

## **Relief and answers:**

### **Christians continue vital ministry 18 months after Venezuelan disaster**

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LAM News Service

La Guaira, Venezuela (LAMNS)--"Look, the trees are starting to come back!" Rebecca Domingues points to some shoots pushing up through unbelievable piles of mud and rocks.

Those leaves demonstrate the hope that is returning to Venezuela's scarred coastline a year and a half after devastating floods and landslides buried houses and families and swept away entire communities.



Today, neighborhoods still look like war scenes from Chechnya or earthquake devastation in India, with the exception that most buildings are buried or filled up through the second floor with rocks and mud, their families still entombed inside.

Nobody really knows how many died in the disaster, and few are willing to guess.

"The government says 30,000, I think 50,000, but residents along the coast say more than 100,000," says Darrell Horn, a Southern Baptist missionary who has worked in disaster relief for the past year and a half.

"I really don't know how many died," says Rebecca who has led her church and other congregations in relief work along the coast. "Just last week they dug out a house and found a whole family, including a baby, buried in there."

"The problem is that many families have been separated by the government relocation efforts while other families don't know whether their relatives are living in another city or are dead," says Berenice Cabrera, director for disaster relief for the Evangelical Council of Venezuela (CEV). "We are working with refugees as far away as Maracaibo (350 miles) who haven't seen or talked with their families since the floods," she adds.

There are reminders of the disaster wherever one goes along the coast. Standing on the waterfront amid piles of dirt and rocks, Berenice says that the water line is a block or more away from where it was before the disaster. The sweep of water and mud dumped tons of dirt into the ocean and rescue workers added to the fill as they removed the debris.

"This is a campo santo (a holy ground) declared by the government," she says. "It's called that because there are bodies under here that have never been recovered."

A little while later, as she visits an entire community that was swept out to sea when the river shifted into a new course and washed everyone away, she repeats, "this is campo santo, there are bodies buried under where we are walking."



The disaster did more than what might be immediately evident. "It not only broke up families, but destroyed social roots and traditions," reflects Berenice. "Some members of families were loaded onto helicopters or the

backs of trucks and taken to settlements across the country. Communities were broken apart. Today, a year and a half later, many families are still separated."

Southern Baptist missionary Darrell Horn knows one mother who waited over seven months to learn that her two teen-age daughters were still alive in another city.

Churches were among the first to respond following the flooding. Southern Baptists sent water filtration plants into the area while the evangelical council sent food, clothing, shoes and other goods to replace those that were lost. Darrel says that the last filtration plant was removed only this past April.

"Many people were despondent," says Berenice. "Now, counselors are working to help people deal with the deaths and destruction," she says.

A recent newspaper headline, "The arrival of rainy season panics the country," tells of the trauma that many still have. "As soon as it starts raining, children panic," says LAM missionary Greg Burch. "They are afraid that any rain will bring more floods and landslides."

Church groups are helping to overcome the trauma. "We brought in trainers to do week long workshops on trauma and post trauma," says Darrell. "We trained Venezuelans and missionaries along the coast and in Caracas. The whole purpose was to train Venezuelans how to deal with their neighbors. They were able to work with teachers and the children."

People are starting to come back. Pastor Carlos Rodriguez who pastors the Union Evangelical Church says that people are beginning to return home on their own and seek work.

But, jobs are hard to find. "We have been developing a microenterprise program where we are able to help women obtain a sewing machine and start a small business," says Rebecca.

As life settles back to near normal, Christians are moving from emergency relief to church building. "Through the efforts of many, quite a number of people came to know the Lord," Baptist missionary Karen Horn remembers. "When I looked at the disaster, I thought, we have a small window. We have a year and a half for people to have a tender heart toward the Gospel because of their hurts. We were meeting a specific physical need, but they became opportunities for us and the Venezuelans to share the word."

Karen says that many people were asking why God allowed the floods to happen. "When they are already phrasing the question that has the God element in it, you try to supply answers," she explains.

Relief workers believe that a high proportion of those who died were children and teenagers. Because of that, "many youth are coming to the churches to ask questions and seek guidance," explains Rebecca. She says that many of them are making professions of faith.



CEV's Bernice Cabrera says that she believes the Lord is using the disaster to motivate the churches and raise up new leadership as well as to lead people to the Lord. That has led to churches establishing leadership development programs to train those who have stepped forward during the crisis.

"We appreciate the help of North American Christians," reflects Berenice. "They have helped us out so much." Supporters of the Latin America Mission contributed over \$20,000 that was used by the CEV to transport relief goods and cover administrative costs.

"People may not understand why we are still doing disaster work over a year later," reflects Pastor Carlos. "There is so much to do, so many people are still missing and people always need help here," he says.

The disaster united churches in a way that they had never been before. Through the efforts of the CEV, churches formed an emergency commission, working across denominational lines, to meet the needs of those affected. "We are now transforming that commission into an ongoing emergency planning group that will prepare for future

disasters and meet other needs in the country,” says Rev. Sam Olson, president of CEV. “This continuing effort will help to move us into a more holistic ministry,” he reflects.

Those who survived and became involved in helping others have found their lives transformed. "This work has given me great satisfaction," reflects Rebecca. "I have learned so much. God has presented me an opportunity to serve Him. My life is in His hands."

The Latin America Mission works in partnership with churches and Christian agencies throughout Latin America and supports missionaries and projects in many Latin countries as well as in Spain. LAM is seeking to place new missionaries throughout the region. The U.S. headquarters can be reached at Latin America Mission, Box 52-7900, Miami, FL 33152, by e-mail at [info@lam.org](mailto: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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