

COMPLEX HUMANITARIAN EMERGENCY IN VENEZUELA

Zulia

Report 2019/2021

Zulia state is in the extreme northwest of the country. Its territory of 63,100 km² surrounds Lake Coquivacoa (Lake Maracaibo), the largest body of water in Latin America, with one of the largest oils and gas reserves in the American continent. Include 21 municipalities and has an estimated population of 3,833,935 inhabitants. Maracaibo is its capital city.¹

Zulia has approximately 600 kilometers of the frontier with Colombia, with high migratory mobility through the communities of Paraguachon and Maicao. Zulia population suffers from a Complex Humanitarian Emergency in which freedoms and human rights are massively violated.

Civil society organizations consulted that make up the Interdisciplinary Group to Address the Complex Humanitarian Emergency - GACHE, in the state of Zulia highlighted environmental issues, public service, health, education, and gender, which, aggravated by the pandemic, place large groups of the Zulian population in a situation of vulnerability.

COMPLEX HUMANITARIAN EMERGENCY IN VENEZUELA

Zulia

Report 2019/2021

**Structural decline and wide inequality gaps in water, electricity, communications, and public transportation services**

1. Most of the population of the city of Maracaibo suffers from water shortage. The lack can sometimes extend from one to six months in various capital sectors. People must search for water using powerful strategies, such as walking miles several times a week. The Amparo sector has not received water service for three years. The same happens in Los Haticos, where he would arrive every other day, then every 15 days, and in recent times it is not known when he comes.
2. Likewise, in many sectors of Maracaibo, the electricity service, which is irregular in a differentiated way in the communities, continues to be one of the main concerns, despite the efforts to equip international agencies with the humanitarian response plan in the country. Some sectors of Maracaibo have up to two years without a transformer. The structural fall is so deep that people have had to leave their homes or take cables from other blocks to connect.
3. In La Guajira, located in the north of Zulia, whose population is primarily indigenous, some communities continue to have up to two and three months without water supply, communications, or electricity service. It's not just blackouts that happen. The State does not guarantee the replacement of damaged equipment, leaving the population without electricity. Field studies carried out in the municipalities of La Guajira and on the Island of Toas determined that people spend days without electricity there. In La Guajira, two years ago, the main transformer exploded, and since then, the communities of Caño Pajaima and Cardoncito, comprising 265 families, have not had electricity.
4. On the Island of Toas², there is no water supply, and the antenna of the state company that provided mobile phone service (Movilnet) fell five years ago. Only those who can pay between USD 20 and USD 25 per month have access to the Internet, as long as there is electricity service. Maracaibo today registers better connectivity due to the entry of fiber optics from private companies. In urban public transport, after the dollarization in fares, there is a more significant number of operating units, which does not mean that transportation is more accessible because the cost is very high, almost five bolívares, which is equivalent to one dollar approx.

COMPLEX HUMANITARIAN EMERGENCY IN VENEZUELA

Zulia

Report 2019/2021



5. Organized crime groups continue to cause anxiety to the population of Zulia. The municipalities of Santa Rita, Miranda, Almirante Padilla, part of the municipality of Mara, and La Cañada de Urdaneta are controlled by criminal gangs, whose weapons include the use of grenades³. Between January and March 2022, there were six attacks in Maracaibo with grenades, one of them against the headquarters of the courts of justice, although in general, they are related to extortion acts against private businesses.

Armed violence by organized and irregular crime groups has the populations of the countryside and the city in a anxiety

6. What most worries farmers in the countryside are extortion, invasions, and cattle theft. These attacks have occurred in rural areas for many years but have moved into urban centers. In the border municipality of Jesús Enrique Losada, these criminal groups “decreed” an armed strike with a curfew that lasted 48 hours in March 2022⁴. In March 2022, the murder of four workers on a farm in La Cañada de Urdaneta was recorded. Days later, they stole a significant number of buffalo in Machiques. The municipalities that organized criminals do not directly control are under the control of guerrillas of Colombian nationals who are in Venezuelan territory. There have been armed strikes in the past on the borders with Táchira, Mérida, Trujillo, and the eastern coast⁵.

7. The underwater pipelines of Lake Maracaibo are not maintained, making oil spills permanent and increasingly perceptible from the coast⁶. Mercury and Cadmium have been found in dolphins and other fish. The presence of Cadmium is due to oil spills. Almost all the fish marketed and eaten in Zulia comes from the Lake and is contaminated with highly carcinogenic substances. There are no contingency plans or responses from the state-owned company Petróleos de Venezuela (PDVSA), even though there are conservation and security protocols and manuals.

