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When the State Fails, the International Community Responds

On June 24, two consecutive earthquakes struck Venezuela, leaving behind destruction, death, and thousands of families in anguish and despair. But beyond the numbers, what was truly revealing was what the tragedy laid bare before the nation and the world: a truth that, for far too long, many had chosen to avoid. The earthquake did not create Venezuela's crisis, but it stripped away every disguise it still wore. Amid collapsed buildings, overwhelmed hospitals, and entire communities waiting for help, the image that emerged was that of a country with no real state capacity to protect its own people in a moment of emergency.

And if any doubt still remains about the political origins of this tragedy, one need only look back. Some of the homes that collapsed or suffered severe damage were not victims of the earthquakes alone, but of an earlier and sustained pattern of negligence: buildings erected in haste, using substandard materials, many of them constructed under the banner of government housing missions and programs designed more to project the image of a benevolent regime than to ensure genuine structural safety. The priority was the number of homes handed over and the propaganda value of the symbolic key ceremony, rather than proper soil assessment and technical oversight, even

in areas already known to be unsuitable for such construction. Another telling fact reinforces this picture: much of the country's network of seismic sensors and monitoring stations became inoperative or obsolete over the years, in some cases through neglect and in others because sensors were dismantled or stolen and never replaced. A country that does not invest in knowing when and where the ground may shake is also a country that does not invest in being prepared when it does.

The Hours of Pick and Shovel

In major disasters, the first hours are everything. They are the hours when a rescue team can pull someone alive from beneath a collapsed structure, when an ambulance arriving in time makes the difference between recovery and death, when institutional coordination, the availability of properly equipped hospitals, and the resilience of public infrastructure cease to be administrative concerns and become matters of life and death. While family members, neighbors, and volunteers improvised with their own hands, armed with little more than picks and shovels, or organized fundraisers to rent search-and-rescue and debris-removal equipment, eyewitness accounts from various areas revealed a telling scene: a lack of trained personnel and machinery, institutional delays, disorganization, and a military presence that proved incapable of responding to the scale of the tragedy. Instead, it exposed the true nature of security forces that had spent years being trained to control, intimidate, repress, and kill —but not to rescue, protect, and coordinate a large-scale humanitarian response.

The Presence of the International Community

It was precisely in that vacuum that the international community assumed a central role. Foreign assistance did not arrive as

a minor supplement or a diplomatic formality, but as an urgent necessity. International search-and-rescue teams, medical personnel, technical specialists, and emergency coordination units began doing, in different parts of the country, what Venezuela's own institutions were unable to do with the required speed and effectiveness.

But reducing the international community to heavy machinery, medical brigades, and rescue teams would tell only part of the story. Other actors also proved indispensable: journalists, foreign correspondents, photographers, human rights organizations, technical experts, fact-checking platforms, and members of the Venezuelan diaspora who documented, verified, and disseminated what was happening inside the country. Correspondents from various news outlets reported direct pressure from security officials to halt live broadcasts from affected areas under threat of arrest, while local journalists' associations reported similar restrictions on access. Those restrictions even extended beyond the country's borders: cases were documented in which rescue workers were stranded in airports while awaiting authorization to enter Venezuela.

That episode compels us to broaden our understanding of who truly constitutes the international community that has sustained the country throughout this emergency. It also includes the work of correspondents who persisted in reporting despite mounting pressure, of press associations that documented the obstacles they faced, and of platforms specializing in Latin American journalism that compiled testimonies from reporters whose access to devastated communities and hospitals had been restricted. In a country where those in power contest the narrative as fiercely as they contest the territory, reporting with rigor under pressure has itself become an act of civic resistance and a service to the truth.

The Root of the Collapse: Neither Sanctions nor the International Community's "Siege"

When a country depends on international rescue teams to pull survivors from the rubble, recover bodies, treat the injured, and organize the emergency response, the problem is no longer merely the scale of the natural disaster. The problem is the extent of the prior destruction of the state apparatus. This is not simply a severe earthquake; it is an earthquake that struck at the very fabric of a society already devastated by years of institutional decay, corruption, mismanagement, and the capture of the state by an elite that turned political power into an instrument of its own perpetuation rather than of the common good.

This is something that people who have experienced major earthquakes elsewhere in the world do not always fully understand. Many sincerely sympathized with what was happening in Venezuela, and more than a few, in an effort to express empathy, repeated the same phrase: "I, too, have lived through major earthquakes. I understand what you're going through." Yet, despite its good intentions, that comparison overlooks the essential difference. The distinction lies not in the magnitude of the earthquake, but in the context in which it occurs. Experiencing an earthquake in a country with a functioning state means having emergency protocols, trained rescue teams, operational hospitals, and a chain of command that responds. Experiencing one in Venezuela meant facing, in addition to the earthquake itself, the near-total absence of those safeguards. That is the real earthquake behind the earthquake: the one that transformed a natural disaster into a human catastrophe.

