Hundreds dead in Colombia earthquake: Capitalism’s latest case of social mass murder

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Seven weeks after the June 24 earthquakes in Venezuela, where 6,301 have been confirmed dead and tens of thousands remain missing, the world was confronted again with the same scenes across western Colombia: dozens of buildings collapsing, families with children fleeing falling structures, and thousands who have lost their loved ones, their homes and their belongings.

Early Monday morning, a magnitude 7.4 earthquake struck western Colombia, with its epicenter near the town of San José del Palmar in Chocó, the poorest department in the country.

The tremor devastated a corridor of major population centers including Cali, Quibdó, Manizales and Pereira. According to official figures released Tuesday, more than 240 are confirmed dead, 1,300 injured, and at least 2,000 missing. Some of the worst-affected regions remain almost entirely cut off.

Within hours of the disaster, the newly inaugurated far-right government of Abelardo de la Espriella handed the entire emergency response to the armed forces, celebrating the mobilization of “the entire military and police apparatus,” including 1,000 troops just in Cali.

This takes place precisely as Washington prepares a major escalation of military involvement in the country. As in Venezuela, the catastrophe will be converted into an instrument for militarization and neo-colonial consolidation.

The US Geological Survey (USGS) reported that the earthquake resulted primarily from strike-slip faulting—two blocks of the Earth’s crust sliding horizontally past one another. William Barnhart of the USGS explained why this produced such widespread destruction: “The epicenter was in a remote region but it was fairly close to some of the major population centers of Colombia, so over 10.5 million people were exposed to very strong shaking.”

Because the quake was deep and inland, the shaking spread across a far broader region than a shallow event of the same magnitude would have.

The infrastructure damage is severe. Six airports have been closed and dozens of roads are impassable. Three hospitals have collapsed and 18 more are damaged; 39 schools have been affected. The UN humanitarian agency reports 61 buildings collapsed and thousands of homes damaged or destroyed, while government figures put approximately 5,000 homes damaged or collapsed.

In Cali, Colombia’s third-largest city with a metropolitan population of 2.9 million, Mayor Alejandro Eder said he could not confirm casualty figures because the search-and-rescue phase had become “a needle in a haystack exercise” since the city held up relatively well. His statement was refuted by his own public health secretary Germán Escobar, who reported the city morgue was full as authorities continued bringing bodies in from the streets.

The testimony from the affected cities is uniform in its desperation. “People ran out naked, people jumped from the second floor of their homes,” Wilmer Cuesta, a law student in Quibdó, told AFP. A resident in Pereira said: “It was shocking—the city fell down around us.”

A small business owner in Cali, Isabel Gómez, told the BBC, “We don’t have food, water, power. It’s a tragedy bigger than anything we’ve seen. We really need help.”

As in Venezuela, ordinary people have organized their own rescue operations. Fists rise and whistles sound to demand silence; a survivor is located; applause follows, then more whistles, then the laborious hammering and hauling of concrete blocks resumes.

While cranes and excavators are more available in Colombian cities than they were in La Guaira, Venezuela, the specialized equipment needed to cut and lift reinforced concrete and metal is just as scarce. Rescuers work in human chains with buckets, hammers, pickaxes and their bare hands.

A social murder and Petro’s legacy

The scale of the collapse was entirely foreseeable—and was, in fact, foreseen.

Ryan Hoult, an engineering lecturer at the University of Newcastle, who has conducted full-scale laboratory testing of Colombian construction practice, wrote bluntly that his research “suggests we shouldn’t be surprised so many buildings collapsed in this disaster—and also that we should be concerned about the many other regions around the world with similar practices.”

Hoult explains that many buildings in Colombia are constructed with thin concrete walls that makes “confinement,” the hooped steel placed at wall edges to prevent concrete crushing, nearly impossible to install. “Nor is it required under Colombian building standards,” he adds.

Working with colleagues from three Colombian universities, Hoult tested walls built to match standard Colombian practice and found that “the walls on these buildings are so thin, even if there was enough steel reinforcement, they’re still liable to fail during an earthquake.”

A 2018 survey of nine buildings in Cali he cites found that 90 percent had walls with only a single layer of reinforcement, and 30 percent had walls 100 mm thick or less.

The buildings that killed hundreds of people on Monday morning did not merely fall short of what engineering science requires for safety. Many did not meet even the inadequate standards already codified in Colombian law. The published research existed. What did not exist was a ruling class willing to act on it. This is social murder.

