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Venezuela Attempts to Recover from Major Flood; Rights Violations Charged

LADB Staff

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The government of Venezuelan President Hugo Chavez has pledged to investigate charges of human rights abuses by security forces during the catastrophic December floods that wracked the country. Meanwhile, efforts continue to relocate families who lost their homes and possessions. The floods, possibly Latin America’s worst natural disaster in 50 years, devastated Venezuela, and the tragedy will take years to overcome.

The Red Cross says that between 20,000 and 50,000 people lost their lives in the landslides that buried entire towns under tons of rubble, rocks and earth in mid-December. Another 100,000 people were left homeless. Venezuela will need between US$10 billion and US$30 billion to repair the damage, and much of the money will have to come from other countries, government officials said.

"The figures are astronomical because a substantial part of the national infrastructure has been destroyed," Vice Minister of Foreign Relations Jorge Valero told reporters.

**Criticisms follow disaster**

Following the massive destruction, accusations arose of government negligence and complicity. One criticism was that the president was so busy urging people to vote in the Dec. 16 referendum for the new Constitution that he ignored warnings of impending flooding. "I think he has handled this with negligence and criminal irresponsibility," said opposition leader Jorge Olavarria. Speaking to reporters, Chavez said, "They should shoot me if I have any personal responsibility in this."

The Chavez administration said there was no way to predict that the mountain that separates the capital Caracas from the Caribbean would collapse, burying entire communities, and it placed much of the blame for the magnitude of the tragedy on previous corrupt governments that allowed squatters to build shacks in unsafe areas.

Civil Defense Director Angel Rangel said authorities evacuated thousands of people in two states where dams broke, and called much of the criticism politically motivated. "It’s a desire to turn a painful natural disaster into a political event," said Rangel. "This is not what the country deserves."

**Security forces accused of human rights violations**

On Jan. 2, nongovernmental human rights organization Programa Venezolano de Educacion Accion en Derechos Humanos (PROVEA) said it had received reports of serious human rights violations by security forces during the crisis.

The organization alleged that police and soldiers sent to prevent looting and protect the people had committed the abuses. PROVEA said that between Dec. 19 and Dec. 27, rescue personnel,
paramedics, and volunteers received complaints of at least 13 cases of major violations, including extrajudicial executions of persons caught looting.

Looting was widespread in Vargas, just north of Caracas, in the first days after the mudslides. Shops were ransacked and apartment buildings broken into, amid unconfirmed reports of delinquents raping women and troops being told to shoot on sight during a dusk-to-dawn curfew.

The PROVEA report cited people who overheard soldiers in Vargas plotting to "eliminate" looters and common criminals, and others who said soldiers beat them as they tried to salvage belongings from their flood-damaged homes.

Initially, Chavez called the report "suspicious and superficial," saying it offered no names of witnesses. But on Jan. 9, Public Defender Dilia Parra announced an investigation into the charges. She said "we cannot at the outset say that no abuses occurred, we cannot continue putting a lid on the people," referring to Chavez's dismissal of the charges as irresponsible.

Foreign Relations Minister Jose Vicente Rangel said the following day he was not dismissing the allegations but underlined the need for proof, saying, "Sometimes the impunity is worse than the crime." "There is a culture of historic arbitrary actions rooted mostly in the security forces and that doesn't automatically change because of a change of government or new Constitution," said Rangel. "We want to be the first government to eliminate impunity and punish with the full weight of the law those proven to have violated human rights, because former administrations have institutionalized impunity."

PROVEA information coordinator Antonio Gonzalez said witnesses had implicated soldiers, the police, and state security (DISIP) personnel. On Jan. 14, the Foreign Relations Ministry said it would investigate "each and every accusation that it receives, whether it is against civilians or military."

PROVEA promised to release names and dates of witnesses if the government would guarantee the their security, which Attorney General Javier Elechiguerra immediately did. Rangel said he had written to Organization of American States (OAS) head Cesar Gaviria, asking him to send a mission to Venezuela "to study the denunciations that have been made."

On Jan. 24, Chavez went to Vargas and said he was now convinced that abuses occurred. "I didn't come to talk much," said Chavez. "I came to listen. But I just want to tell you, and I swear it on my children, that I will not rest until this is clarified."

**Recovery efforts crawl along**

Even apart from abuses by authorities, the personal tragedy is almost incomprehensible. The death toll will never be known, as thousands of victims remain buried under tons of mud and debris. The drama has been aggravated by difficulty identifying victims and by complications in locating refugees who have passed through several assistance centers.

Officials have moved tens of thousands of survivors to military bases, stadiums, and churches serving as temporary refugee centers until new housing is built. But many survivors are refusing
to abandon the disaster area. Some doubt government promises to build new houses for them, and others prefer to live in danger rather than leave behind their homes and neighborhoods. Most new housing will not be ready for months.

Even before the disaster, the country had a serious housing shortage. In early January, Chavez fired the head of the national housing department for building just 5,000 houses last year, despite a goal of 32,000 houses and a US$664 million budget. Now Venezuela needs at least 50,000 additional houses for flood victims. Where to rebuild is also a controversy. The government pledged to prohibit building in the hardest hit parts of Vargas and may turn several neighborhoods into memorial parks because many victims remain buried beneath the mud.

Chavez wants to relocate many victims to the interior of the country, but critics say that is unlikely to work, especially if those who move do not have employment. The government plans to improve its weather-forecasting service, conduct studies to determine which areas of Vargas are relatively safe, and possibly install a disaster warning system.

Some experts say if those steps are taken, rebuilding in Vargas can work, although dangers will remain. "Should we eliminate the state of California because it has the San Andreas fault?" asked Jose Antonio Rodriguez of the national seismology office. But other experts are skeptical, given Venezuela's traditional lack of disaster preparedness. "We're blind," said Edgard Yerena, an adviser to Venezuela's Environmental Ministry. [Sources: CNN, 01/03/00, 01/05/00; Spanish news service EFE, 01/02/00, 01/10/00, 01/14/00; Inter Press Service, 01/18/00; Reuters, 12/30/99, 01/19/00; Associated Press, 12/29/99, 01/11/00, 01/20/00, 01/24/00; The Miami Herald, 01/24/00; El Nuevo Herald (Miami), 01/25/00]