

COMPLEX HUMANITARIAN EMERGENCY IN VENEZUELA

Amazonas

Report 2019/2021



The state of Amazonas, in which the mighty Orinoco River originates, is located in the south of the country, with an indigenous presence of more than 20 different ethnic groups, representing half of a total population of 182,311 inhabitants¹. It borders Brazil to the south and east and Colombia to the west. As a border state, characterized by precarious economic activity despite its natural wealth, in addition to illegal mining practices, Amazonas is the target of other types of conflict, with indigenous peoples and women being the most vulnerable populations. In its territory of 180,475 km², the second largest in Venezuela, only 180 km of roads have been built around its capital, Puerto Ayacucho. Movement within the state is mainly by river and air, and land movement is totally controlled by the state, specifically by the military.

The Interdisciplinary Group for the Complex Humanitarian Emergency (GIEHC) in the state of Amazonas, which participated in the preparation of this report to address the impact on human rights in the state between 2019 and 2021, highlighted 12 issues that are essentially aggravating the emergency. The issues are related to the militarization and control of the population in indigenous territories, the performance of the security forces, the deterioration of public services, the lack of access to health care, the undermining of the right to obtain identity documents, crimes at the border as a consequence of forced irregular migration, poverty and unemployment, dysfunction of the State as a figure of protection and containment, the deterioration of education, the degradation of the ecosystem and a sustained attempt by the government to control the work of civil society organizations and humanitarian actors.

COMPLEX HUMANITARIAN EMERGENCY IN VENEZUELA

Amazonas

Report 2019/2021



Crisis of institutions leads to the defenselessness and helplessness of indigenous population

1. In the state of Amazonas there is evidence of a crisis of public institutions, which have become unstructured and do not respond to their competencies and functions, in accordance with constitutional dispositions, generating a vacuum that leads to a worsening of the human rights situation. Except for Puerto Ayacucho, it seems that in the rest of the territory the figure of a State that has no institutional representation is blurring and, therefore, the defenselessness and helplessness of individuals and communities prevails before a dynamic without clear rules.

The working group detected a crisis of institutions that do not respond to the problems affecting the population, even the most evident ones. This situation leads to human rights violations.

2. Militarization has created conditions for abuse, hostility and the commission of crimes and other acts that undermine the dignity of indigenous and non-indigenous people living in the state of Amazonas. At the time this report was written, in March 2022, four indigenous people had just died in a confrontation with Air Force soldiers over an internet router they shared by common agreement at the Parima B post, a locality 440 kilometers from Puerto Ayacucho. However, one day the military denied them access, causing the indigenous people to feel defrauded and demand compensation.²
3. In these conditions of militarization, the indigenous communities try to protect their territory through committees, but it is feared that this could also lead to violence. The working group also refers to the excessive number of military operations on the roads. On the southern road axis, for example, up to eight roadblocks can be found, with very short distances between them, and it is unknown why such operations are carried out, what their functions and procedures are, and to what extent they are necessary to fulfill military objectives.

Militarization of the indigenous population's territories increases the risk of abuse and violence.

COMPLEX HUMANITARIAN EMERGENCY IN VENEZUELA

Amazonas

Report 2019/2021



Controls not in line with humanitarian principles and objectives hinder and weaken efforts to deliver aid

4. Humanitarian activities by civil society are controlled by the government in Amazonas. Organizations that carry out such activities must report to the governor's office to obtain a permit, a procedure through which it is decided who may or may not act in the field and be subjected to the established conditions, often without understanding the principles, objectives, codes of ethics and standards of rights that guide humanitarian work. Rather than facilitating, misunderstandings generate difficulties and obstacles to humanitarian work and weaken the efforts that local civil

society organizations and international humanitarian agencies have been making for this purpose, given the rapidly worsening situation of the Complex Humanitarian Emergency.

Without the protection of rights, migration and mining compromise the integrity and security of the most vulnerable indigenous groups.

