings on June 24 and the wholly inadequate emergency response can only be explained by this century of semi-colonial oppression.

While selfless rescue teams from the US and other countries will save lives, Washington has primarily sent a military invading force. Two US warships—the USS Fort Lauderdale and the USS Billings—are deployed in Venezuelan waters. Five C-17 Globemaster transport aircraft are ferrying a Contingency Response Element to take over management of Simón Bolívar International Airport from Venezuelan aviation authorities. MV-22 Ospreys, UH-1Y Super Huey helicopters, and Army CH-47 Chinooks pre-staged on Curaçao complete the picture.

This military footprint is entirely consistent with the operations that Washington and the government headed by the US puppet, Acting President Delcy Rodríguez, have already been conducting jointly in Venezuela’s interior. US and Venezuelan forces have bombed and swept through the gold and coltan mining zones of the Orinoco Arc to clear informal miners and secure control by the mining transnationals—operations that included the extrajudicial killing of Héctor Guerrero Flores, the alleged Tren de Aragua leader.

Late Thursday, Maj. Gen. Kevin J. Jarrard of the US Marine Corps arrived in Caracas to direct SOUTHCOM’s operations and become the de facto colonial administrator. Rodríguez, in turn, appointed Maj. Gen. Juan Ernesto Sulbarán Quintero of the Bolivarian National Guard as Sole Authority for the Emergency. The disaster zone covering the Caracas metropolitan and surrounding areas is under military command, six months after a US invasion.

The parallel with the Haiti earthquake in 2010 is chilling. Then, Washington exploited a catastrophic earthquake to deploy 20,000 troops, seize control of the Port-au-Prince airport, and impose direct military administration over a country it had dominated for a century. Relief planes from Médecins Sans Frontières carrying desperately needed medical equipment were turned away from the US-controlled airport while patients died. The mission was not rescue. It was occupation.

The political analyst Ricardo Rios of the Caracas consultancy firm Poder & Estrategia stated what bourgeois commentators rarely acknowledge so plainly: the earthquake “is going to be very well exploited to increase the presence of the United States and its control over Venezuela. And also, for Rodríguez to lean on the United States as her primary ally.”

Trump himself provided the most revealing statement of colonial arrogance. In a speech following the earthquake, the would-be US Führer declared: “Venezuela has been fantastic, we have a great relationship. It was a one-day war, we hit them so hard, and now we’ve taken out millions of barrels of oil and we’ve paid for the war many times over... it is a happy country again. The people are happy. They are dancing in the streets.”

Prior to the US invasion, Venezuela’s economy had contracted by roughly 80 percent in a decade, driving more than 8 million people to flee the country.

The sanctions regime maintained across Democratic and Republican administrations alike killed far more Venezuelans through deliberate economic deprivation and set the stage for the disaster following Wednesday’s earthquakes.

At the same time, the dead of La Guaira and Caracas are also the victims of the historic bankruptcy of bourgeois nationalism and its “Bolivarian” variant. The Chavista governments of Hugo Chávez, Nicolas Maduro and now Rodríguez held power for nearly three decades, presiding over one of the greatest surges in oil revenue in history.

They proclaimed a “Bolivarian Revolution” and “Socialism of the 21st Century.” Yet the concrete-and-adobe apartment blocks that pancaked on Wednesday night—many of them rebuilt after the 1999 Vargas catastrophe without seismic engineering—stand as the monument to what that “socialism” actually delivered. A government genuinely placing human life first would have used those years of petroleum wealth to systematically retrofit and rebuild the country’s housing stock to modern seismic codes, fortify its hospital system, and develop emergency preparedness systems capable of responding to a catastrophe that scientists had explicitly predicted.

The social conditions that turned a seismic event into a mass grave were prepared by a century of imperialist plunder, decades of sanctions, and a corrupt bourgeois nationalism that subordinated the working class to the needs of Wall Street. The dead of Venezuela are the victims of a class crime.

The governments now dispatching rescue teams to Venezuela stood idly by, or became directly complicit in the US efforts to subdue the country through mass hunger, disease and suffering.

Rosa Luxemburg, writing in 1902 about the eruption of Mount Pelée that killed 40,000 in Martinique, gave eloquent expression to the character of such moments. She described the imperial powers that rushed to offer aid to the survivors after inflicting far more death over decades of oppression as “weeping carnivores” and “beasts in Samaritan’s clothing.”

Luxemburg concluded her essay with a vision of the coming reckoning: a “volcano” of social revolution that would sweep away the oppressive social order, after which humanity would at last confront its only true and final enemy: “blind, dead nature.” Earthquakes and other natural phenomena do not choose their victims. It is the social order based on capitalist profit and imperialist domination that determines who dies.

The working class in Venezuela and internationally must take matters into its own hands, organizing independent rank-and-file relief committees to mobilize the resources necessary for effective rescue and humanitarian aid efforts, while demanding the expropriation of all the ill-gotten gains of US corporations from the historic plundering of Venezuela and Latin America to rebuild on the basis of social equality.



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