

THE EXPERT AS EVACUEE: AN EYEWITNESS ACCOUNT OF THE VENEZUELAN FLOODS OF '99

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The torrential rains that fell in several regions of Venezuela during the first three weeks of December 1999 brought about to the worst natural disaster in the nation's history, causing thousands of deaths and injuries and material losses worth millions of dollars. They dealt a heavy blow to the country's economy and its environment. Damage was most severe along the coast of Vargas State, North of Caracas. However, it hit other regions including, to a lesser extent, the federal capital itself.

The disaster coincided with the referendum to approve the new national constitution. The vote took place on 15 December, on the eve of the most intense rains seen in Venezuela since records began to be kept. Response to the disaster was hindered by the referendum, which prevented the population and the experts from noticing the imminence of the disaster, and giving it social and political overtones that have yet to be analyzed in full.

My personal experience during the disaster

I live—I should rather say, lived—in an apartment on the 13th story of a building in Los Corales, the “epicenter” of the hydrometeorological catastrophe. After some business traveling, I returned to my apartment on 14 December, one day before the controversial referendum was to take place. It had been raining steadily all month, even though it was nominally the dry season, which usually takes place between November and April. On Wednesday 15, it was already raining by early morning. Aside from this, no irregularities affected the poll stations, and the results of the referendum were made known by 9:00 p.m. A clear majority had approved the new constitution. I went to bed. Near 1:00 a.m., there was a power cut, which I noticed because the air-conditioning stopped working. It was still raining heavily. In spite of the heat, I went back to sleep.

I rose at dawn, as is my habit. Not only was it still raining heavily, but the sky was completely overcast. The balcony of my apartment overlooked the sea, but that morning

Disaster Region