5. In Amazonas, we observe the consequences of forced migration of people fleeing the precarious and conflictive situation in Venezuela experienced at all levels. When crossing the borders, human trafficking, kidnapping and extortion are frequent. Many indigenous people, considered irregular migrants, ask for help for their relatives who are in dire situations in Ecuador, Peru and Colombia. It is now common to hear not only of young people working as food smugglers, but also of cocaine smuggling, in both enabled and non-enabled ports. The presence of humanitarian agencies has

brought sources of employment and this has helped, although not enough to produce significant improvements in people's lives. Mining activity also aggravates violence, including drug trafficking and other crimes.

COMPLEX HUMANITARIAN EMERGENCY IN VENEZUELA

Amazonas

Report 2019/2021



6. There is an increasing environmental degradation. Mining and other activities have irreversibly contaminated the environment, basically the water and soil in Amazonas. Mining activity has been growing and not enough attention has been paid to this serious problem that affects current and future generations. On the other hand, according to the Venezuelan Violence Observatory (OVV), Amazonas is the least violent state in the country. However, civil society organizations and specialists express concern about the risk that illegal mining activity implies for peace, especially in indigenous areas. In the centers of mining activities there is greater risk and incidence of violence in general.

Irreversible ecological damage from illegal mining and special concern about gender-based violence in mining
7. Furthermore, there is particular concern about gender-based violence (GBV)³, which is exacerbated by illegal mining. Organizations working in the state have stated that they cannot keep up with the calls for help, requests for support and accompaniment of victims of GBV, although there is also the possibility that the campaigns that have been carried out to make the problem visible are having some effect and, consequently, it is being denounced more. Armed groups continue to have ever greater control over the mines, as well as over indigenous territory, and are a major risk factor for indigenous and non-indigenous women and children⁴.
8. In Puerto Ayacucho, many families depend on food obtained through the Local Supply and Production Committees (CLAP), but fuel and gas are other major concerns for the Amazonians. The unemployment situation has not improved in the state, at least in relation to formal employment. Many people are living off the informal sale of medicines and food from Colombia. The economy and employment are still characterized by an informality that extends to mining. People continue to move to the nearest places to find side gigs, with the serious risks that this implies for the recruitment of people, especially adolescents, for illicit work. In Amazonas five years ago it was not as common as it is today to hear about drug trafficking.

Economic poverty and unemployment affect sensitive areas of individual and societal life

COMPLEX HUMANITARIAN EMERGENCY IN VENEZUELA

Amazonas

Report 2019/2021



Deterioration of educational facilities, lack of supplies and disruption of water and electricity services continue as schools return to normal

9. The school infrastructure, which was 80.4% deteriorated, continues to worsen⁵. Schools have begun to attend students during the return to on-site classes. Teachers have been incorporated, but the infrastructure has not improved at all. We face a shortage of equipment in over 98% of the schools, and as they move away from Puerto Ayacucho, this deficiency is closer to 100%⁶. There is no government policy to assume its role as State to recover the infrastructures and provide or guarantee the provisioning of schools. In addition to this, schools were

subjected to theft of wiring, water distribution systems and equipment, and even electrical transformers, during the recess period due to the Covid-19 pandemic. Many schools are still without electricity, but electricity service is still being provided⁷. No hay agua potable en las tuberías de las escuelas y aunque algunas cuentan con pozos subterráneos, las fallas de electricidad y la falta de mantenimiento inhabilitan este recurso.

Lack of food and school transportation increases the dropout rate of indigenous children and adolescents

10. Regarding food in schools, the United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF) has been providing an important support that has led to improvements in the menu of meals, raising the amount of nutrients, but it is unknown if this effort is sustainable and if it can go further to solve the causes of the Complex Humanitarian Emergency (CHE). Transportation is only functioning in the morning hours, and this impacts not only the daily routine of the entire state of Amazonas but also the access of children and teachers to schools.

11. An insufficient and irregular food supply and the lack of transportation lead teachers and students to abandon the classrooms. School is no longer a priority and there is a process of professionalization, and precarious salaries that pushes teachers to look for other jobs to make ends meet and satisfy basic needs⁸.

