

# ***VENEZUELA: FLOODS***

*22 December,  
1999*

*appeal no. 35/99*

*situation report no. 1*

*period covered: 20 - 22 December*

---

*Rescue and relief efforts continue for the victims of the floods and landslides, despite being hampered by the size and scope of the disaster. The initial donor response has been extremely positive, enabling an immediate initial emergency response. The Federation's Secretary General, accompanied by the Director of the Federation's Americas Department, is due to arrive in Venezuela on December 27 .*

---

## ***The context***

Two weeks of unrelenting rain led to flash flooding and landslides in northern Venezuela and on December 16, the Government of Venezuela declared a State of Emergency for seven states (Zulia, Falcon, Yaracuy, Nueva Esparta, Carabobo, Tachira, and Miranda), the department of Vargas and the Federal District of Caracas. Two weeks after rains unleashed devastating floods, the relief effort in Venezuela has shifted to recovering bodies, avoiding epidemics and finding homes for 150,000 people. Up to 30,000 are feared dead in the floods and mudslides. The disaster is likely to rank among Latin America's worst of the century. The state of Vargas is considered the hardest-hit. The Caracas-La Guaira highway is closed to all but humanitarian vehicles, and the coastal roads are almost completely destroyed. Venezuelan Navy ships are bringing 800 tons of drinking water to coastal victims and a naval transport is housing 200 internally displaced persons (IDPs).

The Maiquetia airport is serving as the relief headquarters, containing a triage center and a shuttle stop for IDPs that are being relocated to the interior and to Caracas. More than 10,000 evacuees have been sheltered there.

Reports indicate that many roads and bridges are damaged or destroyed, and flooding and landslides currently isolate many communities. In addition, national and international airports serving Caracas are closed to commercial flights but are open to relief and humanitarian flights.

## ***Latest events***

Weather conditions over the last two days have reportedly remained favourable. With no major rainfall for the past 48 hours, cleanup operations in many areas have made progress, particularly in Caracas although some main avenues remain covered in mud.

As the impact of this tragedy unfolds, the death toll continues to rise.

Some basic services such as electricity, telephone and water have been re-established in some areas. Caracas water supply reported to be normal. The port of La Guaira is expected to be reactivated within 3-4 weeks although several warehouses are severely damaged. Roads continue to be blocked between Caracas and La Guaira for civilians and many roads have been wiped out within Vargas State.

A telephone conference call was conducted today between the Secretariat and a number of Participating National Societies to share information on response to the disaster.

## ***Red Cross/Red Crescent action***

### **Government response •**

Military and civil defence personnel continue rescue operations. Several shelters in public and private facilities have been opened in Caracas and interior cities. The Red Cross/Red Crescent response effort is formulated to provide support to and expand the capability of the Government-coordinated operation.

National solidarity for the victims has been overwhelming, with an outpouring of contributions in cash and in-kind from the unaffected population. However, the Minister of Foreign Affairs has declared that the tragedy has overwhelmed the capacity of the Government and that international support continues to be necessary.

The Venezuelan Red Cross and volunteers are actively participating in field rescue and relief operations in the seven states affected. The 1-800 line has proved very important over the past 48 hours; at least 4,500 phone calls have been received from people seeking information on missing persons. For general information, the number is 1-800-27652.

The ICRC is providing supporting in tracing activities, working in joint collaboration with the University of Caracas while the Venezuelan Red Cross will be supported by the Colombian Red cross and other national Societies in setting up a reinforced tracing service.

### **Participating National Society Support •**

A number of National Societies and governments, also OPEC have provided immediate cash support for the operation (see annex 1 for the list of contributions).

The American Red Cross has 9 delegates collaborating in the emergency. A cargo plane arrived with approximately 50,000 pounds of general relief items consisting of water carriers, hygiene kits, blankets, bed sheets, diesel electric generators. Vehicles and water purification chemicals are being sent.

