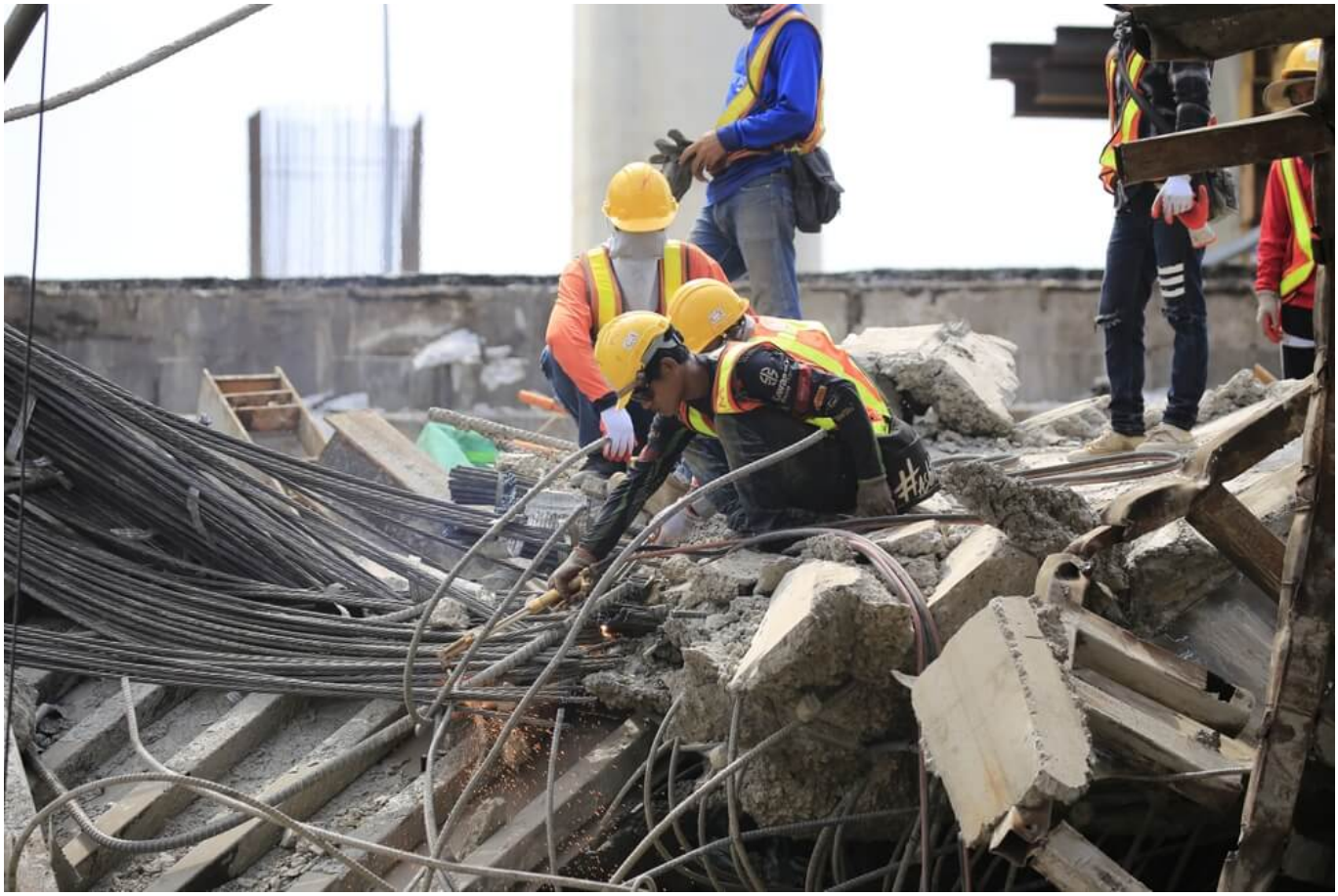
Tomorrow's Affairs

Analysis of today
Assessment of tomorrow

By: TA | AP Insight

Venezuela's healthcare system is near its limit after earthquakes



Aid groups warned that Venezuela's fragile healthcare system is being pushed to its limits nearly a week after two powerful earthquakes, with damaged and understaffed hospitals getting overwhelmed by the injured and infectious diseases flaring in the disaster zone.

