

Churches, Missionaries respond to flooding tragedy in Venezuela; Up to 25,000 reported dead, many towns destroyed

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Miami, FL, (LAMNS)—Churches and missionaries are responding to what is being called Venezuela's worst disaster of the Century. Floods and mudflows following heavy rains are reported to have killed up to 25,000 people along the coast near the capital, Caracas and in other parts of the country.

"It's a major blow to the country," said Charles Fuller, a missionary with the Latin America Mission serving in Caracas. "There have been a lot of mudslides in various areas, particularly the poorer areas. Many villages have been wiped out."

Reuters news service reported that most of the victims were buried under avalanches of mud or swept downstream on Wednesday and Thursday, December 15 and 16, as torrential rains drenched Venezuela's central coastal area, including the capital Caracas.

Worst hit was the thin coastal strip of Vargas state, an industrial and tourist area roughly twice the size of the U.S. city of Chicago. Mudslides and raging rivers buried entire settlements under yards of earth, boulders and rubble.

200,000 people were made homeless by the floods that affected the South American country's entire northern coast, stretching from the tourist resort Margarita Island to the western Zulia state bordering Colombia.

Most towns along the coast are reported to be virtually deserted, evacuated to reduce the growing epidemic risk caused by blocked drains, absence of running water and huge quantities of rotting corpses.

Estimates of the number of deaths range from 5,000 reported by the Associated Press, to between 10 and 25,000 reported by Reuters and the Agence France-Presse at midday Monday, December 20.

Fuller, a native of New Orleans, Louisiana, says that the toll could easily reach the higher numbers because there are areas with no immediate access. "Many communities do not exist, they are going to need food and rebuilding," he said.

"There are areas covered in as much as 22 feet of earth," said Civil Defense agency chief Angel Rangel told Union Radio. "We will never know exactly how many people died there."

"The churches are sending things like water, food and medicine," Fuller said. "In the long-term, churches are going to be continuing to work with displaced people." At the moment, churches in Caracas are helping people who are refugees, living in different stadiums in the city. Over 200,000 people are reported homeless nation wide.

"Church groups are providing day care for children who are having to live day after day in the stadiums and other refugee camps," Fuller reported.

The long-term recovery could stretch out over a decade, government officials said. Meanwhile, LAM missionary Laura Smith in Caracas said that the immediate needs are for clean water, medicine, food and adequate sleeping facilities. She said that there is a fear of epidemics caused

by decaying bodies buried under mud and criminal attack from armed gangs that have been robbing both survivors and items from dead bodies.

Citing emotional needs, Smith, who is from Winsted, Connecticut, said that many families are separated and do not know the fate of their loved ones. "There are a large number of children waiting to find out if their parents are alive," she said. "Some are too young to be able to tell their names or their parent's names."

In addition, there is the trauma of entire towns having been destroyed and the difficulty for many people of beginning again in an area where they may not know anyone.

"The government is asking for counselors, pastors and others who can help in the various centers by listening and caring for the emotional, spiritual needs of the people," Smith said.

Churches are responding to that request, Fuller reported. "The pastors have formed teams to help people who are lost or who have had deaths in the family."

Smith said that her church had trained people in recent months in the area of pastoral counseling. She said that they began training on Monday and will be placed at different government centers.

The Latin America Mission has established an emergency fund to help meet immediate needs and provide for long-term counseling. "This is only the beginning of what is going to happen there," said Jere Cox, LAM's Director of Development, referring to the long-term needs that missionaries will continue to address. "Anything we receive we will pass along immediately through our people on the field."

The Latin America Mission currently has approximately 240 missionaries in 15 countries and is seeking to place 300 new missionaries in Latin America in the next three years. The U.S. headquarters can be reached at Latin America Mission, Box 52-7900, Miami Springs, FL 33152, by e-mail at info@lam.org, or by calling 1-800-275-8410. The mission's web site may be found at <http://www.lam.org>. LAM's Canadian office is at 3075 Ridgeway Drive, Unit 14, Mississauga, ON L5L 5M6.

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