The Spanish Red Cross and the Colombian Red Cross, in a joint effort, have sent a first preliminary support including 3.5 tons of supplies with 12 hospital tents, relief items, hygiene kits, kitchen kits, flashlights, and bags. A Spanish Red Cross cargo plane arrived on Tuesday with 15 tons of kitchen utensils and hygiene supplies, and with the Spanish Red Cross President visiting the Venezuelan Red Cross.

The Colombian Red Cross and Dominican Republic Red Cross have each provided relief delegates to assist the Venezuelan Red Cross.

The French Red Cross is sending 5 mt of supplies on a French Government flight and is preparing to send 40 mt of water sanitation supplies, 6,000 blankets, plastic sheeting and clothes for delivery on December 28th or 29th on a Red Cross flight.

The American and German Red Cross will assist the logistics operation by donating some trucks.

A number of National Societies have started public fund raising campaigns; with high levels of public interest shown, the strongest support seems to be in Spain.

#### **Logistics •**

Given the damage, the logistics operation is still in the build-up phase, and the Federation is focusing on establishing an effective base of operations as well as assigning experienced logistics delegates to assist in this essential area. Local procurement options are being explored, primarily in Panama and neighbouring countries.

The German Red Cross has indicated a readiness to undertake an immediate water and sanitation assessment mission with a view to establishing whether one of the ERU's located in the region should be set up in the disaster area.

A Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) covering the Venezuelan Red Cross, Federation, and PNS's roles in operational coordination has been drafted and will be used in the operation.

#### **Health •**

Health assessments are underway, focusing on the immediate concerns of water and sanitation and medication. A list of priority actions will be included in the following Situation Report.

#### **UN agencies response •**

- The United Nations Disaster Management Team (UNDP, UNESCO, UNHCR, UNICEF, WHO/PAHO) meets regularly and include representatives of donor governments (e.g UK) and the Corporacion Andina de Fomento (CAF).
- PAHO will support the Government's efforts in managing the management of relief supplies (SUMA), as well as of medical and sanitation systems;
- UNICEF provides support in psychological counselling, particularly of children;
- UNHCR is inquiring into the availability of supplies to set up temporary shelters for displaced population;
- UNESCO will participate in the evaluation of reconstruction of damaged educational system;
- UNDP will (in addition to providing day-to-day support to emergency efforts) reorient projects during the rehabilitation period;
- OCHA is providing support to coordination efforts with the UNDAC Team and the OCHA Regional Disaster Response Adviser.

## ***Outstanding needs***

The requirements expressed in Appeal 35/99 launched on 20 December remain valid. Field reports emphasise the need for water treatment/water supply equipment; psychological support to the disaster-affected population and material and supplies for temporary housing. In addition, there is a clear need of experienced relief people in the states most affected to collaborate with the Venezuelan Red Cross chapters. Transportation is another main problem for the National Society, there is a clear need of four wheel drive trucks and trucks, water pumps, cash, blankets, hygiene kits, and tents are specially needed.

Donors are urged to provide the secretariat with written details of all contributions for this operation to enable a well coordinated relief planning.

## ***External relations - Government/UN/NGOs/Media***

The operation has received a high level of media focus, and the Federation and the Venezuelan Red Cross have had extensive contacts with the media both in Geneva as well as in Venezuela. At this stage of the operation however, effective coordination and external relations remains a constraint, complicated by the size of the disaster as well as the number of agencies involved. The Federation and Venezuelan Red Cross Society are actively pursuing coordination efforts, and participating in meetings in the region as well as with OCHA in Geneva.

## *Contributions*

See Annex 1 for details. Donors are encouraged to indicate the value of in-kind contributions on pledge management notes submitted to the Federation's Operations Funding and Reporting Department.

Peter Rees-Gildea  
Director  
Operations Funding and  
Reporting Department

Santiago Gil  
Director  
Americas Department