Meanwhile, the number of official rescues has dropped dramatically in the last three days, the government said, from 5,380 people saved in the first two days after the quakes to just four people found alive Monday by authorities.

The prime window for finding earthquake survivors is typically 48 to 72 hours, but it is possible to survive longer depending on factors such as temperature and access to water or food.

The sole survivor rescued by Tuesday afternoon was a toddler who had been trapped for six days under a collapsed building, said Jorge Rodríguez, the president of the National Assembly.

Those numbers do not include the many rescues carried out across the country by volunteer groups that, frustrated with the government's sluggish response, scrambled to save their trapped loved ones days before the arrival of expert international teams.

The government puts the death toll at over 1,900. Experts say that is a significant undercount as more bodies are hauled from the rubble every day and morgues struggle to handle the influx.

Among the living, a humanitarian crisis is unfolding. United Nations agencies expressed concern about the health effects of thousands of displaced people sleeping for days in the open or in crowded, unsanitary shelters.

A healthcare system in crisis

The Venezuelan healthcare system, strained by decades of underinvestment and years of economic crisis is “under extreme pressure now, with facilities operating beyond the capacity of the surge of the trauma cases,” said World Health Organization spokesperson Christian Lindmeier at a media briefing in Geneva.

Venezuelan officials say that more than 15,800 people have been affected by the earthquakes — a figure that reflects the official number of displaced people, U.N. refugee agency spokesperson Carlotta Wolf said Tuesday.

Newly homeless Venezuelans are sleeping in cars, parks and elsewhere.

Wolf said that number would continue to rise. Many of those displaced in the hardest-hit state of La Guaira, just outside the capital of Caracas along the coast, are suffering from widespread food shortages, she said.

Without access to toilets, showers or soap, displaced Venezuelans have also become increasingly vulnerable to the outbreak of preventable diseases like measles, given the population’s low vaccination rates, Lindmeier said, adding that conditions are ripe for waterborne infections such as dengue, yellow fever and malaria to spread.

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According to the government, last week's earthquakes damaged or otherwise compromised 38 hospitals nationwide.

WHO said it so far has evaluated 21 of those facilities, three of which are no longer operating. Another six have sustained damage and the rest are now buckling under the influx of injuries.

Many specialist doctors are missing in the ruins, including officials in charge of maternity care in La Guaira, WHO said, compounding the challenges to health care in a country that 8 million people, including many doctors and nurses, have fled in recent years.

“Findings reveal chaotic service delivery and

patient flow, marked by overcrowding, growing surgical backlogs ... and a breakdown in biosafety measures," Lindmeier said.

An increased presence of nongovernmental organizations was noticeable Tuesday in La Guaira and adjacent communities, with tents from the Red Cross, the World Food Program and other organizations set up on sidewalks, waterfront esplanades and athletic facilities.

People lined up throughout the day under the blistering sun to receive free toiletries, food, medications and face masks.

A struggle to grasp the true toll

With the government tight-lipped about victims and survivors and offering no official count of missing people, ordinary Venezuelans are struggling to find relatives.

Many have turned to WhatsApp groups and nongovernmental digital databases to report their loved ones as missing. One such registry listed at least 43,220 people as missing.

UNICEF said 680,000 children are in need of humanitarian assistance nationwide

In his daily televised casualty update, Jorge Rodríguez, brother of interim President Delcy Rodríguez, said that the official toll stood at 1,943 people killed and 10,571 injured as of Tuesday, urging the public to share only government information.

But his numbers left thousands of Venezuelans unaccounted for. He said the government estimated there were around 30,000 people in the hardest-hit parts of La Guaira state at the time of the earthquake, and that around 20,000 of them managed to escape the area or were later rescued.

NASA estimates that nearly 59,000 buildings have been damaged or destroyed by the earthquakes, which would put the number of people affected by the quakes in the hundreds of thousands.

The U.N. children's agency, UNICEF, on Tuesday said 680,000 children are in need of humanitarian assistance nationwide.