And this must be stated plainly: that institutional weakness cannot be explained by the simplistic narrative centered on sanctions or the so-called "international siege," as the regime has

repeated for years. The state did not fail because it was suddenly deprived of resources or rendered incapable by outside forces. It failed because, for years—even during periods of extraordinary oil wealth—it ignored warnings and diverted, looted, and squandered resources that should have been invested in resilient infrastructure, functional hospitals, reliable public services, and genuine emergency preparedness systems. The underlying problem has never been a lack of resources, but rather their political, clientelist, and patrimonial use for the benefit of those who control power.

The Underlying Argument

The mutual dependence between the Venezuelan regime and the international community is not merely a diplomatic curiosity; it is proof that Venezuela's problem is not the force of the earthquake, but the chronic fragility of a state apparatus that prioritized its own survival above all else. Meanwhile, the international community is forced to operate within the limits imposed by that regime: safe-conduct passes, restrictions on press freedom, and cooperation and negotiation with officials under international sanctions.

Other disasters of similar magnitude offer a useful lesson by contrast. In Haiti, following the 2010 earthquake (magnitude 7.0), the international community ended up almost entirely replacing a collapsed state, with mixed results that now serve as a cautionary tale. In Turkey and Syria, after the 2023 earthquake (magnitude 7.8), international assistance exposed similar disparities between one country with institutions capable of coordinating the response and another devastated by years of war and authoritarian rule. The common lesson is clear: when the international community must replace, rather than simply complement, the state, reconstruction becomes slower, more fragile, and increasingly dependent on the

political will of those who govern the territory. Venezuela is no exception to that logic.

For that reason, the international community should neither withdraw nor remain passive, but act strategically. Its role should not be limited to sending rescue teams, funding, and field hospitals, indispensable though those remain. The experience of other protracted crises shows that it can also play a crucial role in overseeing how aid is administered, helping to ensure that reconstruction does not reproduce the same patterns of corruption and clientelism that worsened the original tragedy. That also means strengthening independent civil society and local organizations already working on the ground, rather than channeling all international assistance exclusively through structures controlled by a regime that has demonstrated its willingness to use even humanitarian aid as an instrument of political control.

Likewise, international cooperation cannot be unconditional. Delivering aid without requiring minimum standards of transparency, unrestricted humanitarian access, and accountability amounts, in practice, to legitimizing the very power that created the vulnerability the world is now trying to remedy. Conditioning assistance does not mean punishing the population or withholding life-saving aid; it means insisting on unobstructed humanitarian corridors, expedited permits for rescue workers and the press, and independent oversight mechanisms to ensure that resources are distributed properly.

The international community can also play a role that extends beyond the immediate response: documenting what has happened. Human rights organizations and United Nations missions have spent years gathering evidence of Venezuela's institutional deterioration, and this tragedy adds yet another

chapter to that record. Carefully documenting patterns of negligence, obstruction, and the political use of humanitarian aid is not merely an academic exercise; it is about laying the groundwork so that, when the day comes that Venezuela is able to demand accountability, there will be a documented record of what occurred. That quiet, sustained work behind the scenes may ultimately prove just as important as any field hospital, especially because the long-term consequences —displacement, interruptions to education, job losses, and new forms of hardship affecting millions of people— will be just as relevant to that record.

Finally, this crisis demands a longer horizon than that of the emergency itself. The fragility exposed by the earthquake is not a recent accident. Decades of institutional decay will not be undone by a single wave of assistance. That is why the international community must think beyond the immediate rescue effort and help design strategies for institutional reconstruction over the medium and long term: technical training, the transfer of expertise in disaster risk management, early warning systems, and the strengthening of local response capacities. Without that sustained commitment —one that must go beyond the creation of a dollar-denominated recovery fund— Venezuela will remain vulnerable, ensuring that the next emergency, whether seismic or of any other kind, encounters exactly the same institutional vacuum as this one.

Within this broader imperative, and with a medium-term horizon in mind, it is impossible to overlook the political process that the United States had already set in motion following the capture of Maduro and Flores earlier this year. The Trump administration outlined three successive phases: stabilization, recovery, and democratic transition. The earthquake struck precisely during the transition between those phases, at a

particularly vulnerable moment when the roadmap had not yet fully taken shape. That coincidence demands more from the United States than limited operational and humanitarian assistance; it requires honoring the responsibility and commitment it has already assumed, so that Venezuela's tragedy is not overshadowed by Washington's domestic priorities during a year marked by the November midterm elections and growing attention to the 2028 presidential race.

The international community has shown that it can extend a helping hand when the ground gives way. It must now demonstrate that it can sustain that commitment with an honest political assessment, without repeating the mistakes of other failed reconstruction efforts. The urgent question is no longer whether Venezuela needs international assistance —that need is evident and undeniable. What truly matters now is whether the world is willing to sustain that assistance over time, while speaking plainly about both the structural causes of the crisis and those responsible for leaving Venezuela so dangerously unprotected in the face of this tragedy.