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An Improvised Tsunami

Like any full-fledged natural disaster, the double earthquake of June 24 shook Venezuela unexpectedly and violently. There was no time for hesitation, nor much awareness with which to react.

The dust from the collapsed buildings had not yet settled when Venezuelans, paralyzed and terrified, tried to process what had happened. And within minutes, among a population armed with cell phones with bad reception, the word began to spread on the streets about the logical possibility of a tsunami.

But this second cataclysm —entirely conceivable in the minds of a population practically accustomed to disaster and with no seismic culture to speak of— fortunately, and for reasons that only nature itself can decree, never came.

The rumor was quickly overtaken by the horrifying reality of massive destruction centered in La Guaira. Certainty trampled uncertainty, and from that point on, Venezuela began to move through its new history —one even more demanding than before, when we had thought that was no longer possible.

But although the Caribbean Sea did not punish us, a many-faceted swell waits watchfully along the shores of our extensive coastline.

A tsunami with many faces. All harsh. All dramatically challenging.

Fractured Families: A Social Tsunami.

Without a doubt, this is the most devastating phenomenon we may face as a nation.

Displaced and incomplete families, without homes or prospects. Without direction. Without answers. Without explanations. Children left orphaned or separated from their relatives, with no outlook that offers any sense of what their future may hold. Mothers abandoned to solitude. Fathers faced with the demanding task of salvaging whatever may remain of a life that, in a matter of seconds, ceased to be.

It is too early to know the true scale of this social tragedy. But the United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF) already estimates that 1.8 million people require humanitarian assistance as a result of the earthquakes. Of those, 680,000 are children, whose precarious health and housing conditions are compounded by the likely loss of their schools. Although no final official figures are yet available, significant damage to the educational system in the hardest-hit states is to be expected, leaving it without direction. Never before has that expression been more literal.

This is a desolation unprecedented in our recent history. A widespread physical and psychological shock that has left an entire country socially devastated.

Post-Traumatic Stress: A Psychological Tsunami.

No one in Venezuela emerged unscathed from the deadly tremors of June 24. Even those of us who did not suffer the loss of family members or property relive each day, in our minds, the tragedy of so many destroyed homes and experience the emotional consequences of a deeply wounded country.

The long-term psychological effects of this unprecedented situation are still difficult to predict. But it is clear that the trauma caused by the earthquakes and their countless aftershocks, the immeasurable losses of every kind, and the prolonged uncertainty endured by the population is already having immediate consequences that, in the medium and long term, could lead us into a dangerous mental health crisis.

Stress, insomnia, recurring fear, and severe anxiety are some of the most obvious individual signs of a tragedy for which no one is usually prepared. And their paralyzing effects undermine any possibility of setting a course toward recovery —whether personal or national.

The World Health Organization (WHO) has stated that “there is no health without mental health.” As an indivisible part of the well-being we seek, the mind and its care must become an urgent priority if, as a country, we are to move forward.

Buried Incomes: An Economic Tsunami.

Against the backdrop of a volatile and uncertain economic situation, a double earthquake of the magnitude we experienced swept away, in less than a minute, the slim prospects of thousands of families already battered by multiple hardships and the excesses of the country’s enduring political uncertainty.

Domestic tourism, which until now had sustained the day-to-day survival of countless residents of La Guaira —after having been buried 27 years ago beneath the mud of the mudslides— has now collapsed alongside the destroyed buildings, once again shutting the door to a livelihood for an incalculable number of *guaiqueños*.

Businesses wiped out and ventures buried. Unemployment and a lack of income to meet even the most basic needs.

In other states that were structurally less affected, the earthquakes nevertheless further aggravated the already faltering economic system, driving away potential and much-needed investment and delaying even further the long-awaited solutions to a long-standing crisis.

And as a country, we must also reckon with the financial demands involved in beginning to recover, preliminarily estimated by the United Nations Office for Disaster Risk Reduction (UNDRR) at \$37 billion.

An enormous challenge for a state unaccustomed to planning, more devoted to wasteful spending and corruption, and marked by a highly questionable culture of emergency response.

