nothing could be seen: no sea, no sky, no horizon ... and it kept pouring. By 8:00 a.m. I called my daughter in Caracas to tell her about the extreme weather I was witnessing. Around 9:00 a.m., the foaming waters that were invading the ground floors of the buildings and rushing out towards the sea were dragging tree trunks and branches through the suddenly surrealistic urban landscape. I tried phoning Caracas again, but there was no dial tone. The surging waters crashed down from the mountains, overflowing the banks of the creeks that, full of rubble, trash, and discarded objects, posed a far graver hazard to the neighboring houses than any purely natural disaster could have done.

By noon, in spite of the foul weather, helicopters began to fly over the area, no doubt assessing the damage and planning a large-scale evacuation. At one given moment, I counted as many as 10 choppers aloft at the same time. Completely isolated in my apartment, I was without power, running water, or even a mobile phone, a flashlight, or a battery-operated transistor radio. Since I am considered a disaster reduction specialist, this lack of the most basic emergency supplies reminded me of a Spanish saying: *In the house of a blacksmith, the knives are wooden.* I had some water, soft drinks and food in the fridge—but no electric power. There was no sign that the rains might abate in the hours immediately ahead.

Rocks, some of them boulders, followed the branches and trunks dragged by the angry streams. I noticed one the size of a pick-up truck that might have weighed 35 or 40 tons. It fell down tumbling through the streets, and miraculously did not hit a two-story house close to our building. Instead, it stopped just short of impact, hindered temporarily by some merciful obstacle. A few hours later, however, it swept on its fatal course, and we were glad to have evacuated the residents of that house before this happened.

By now, the raging waters reached up to the roofs of one-story houses, frothing as if frustrated at their inability to swallow the structures whole. People sat or stood on those roofs, awaiting evacuation. Cars kept rolling over and tumbling down in the torrents of muddy water that thundered down from the mountains. In our building, the water and mud had swept through the parking lot and the hall, covering the gardens, recreation areas, and tennis court. No sign of the two swimming pools could be detected under the avalanche of mud. A car that had been parked in the basement came to rest next to one of the pools, as if eager for total immersion. I went to bed early.

On Friday 20 it was still raining, but the flood was gradually subsiding. You could see people leaving their houses and heading west (towards Caracas, perhaps, or La Guaira). Another night without power or television, rereading the Spanish classics by candlelight, I noticed just before bedtime that it had practically stopped raining.

The evacuation

Saturday was a bit overcast, but the rains had stopped. I packed several important documents, a bottle of mineral water and orange juice, a few slices of banana bread, and a pack of smoked salmon I could bear to leave in the powerless fridge. I said goodbye to my books and my classical records. Wearing rubber overshoes, shorts, and a T-shirt, I ventured out with the intention of getting to Caracas—on foot, if necessary. It was 6:30 a.m.

I descended the 13 stories, walked past the mud-filled swimming pools, and reached the coast. The coastal highway had disappeared. I walked across the newly formed beach until I reached the new coastline. It was easier there to wade through the brooks that were still offloading water from the mountains. Soon after beginning my hike, I had to climb over a wall of boulders that were blocking my way, and found the lifeless body of a 35-year-old man on top of one of them. It was the only corpse I saw in the course my evacuation, and I was grateful that I found no more.

Half a kilometer away, I ran into a line of some 2,000 people who were waiting to be evacuated by dozens of helicopters from an improvised heliport on the beach—that new beach that had not existed a few days ago. Talking to one of the evacuees, I told him of my plans to walk to Caracas. It would be madness, he said; I should join the line. It took me less than a second to make up my mind.

The sun was starting to prickle. A mild drizzle made everyone worry, but the worst appeared to be over. Helicopters of every description—20-to-30 passenger military choppers, 5-to-12 passenger commercial and governmental aircraft—landed and took off in quick succession. I counted 11 landings and takeoffs before the morning was out.

The behavior of the evacuees was exemplary. Professor Quarantellien has written about the solidarity that arises spontaneously in emergency situations, and his observations were confirmed by what took place on that beach. People exchanged water, biscuits, soft drinks, anything they might have rescued from their homes before engaging in this uncertain pilgrimage. The helicopters also brought in drinks, juices, and cookies that the officials, soldiers, and marines distributed efficiently and equitably.