Environmental rights violated by oil spills and pollution with risks of irreparable damage to health

COMPLEX HUMANITARIAN EMERGENCY IN VENEZUELA

Zulia

Report 2019/2021



Pronounced deterioration in the economic access of families to sufficient and nutritionally adequate food

8. During the regular monitoring⁷ carried out by the Commission for Human Rights of Zulia (Codhez) every 15 days, about the food situation in the state, in a period of seven months (from March to October 2021), there was an increase of 174% in expenses in bolivars that families spend on essential food purchases. People are not eating correctly. They consume bananas and tubers, fats, and oils, with an absence of protein of animal origin, except for eggs. Between October 2018 and

October 2021, the percentage difference in bolivars in the average price of beef was almost 6,000,000%, and in the case of chicken close to 5,000,000%.

9. The Codhez studies also indicate that to feed themselves, family's resort to survival strategies such as borrowing food, exchanging it for work or selling personal goods, relying on help from relatives living in the country or abroad, and leaving to eat, as adults, so that children and adolescents can do. Five out of ten households declared having eaten once or stopped eating all day, between three and five times a week. In 1,200 homes in five of the most populated municipalities of Zulia (Maracaibo, San Francisco, Mara, Cabimas, and Lagunillas), 95% said they receive bags or boxes from the Local Supply and Production Committees (CLAP) only four or fewer times year. Only 0.5% stated that they receive them every 15 days.

10. The deforestation of the basins that feed the Manuelote, Tule, and Tres Ríos reservoirs, the primary sources of water supply in the state of Zulia, with a storage capacity of 704.80 million cubic meters of water, is estimated at 70%⁸. Deforestation erodes soils and reduces their ability to retain moisture. For this reason, droughts occur in soils and riverbanks, and floods originate that murky drag waters to the reservoirs. The turbidity should be at 250 Nephelometric Units; today, it is 2,500. Added to this is the dragging of water from dumps and waste dumps, not only solid but also contaminated fluids and heavy metals.

Deforestation of watersheds brings soil erosion, flooding and the dragging of cloudy and polluted water into reservoirs and pipes.

11. All this cloudy and contaminated water is reaching the pipes in the city of Maracaibo, causing gastrointestinal illnesses, especially in the northwest of the state. In the Coquivacoa parish, since 2015 there are frequent cases of people with parasitic diseases. In the city, the purchase of cisterns and the construction of artisanal wells is already normal. Some 10,000

COMPLEX HUMANITARIAN EMERGENCY IN VENEZUELA

Zulia

Report 2019/2021



liters of water from a tanker truck costs about \$30, and a building could be buying two to three a week.

12. Additionally, in Zulia, some areas are not suitable for landfilling waste where wetlands and swamps are used, which are also utilized for housing construction. The state program *Misión Vivienda* obtained a permit to build 200 houses in one of these hydraulic landfills to return the waterfront to the city.

Indiscriminate use and occupation of land not adequate for housing construction

Gender disadvantages in education due to inadequate infrastructure and lack of policies against exclusionary and discriminatory stereotypes.

13. 89% of the female students in vulnerable communities in Maracaibo indicated that there were no comfortable bathrooms at school to change during menstruation, 86% said that there was no regular water in the bathrooms, and 12% said that the water supplied did not meet quality standards to manage the menstruation. In addition, 95% stated that the bathrooms were not clean and did not have privacy⁹. When measuring whether menstruation is a factor of educational inequality, 33% of female students said they had missed school because of menstruation. In universities, 14.47% of women indicated that there were gender stereotypes. Several interviewees stated they felt invisible in the classroom and unable to pursue their careers.

14. Women in Zulia do not have guaranteed access to safe contraceptive methods, not so much because of scarcity but because of high prices. Although humanitarian efforts have increased access in some communities, some women confess that their partners hide birth control pills from them or do not allow them to use other long-term methods because they see pregnancy or children as a means of control.

Contraceptive methods are unattainable for the majority of women, increasing sexist control over their right to autonomy

COMPLEX HUMANITARIAN EMERGENCY IN VENEZUELA

Zulia

Report 2019/2021



Increased risks of trafficking and smuggling of girls and adolescents, as well as gender-based violence, at home and in intimate relationships

15. Another problem that severely violates the rights of girls and female adolescents in the Complex Humanitarian Emergency is the increase in recruitment networks for human trafficking and smuggling, disguised as employment opportunities related to modeling and beauty pageants. In addition, the stress and anxiety caused by the humanitarian crisis, added to the COVID pandemic, make the violence worse. The most affected are young women, who flee their violent homes and become trapped in emotional relationships that are also violent.¹⁰.

16. In CHE, women specifically face a considerable increase in the burden of family care, with consequences in which they are affected by the deprivation of their autonomy, exposure to relationships of abuse, violence, and control, in addition to generating sequelae of trauma and physical and mental suffering. With the pandemic, women's access to state agencies that receive complaints of gender-based violence, especially justice and security agencies, has also been reduced. Women who report being victims of acts of violence find that if the police forces arrest the aggressors, they are released after a few days in exchange for bribes.

The burden of unpaid care work on women grows with CHE, affecting their autonomy, exposure to violence, and suffering, without guarantees of protection.

17. The situation that health personnel is going through in public hospitals, both doctors and nurses, is getting worse and worse, not only because of the lack of supplies, medicines, and essential equipment to work but also because, with COVID, the deaths of personnel.

