

Humanitarian crisis worsens in Venezuela, as botched earthquake rescue phase winds down

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The confirmed death toll from the twin earthquakes that struck Venezuela's Caribbean coast on June 24 has climbed to at least 2,295, a figure based solely on bodies recovered from the rubble; 11,267 have been reported injured. The United Nations estimates some 50,000 people remain unaccounted for.

In the port town of La Guaira, among the hardest-hit areas, rescue workers have spent recent days stacking coffins inside an improvised morgue as vans arrive with more corpses, laid out in rows along a concrete pier. The UN is procuring 10,000 body bags, according to resident coordinator Gianluca Rampolla.

More than a week after the disaster, international search-and-rescue contingents have begun winding down operations, citing the closing of the "critical survival window." The rescue of a 43-year-old man pulled alive from a collapsed seven-story building in Catia La Mar, after eight days trapped beneath it, is being used as a last "hurrah" as international rescue teams leave.

Families and neighbors across the disaster zone, however, continue digging through debris by hand to find the bodies of their loved ones.

Despite the courageous work of rescue teams, the whole operation has been undermined by lack of equipment and the collapsed healthcare system.

A *New York Times* correspondent embedded with one rescue team reported that after a 12-hour shift beginning at 4:00 a.m., the doctors had not treated a single patient: Everyone they reached was already dead. In a poor La Guaira neighborhood where the Oppe33 tower came down, the first bulldozer did not arrive until the Sunday after the quake; a second arrived later but, as *El País* reported, sat idle because a country holding the world's largest oil reserves had no fuel to run it. Fuel shortages and a blackout across much of the

coast have further hobbled the rescue since day one.

Acting President Delcy Rodríguez received sharply different welcomes touring the two main disaster zones. In Chacao, Venezuela's wealthiest district, residents booed and shouted "¡Fuera!" (Get out!), as she approached the ruins of the Petunia tower, whose 22 floors had collapsed. The building had already suffered serious structural damage in a 1967 earthquake; its owners nonetheless renovated and sold it, with the approval of local authorities then headed by Leopoldo López and Antonio Ledezma, both leaders of the US-sponsored right-wing opposition.

In La Guaira, by contrast, Rodríguez's response was to announce the militarization of the state and order residents to keep their distance. Open protest was limited, but the anger was unmistakable: Residents said authorities seemed more concerned with crowd control than with speeding up rescues. One asked why access was being blocked and special authorization demanded while people were still dying under the concrete.

That anger is measurable. Rubén Chirinos, president of the polling firm Meganálisis, told the *Miami Herald* that informal polling across multiple regions show public frustration at levels rarely seen directed, above all, at the armed forces, the security services and senior officials, including Delcy Rodríguez, Interior Minister Diosdado Cabello and National Assembly President Jorge Rodríguez (the president's brother).

"The emergency is the only thing containing the anger," Chirinos said. "People are focused on helping each other right now. But once the immediate crisis stabilizes, that anger will have somewhere to go."

Residents put it more starkly on the ground. "This is anarchy, nobody has come here," said Brencis Hernández, a professor whose son remains buried in the rubble. Another resident, Roison Figuera, said people

had organized rescue and aid efforts entirely on their own, with no brigades and no equipment.

Aid workers, comparing the scenes to Gaza, warned that overcrowded shelters and the absence of clean water and sanitation now threaten disease outbreaks compounding the earthquakes' direct toll. Eugenio Cova, a trauma unit chief who spoke to *Al Jazeera*, identified overcrowding and contaminated water as the principal dangers now facing survivors, with infections poised to claim lives.

For domestic consumption, the US media has mounted a damage control operation around Washington's response. The *Washington Post* praised Trump for "going big" on relief after the White House pledged \$300 million, while the *New York Times* applauded the administration's mobilization despite what it noted was Trump's longstanding hostility to foreign aid spending.

Trump's own remarks tell a different story, openly displaying his contempt for the lives of Venezuelans. In the same statement acknowledging the earthquakes' massive toll, he claimed Venezuelans were "dancing in the streets" over the country's transformation into a US protectorate, echoing his 2017 visit to Hurricane Maria-ravaged Puerto Rico, when he threw paper towels at survivors and declared the response a triumph.

What Washington has actually deployed is not aid but an imperialist occupation. The Pentagon has sent 900 military personnel, backed by warships and aircraft, along with 100 State Department officials. Transit authorities say US forces have taken direct control of Venezuela's main international airport, a claim Rodríguez denies.

As in every disaster before it, the Venezuelan military has focused its energies toward suppressing social unrest rather than toward rescue, leaving US forces free to assume direct operational control of key infrastructure.

The scale of need dwarfs what has been promised. The U.N. Development Programme estimates physical damage at \$4.7 to \$8.7 billion; the risk-modeling firm Verisk puts economic losses above \$10 billion, citing roughly 1,400 destroyed buildings.

Washington's record offers little hope that even the paltry sums pledged will materialize. A federal audit released this week found Puerto Rico had received only 25 percent of the \$14 billion in US funds assigned to

rebuild its power grid after Hurricane Maria, which killed an estimated 2,975 people, a decade ago. Six months after the 2010 Haiti earthquake—also used at the time to justify a foreign military occupation of the island—only 2 percent of \$5.3 billion in pledged US aid had actually been delivered.

The disaster has exposed a deeper irony. The very Chavista government the US and its media have spent a quarter-century denouncing as a failed "Communist dictatorship" is now Washington's preferred vehicle for consolidating direct control over Venezuela—preferred, in fact, over Washington's own hand-picked opposition. Nobel Peace Prize laureate María Corina Machado, who gave Trump her medal as a personal gift, remains barred from the country, with Washington declining to allow her return.

Washington, it is now clear, has no interest in ruling Venezuela indirectly through the traditional opposition it spent decades financing and promoting. It has settled instead on Delcy Rodríguez as the administrator best positioned to oversee the country's transition into a direct US military protectorate—one being built, like Puerto Rico and Haiti before it, on the bodies of the poor and oppressed, while Washington and Caracas alike congratulate themselves and each other on a job well done.



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