By mid morning, a landing craft of the Venezuelan Navy was prowling the coast, no doubt looking for the right place to land and, in our case, pick up a couple thousand evacuees. By 2:00 p.m., I was bemoaning the likelihood of having to spend the night at the beach, given the relatively small proportion of refugees who could be taken aboard the helicopters at any given time. A Navy official explained that the landing craft would reach shore by 4:00 p.m. I imagined that it had been waiting for the tide to rise. So it was. By 3:00 p.m., we were walking towards the boat, which was maneuvering to land some 2 km east. An orderly line walked in that direction. I finally managed to board after 6:00 p.m., when it was already getting dark. We got on the boat by wading across waves that seemed to get bigger with every step. Before, while we had been waiting to embark, the president of the Republic had dropped by and wished us luck.

The highlight of the half-hour journey was a cup of instant soup that tasted better than anything I have had in the finest French restaurants. We reached the coastguard dock of the La Guaira harbor, where we disembarked by 9:00 p.m. I then vowed that, if I were ever to write about my experience, I would express my warm appreciation for the splendid job carried out by the officers and crew of the ARV T-62 Esequibo.

From the dock we walked 2 km west, wading through the odd creek. The area was bereft of public lighting, but it was reassuringly watched over by the Army and the National Guard. The full moon made the walk more tolerable. We reached Fort Soublette; buses were waiting to take us to the airport, which had been turned into an impromptu shelter and a distribution center for evacuees who wished to travel inland. Being one of them, and was taken to Caracas, to the *Poliedro*, a dome that hosts concerts, expositions, and political meetings, and which had been turned into the main shelter for evacuees in the capital.

We arrived there by 11:00 p.m. There was a line of eight or nine buses waiting to get in. I was tempted to stay, to watch and assess how evacuees were received, how smoothly things were organized inside the *Poliedro*. However, the desire to get to my home in Caracas was more powerful, at that point, than any professional interest in disaster response.

I escaped from the bus by taking advantage of an evacuee's apparent attack of epilepsy. He was allowed to get off the bus with his family, and I pretended to be another relative. I managed to hail a taxi, and the driver lent me his cell phone to call home. I finally arrived there past 1:00 a.m. on Sunday, 22 December. Seventy-six hours after the results of the referendum had been announced, my ordeal was at an end.

The benefits of hindsight

Days later, in Caracas, I learned some astonishing statistics. Between 1 and 17 December, the Meteorological Station at the Maiquetía International Airport has registered 1,207 mm of precipitation: 120 mm on Wednesday, 381 mm on Thursday, and 410 on Friday. The historical average for the whole of December is 57 mm, and the previous record—the heaviest rains ever registered in December before the disaster—only came to 221 mm. In other words, the rainfall over three days was 20 times the monthly average, and more than five times the historically highest volume of precipitation. According to meteorologists, the rains must have been much heavier on the mountain range, with altitudes of 2,700 m above the sea, that at the Airport, which is practically at sea level.

Nearly five months after the catastrophe took place, I have decided to present my own conclusions. They will no doubt differ from those of other experts. Generally speaking, the disaster was correctly managed as far as the search and rescue efforts were concerned—considering the considerable territory affected, and the obvious lack of preparedness by the relevant organizations. The need for an immediate response led to the establishment of an *ad-hocracy*, in which Civil Defense and its rescue teams, the National Armed Forces, government authorities at every level and, most importantly, civil society, all played key roles.

Recovery and reconstruction did not run as smoothly, given the blatant lack of proper planning. The future of the affected areas and their inhabitants remains cloudy. International cooperation was swift and massive, at least in the early stages. It is still too early to assess the usefulness of the aid provided during the recovery and reconstruction stages, when the well-known phenomenon of donor fatigue may have set in..

The disaster opened a window of opportunity that will, unfortunately, close sooner rather than later, if history and the experiences of other countries are to be trusted. I hope we will be able to draw lessons from this distressing event, not only to develop acceptable rehabilitation and reconstruction plans for the affected areas, but also to face the ineluctable challenge of preparing our communities for full participation in disaster mitigation, regardless of the natural hazards that may come to the forefront.

Personally, this experience allowed me to compare first-hand what I learned in books and other countries with what an actual disaster feels like, when you are caught in it as a victim rather than an emergency manager. It has been a painful experience, but one full of lessons. ■

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