They increased dramatically, mainly because the system did not guarantee the basic biosecurity implements for their protection, being in the first line of contagion in the same hospitals. Their low salaries did not allow them to buy them.

Some drugs that had gone out of circulation have appeared again, especially for common chronic conditions, such as hypertension or blood glucose, and costs have increased markedly.

It worsens a public health system that does not guarantee adequate working conditions, protection of life, or decent wages for health personnel.

COMPLEX HUMANITARIAN EMERGENCY IN VENEZUELA

Zulia

Report 2019/2021



18. According to the Venezuelan Violence Observatory (OVV), Zulia ranks seventh among the Venezuelan states with the highest number of suicide cases, which have been growing since 2015¹¹ in the CHE, making it a public health problem. In 2020, the Rehabilitate Foundation found almost 15% of people in Zulia did not find meaning in their lives, and about 60% frequently experienced sadness and hopelessness. The perception of the Zulian population about their quality of life shows an abysmal deterioration of their well-being and mental health. With the pandemic, suicides increased more. OVV found that, in the first four months of 2020, a suicide occurred every 17 days in Zulia, while in 2021, it was one every ten days. In 2021, Zulia registered 23 suicides and one suicide attempt (65.2% men and 34.8% women)¹².

Failure to Respond to Mental Health Impacts of CHE and COVID Pandemic, Suicide Cases on the rise

19. Between 2020 and early 2021, very few of the most common medications were available for mental health. In February 2022, treatment for schizophrenia cost an average of USD 10 per month, which, with the average salary, is impossible to pay. The pandemic removed mental health services in non-specialized hospitals, and the personnel was sent home. In some, such as Chiquinquirá in Maracaibo, the spaces of these services have other medical uses, and it is suspect will not recover them.

All types of violence against children, women and LGBTI people increased with the COVID lockdown

20. In the lockdown due to the pandemic, violence and discrimination against LGBTQ+ people increased worryingly, as well as violence against women and child abuse by caregivers. Some women and children were for a long time—and still are—locked up in their homes with their aggressors.

21. With the return to face-to-face classes, the students returned with stress, school deficiencies, and difficulties in readjusting to routines. Boys and girls who did not go through preschool had to be enrolled once in primary school. Others who were finishing the preliminary stage passed to the secondary stage. Likewise, ninth graders now have to go to university without completing their secondary

The COVID lockdown also created severe learning disabilities and difficulties adjusting to the routine when returning to school.

COMPLEX HUMANITARIAN EMERGENCY IN VENEZUELA

Zulia

Report 2019/2021



education well, creating severe problems due to learning deficiencies and difficulties in readjusting to school routines.

Universities are victims of policies that violate their autonomy and academic freedom, causing severe deficiency of their capacities and student desertion.

22. At university levels, the right of the community of students, teachers, and researchers to the autonomy of universities and academic freedom violation. On December 30, 2019, the CNU, through Official Gazette No. 41,790, proceeded to the unconstitutional appointment of Clotilde Navarro as Administrative Vice Chancellor of the University of Zulia (LUZ). On March 2, 2020, Navarro's imposition was completed after multiple administrative irregularities and criminal prosecutions¹³. On March 9, 2020, Professor Freddy Pachano, postgraduate director of the Faculty of

Medicine at the University of Zulia, was the target of threats and legal action by the now former Governor Omar Prieto¹⁴. This professor published a tweet where he mentioned two suspected coronavirus cases at the university hospital in Maracaibo¹⁵.

On July 12, 2020, a resident doctor and student in the first year of the Postgraduate course in Internal Medicine at the Autonomous University Hospital Service of Maracaibo (SAHUM) was harassed by police forces for using her house as custody of security material obtained through donations for the Society of Internal and Resident Doctors (SOMIR) of the SAHUM¹⁶. In 2020, LUZ's budget deficit was 97%, while in 2021, it was 99.99% concerning what was requested by the university¹⁷. This university's student desertion between 2020 and 2021 was estimated to be between 40% and 60%¹⁸. Since 2020, 77 insecurity incidents have been recorded at LUZ. Among them was a security guard wounded by a stab at the headquarters of the teachers' association and an employee released from the second floor of the Faculty of Humanities. The vandalism of the facilities has seriously affected teaching, research, and extension activities.

COMPLEX HUMANITARIAN EMERGENCY IN VENEZUELA

Zulia

Report 2019/2021



23. As a consequence of policies of censorship and attacks on freedom of expression, in Zulia, there are very few independent radio stations that offer informative programs, and fewer offer truthful information. The paper and online versions of the newspaper Panorama, a historical reference in the state of Zulia, disappeared. The local news media that try to maintain their coverage only consult government sources, with little depth and investigation.

Censorship and attacks on freedom of expression leave the population of Zulia without independent media.

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COMPLEX HUMANITARIAN EMERGENCY IN VENEZUELA

Zulia

Report 2019/2021



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