12. In view of an approximately 70% teacher dropout level, the State's response is to hire personnel without the necessary academic preparation for teaching. This measure is intended to give the impression that children and adolescents are being taken care of, but

COMPLEX HUMANITARIAN EMERGENCY IN VENEZUELA

Amazonas

Report 2019/2021



in practice it is not so. It happens very frequently what in the past was known as "multi-grade schools", where a teacher in the same environment ended up attending up to two or three different grades, without complying with the curricular design. This situation is on the rise, but the State does not recognize it or provide reliable data.

Lack of access to health services, which are in an extremely precarious situation

13. In Amazonas, the capacities of the health sector have plummeted⁹. There is no health policy in the state, or at least one that is publicly known, and the tendency is for public health to continue to deteriorate. In spite of the fact that Doctors Without Borders, together with other local civil society organizations and international agencies, made an investment in the José Gregorio Hernández Hospital, the ambulatory clinics do not work, they still do not have the capacity to provide care. In Puerto Ayacucho there is a High Technology Center (HTC), where only laboratory tests are performed, "...but that's as far as the name goes because the equipment does not work. Every day you can see people on street corners asking for financial help to be able to have CT scans, MRIs and other expensive tests that the official institutions do not offer".

14. There is no functioning X-ray equipment in public hospitals. The closest place where these exams can be performed is seven hours away from Amazonas and there are people who have no relatives in other states nor can they afford to pay the cost of transportation. The Comprehensive Diagnostic Center (CDC) in Puerto Ayacucho is not functioning. The new Maternity Hospital of Puerto Ayacucho was opened and the situation is quite worrisome due to the number of indigenous children that are confined there. Unofficial data indicate a worrisome mortality rate in newborns and new mothers.
15. The diversion of medicines and supplies in hospital centers is another concern. It can be observed that medicines with the seal of the People's Ministry for Health (MPPS) are sold on the street and there is no way to control their quality. Civil society organizations have received complaints about charges for patients to enter the operating room and that certain areas are only opened if patients or their relatives pay for the service. There have also been reports of charges for materials stolen from the Dr. José Gregorio Hernández

COMPLEX HUMANITARIAN EMERGENCY IN VENEZUELA

Amazonas

Report 2019/2021



Hospital. There is, on the other hand, a great tendency to self-diagnosis and self-medication, because some health institutions do not have sufficient and trained medical personnel. The precariousness with which they work in public health centers and the low salaries, have led health personnel to retire, not only from the hospitals but also to migrate from the state or the country.

Water supply and sanitation conditions are far below quality and access standards

16. Regarding access to drinking water, there is insufficient pumping capacity and no storage system. The sewage system is not maintained and there is no minimum sanitation equipment. There is no investment to replace damaged equipment, nor is there any new investment. Damaged parts are barely replaced. Almost 100% of the population of Puerto Ayacucho has some type of restriction in water and sanitation services. This situation is leading the population to live in

unacceptable conditions. On the other hand, there is no large watershed in the state of Amazonas that is safe from illegal mining activity, which generates destruction due to contamination and breaks the balance of ecological cycles. There has been an evident deterioration in the population's access to drinking water, something that had not happened before.

17. The main internet and telephone providers in Amazonas are the state-owned Cantv and Movilnet, and only the capital, Puerto Ayacucho, has service, albeit with a very weak signal and this is aggravated by power outages. Only Puerto Ayacucho has a continuously operating electric power service. In the rest of the municipalities there is a marked tendency to a lack of electricity and signal. In other areas there is simply none.

Incommunication in the state due to power outages and poor telecommunications coverage

COMPLEX HUMANITARIAN EMERGENCY IN VENEZUELA

Amazonas

Report 2019/2021



Geographical inaccessibility to public offices leaves indigenous populations without identity documents

18. To obtain a passport or even an identity card, an inhabitant of Amazonas has to travel to Caracas "or who knows where". The nearest town outside the state is San Fernando de Apure, which is a five-hour drive away. Amazonas is a vast territory, with very low population density, and due to the scarcity of means of transportation and roads, it is isolated from the rest of the country, which further complicates the possibility of accessing the offices of the Administrative Service of Identification, Migration and Foreigners (Saime).

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COMPLEX HUMANITARIAN EMERGENCY IN VENEZUELA

Amazonas

Report 2019/2021



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