Vulnerable Environments: A Public Health Tsunami.

The simultaneous and instantaneous destruction of hundreds of buildings left thousands of citizens —whose numbers are only beginning to be counted— homeless, giving rise to improvised and inadequate shelters, many supported by international organizations and the unwavering determination of a civil society that organized itself to confront a disaster that overwhelmed us.

As large groups of displaced people rapidly multiplied, particularly in La Guaira, overcrowding followed —and with it, the greatest driver of a public health crisis: the lack of running and safe drinking water.

More than 20,000 people housed in shelters with very limited access to sanitary conditions translates into an exponentially greater risk of diseases typical of these vulnerable environments: gastroenteritis, hepatitis, influenza, pneumonia, bronchitis, COVID-19, dengue fever, and chikungunya. Those traditionally most affected: children and older adults.

And with a hospital system that has always tended toward collapse and inefficiency, with little success in meeting the needs of Venezuela's growing low-income population, this threat becomes a calamity that directly undermines any possibility of responding effectively to the emergency.

Despite the evident assistance provided by global organizations and countries better prepared to confront chaos, the public health emergency appears to be only beginning, and the measures needed to combat it are, at best, only now beginning to take shape.

Uncontrolled Waste: An Environmental Tsunami.

Given the characteristic improvisation of a state accustomed to resolving crises by whatever means, the debris resulting from the fatal collapse of so many occupied buildings —some of them even overcrowded— is beginning to concern the most knowledgeable environmental experts, while also posing a major obstacle to any attempt to emerge from the chaos.

After the tireless work of rescuing survivors, followed by the tragic undertaking of recovering the bodies of those who died —led in many cases, and out of necessity, by the residents of each building themselves— comes the pressing question of what to do with the material remains.

This is not, as one might imagine, a solid mass of reinforced concrete, steel, rebar, and construction blocks. Every collapsed building is an immensely complex, misshapen tangle that also contains glass, household appliances, chemical waste, batteries, plastics, heavy metals, electrical components, minerals, textiles, and decomposing food, among other unexpected forms of waste. The lives of thousands of families compacted into more than two million tons of debris, according to experts' estimates, with nowhere to put it.

Attention is focused on the dangerous proximity of this rubble to the coast of La Guaira and on the misguided expediency and convenience of depositing it directly and quickly into the sea.

Another battle yet to be fought, whose outcome could make a decisive difference to the future of the marine ecosystem along Venezuela's coasts —an intrinsic value that has distinguished us as a Caribbean nation.

Democracy and Action

Venezuelans have traditionally been immersed in contradiction.

We live prepared to move forward amid the endless atmosphere of uncertainty. The incomprehensible is part of our routine, and we stop asking questions to protect ourselves from our own answers.

Thanks to that curious trait of confronting the inexplicable with determination, moments after the earthquake, the resolute cries of family members, neighbors, friends, and strangers could be heard loudly as they used their bare hands to remove debris in search of survivors, answering the cries for help beneath that devastation with fear, but still with enthusiasm.

Ordinary people, with the authenticity of those who take action on foot, chose to act immediately. Without guidance or direction. Without orders from those in power. Without a state. Later joined by the support of brave rescuers from Venezuela and around the world.

The thing is that the greatest value of democracy, in its purest and simplest sense, is the genuine possibility that citizens may decide —but also act. And amid this adversity, more than ever in our recent history, that principle was exercised to the fullest. For even though Venezuelans invoke democracy as an old and foreign formula that seems out of place on our national map, we live it every day like someone inhabiting a borrowed dream, hoping to make it our own.

But the challenge ahead is different. No citizenry can face the enormous waves to come alone. Because one thing is to lend a hand to someone who is drowning, and another is to carry them on your shoulders while swimming forever.

The future appears overwhelming. There are many tsunamis threatening us in the wake of such a deadly double earthquake. And it is deeply dangerous not to prepare ourselves for their arrival.

Venezuela needs to stay afloat. The country is drowning amid a violent swell that barely gives it enough time to catch its breath and keep swimming.

And the useless life preserver appears far too distant. An old, deflated one that has nothing left to give...