The catastrophe delivers a devastating verdict on the outgoing government of Gustavo Petro, celebrated by the pseudo-left regionally as Colombia’s “first leftist president.” Poverty did fall under his limited social programs. But in Chocó, where the epicenter struck, nearly 70 percent of the population remains below the poverty line. Journalist Luis Felipe Molina of Manizales told Australia’s ABC that the earthquake hit “Choco, which sadly, is one of the poorest regions of the country and so

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many people, I would say millions of people, still don't have communication right now because the networks are still affected."

Petro's government left untouched the fundamental conditions that turned a predictable seismic event into mass death: the rampant inequality, the housing stock, the building codes, the emergency response capacity, and the concentration of the population in structures known to be lethal. His legacy will be measured not only by the electoral defeat of his coalition by a fascist political nobody, but by the earthquake disaster.

The incoming government responds with militarization

De la Espriella appeared before cameras Monday smiling and laughing as though at a campaign rally. He then traveled in rapid sequence through the affected cities, declaring a national emergency and issuing calls for "national unity" while glorifying the deployment of the military and police. After a midnight meeting with the military command, he announced with clownish cheer: "Tomorrow I will announce great news for Colombia. Firm for the Fatherland!"

This is the authentic voice of a ruling class utterly divorced from the population it governs.

His first official acts last week included holding a security council in Cali with military and police commanders lasting until dawn, and delivering his first presidential address to troops at the Pichincha Battalion and pledging war without truce against "narcotrafficking, crime and the narcoguerrilla."

Valle del Cauca Governor Dilian Francisca Toro described the outcome of the security council: an intersectoral security strategy and buildup of the capacities of the security forces across southwestern Colombia. In plain terms, the militarization of the country under Pentagon guidance. This had been planned long before the earthquake, and now will be accelerated through it.

Like every far-right government installed across the region with Washington's backing, De la Espriella confronts mass opposition and a political crisis from the outset. Ahead of his inauguration, half of Colombians viewed him negatively. His program of frozen social spending, austerity and deregulation now collides with a disaster requiring massive public expenditure.

Sandra Borda, professor at Bogotá's Universidad de los Andes, described the resulting bind to Bloomberg: "These right-wing governments are stuck in a dilemma that isn't easy to resolve." They represent business interests that "demand strict discipline in public spending," she said, yet "fully understand that rolling back any of the subsidies or social programs created by left-wing governments would create very serious governability problems."

The resolution the ruling class prepares for this dilemma is not social concessions. It is dictatorship.

During De la Espriella's inauguration Friday, the Trump administration announced discussions with Congress on a $1 billion assistance package—one of the largest in the history of the bilateral relationship, and already being called Plan Colombia 2.0 by Colombian journalists. The original Plan Colombia, launched under Clinton in 2000, channeled roughly $500 million annually for two decades into building the Colombian armed forces into one of the region's most powerful militaries, wholly subordinate to US strategic interests. Its actual result was a massive escalation of the civil war, tens of thousands of deaths, the "false positives" scandal in which the army murdered civilians and presented them as combatants, and the systematic assassination of trade unionists and community leaders. Under Petro, amid rising tensions with Washington, annual US military aid still stood at $377 million.

Washington's response to Colombia's disaster is measured against this. The State Department announced $15.5 million for shelter, food, protection and assessments. Hours later, from the same account, it published a video defending the Monroe Doctrine and declaring that "American dominance in the Western Hemisphere will never be questioned again." The USGS estimates economic losses of up to $1 billion.

In Venezuela, US forces used the earthquake to establish direct operational control over the country's primary air and sea entry points while insisting the mission was strictly humanitarian. De la Espriella has already promised an expanded US military presence and was repeatedly endorsed by Trump.

The socialist alternative

Since 1950, more than 3,500 people have died in Colombian earthquakes, including 1,185 in the 1999 magnitude 6.2 quake that struck the same coffee-growing region. Each time, the same lesson has gone unlearned.

A workers' government would have responded to the published research with the immediate mobilization of society's resources: a mass program of retrofitting and rebuilding, the training and employment of hundreds of thousands of construction workers, the stockpiling of heavy rescue equipment and building standards written by engineers rather than by the real estate interests that profit from thin walls and brittle mesh. Petro, operating within capitalism and dependent on the Colombian bourgeoisie, did none of this. Neither did the Chavistas in Venezuela across nearly three decades of oil wealth.

This is not a Colombian problem or a Latin American problem. The same construction practices exist in regions around the world. Hundreds of millions of workers live in buildings that could fail any moment. The earthquakes in Venezuela and Colombia, seven weeks apart, are two expressions of a single global reality—a system drifting into barbarism that refuses to deploy existing scientific knowledge and material capacity to protect human life.

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