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Towns still buried under mud

MACUTO, Venezuela -- The coastal hometown of Nestor Jaspe is a modern-day Pompeii, buried in neck-deep hardened mud and rocks from floods last month, where he has returned for the first time to survey his losses.

"My taxi is under here," he says, pointing to a dusty patch of earth that also covers a 20-seat bus that once provided his livelihood. "It's a brand new Daewoo," he laments. "I bought it last year."

Four weeks after torrential rains stripped mountainsides and unleashed floods that screamed down hillsides of coastal Venezuela with a lethal cargo of mud, tree trunks and boulders, residents like Jaspe are coming back to their ruined homes, toiling at recovery and contemplating the massive damages.

"I used to be middle class," said Luis Arlia, 38, a computer shop owner who lost his uninsured home and his shop. "Not any more."



A bus belonging to the local Police lies overturned in Macuto, Venezuela, where devastating floods tore through the city center.



Floods tore through the center of many coastal cities and towns, destroying homes and businesses.

Many devastated areas still have no electricity. Drinking water is in short supply. And relief officials flying over the afflicted coast, viewing the rubble in town after town, appear astonished at the extent of damage.

"I don't think people outside of here understand the magnitude of this disaster," said U.S. Air Force Col. William E. Osborne, who heads a U.S. military relief team. "Every river valley had a rock slide. So every town got hit. It's from serious to catastrophic damage."

It is still unclear how many people were buried in the mud and landslides from Venezuela's worst disaster this century. Estimates from the Venezuelan Red Cross and authorities under President Hugo Chavez range from 15,000 to 50,000 people dead. Osborne said U.S. officials believe there may have been at least 16,000 fatalities.

CORPSES UNEARTHED

Far fewer bodies have been recovered, but bulldozers pushing a primitive dirt road through the buried coastal region unearth corpses almost daily. Bodies continue to wash up on beaches, according to news reports, even as far away as the island of Aruba.

Triggered by once-a-century rains, the floods and mudslides ripped through an area of central coastal Venezuela where 350,000 people lived. The disaster also lashed Caracas, the capital on the other side of a mountain range, although with less fury.



Dr. Roddy Tempest meets with Government officials in the State of Miranda to discuss their plans to provide fresh drinking water.

Immense boulder fields, tangled with tree trunks and mangled cars, now lie where stream beds once dropped into the sea from El Avila mountain chain.

What look like scratch marks or tear streaks marked mountainsides, where vegetation on thin topsoil gave way and roared down gullies and streambeds.

“It became an earthen avalanche, basically,” said Dr. Roddy Tempest, head of a Durham, N.C. water purification company helping U.S. relief efforts. “The size of some of those stones exceeds 10 tons, and some of them came from several miles away. . . . It’s worse than it looks because there are still many people buried.”

ENTERING UPSTAIRS

To enter some high-rise buildings, residents clamber in through second-story windows. The first floors of hundreds of homes and apartment buildings, from La Guaira to Carmen de Uria, remain buried. In the resort town of Macuto, once dotted with beach restaurants, it seems that every block, street and home has its tale of woe.

“There are three dead in here,” said Pedro Amore, 50, a waiter who approached a visitor and pointed to a house. “It smells of death. Smell it?”

Relief workers say residents of Vargas state, the coastal area north of Caracas that was hardest hit, remain psychologically brutalized.

“People are in shock. They have a lost look in their eyes. They aren’t coherent when they speak,” said Winston Rojas, an epidemiologic expert who lives in the ruined coastal town of Los Corales.



Winston Rojas, working with Tempest Environmental Systems, passes out purification tablets to local residents.

ACCESS PERMITS

Access to the area is only with permits issued by the national guard, and heavily armed troops watch for looting.

On Macuto's Avenida España, relief workers painted the owner's name on the front of each home, along with a telephone number, hinting at the people who once occupied the houses on this now-desolate and buried street.

Jaspe, 38, and his family occupied a four-bedroom house until that terrifying night Dec. 15 when mudslides and rock avalanches roared down the Macuto River and swallowed the town. Some residents like Jaspe have returned in recent days, traveling along a newly opened coastal dirt road, to size up what is left of their property, then going back to refugee shelters or other lodging in Caracas by nightfall.

Looking resigned and shaken, Jaspe said his wife, Lilia, and their three children have suffered nightmares since the rock slides.

"I think they need to see a psychologist. It was traumatic. They were crying and screaming. We could feel the rocks coming down," he said.

Like many homes, the Jaspe residence, with its open-air rooftop terrace, was uninsured.

Before the floods, the small Macuto River flowed three blocks away. But many coastal rivers changed route, their original beds blocked by debris and boulders. The Macuto jumped its banks and now flows along what used to be Isabel la Católica Avenue, 25 yards behind the Jaspe home.

PLANS CRITICIZED

Standing on the river's new banks, retired school evaluator Humberto Castillo, 60, decried plans by President Chavez to relocate coastal residents inland.

"The Chavez government does not believe in the capacity of people to rebuild. This is an error. People here must rebuild what they had. Humans are creatures of habit, and we are accustomed to living here," he said.

Faced with decades of lax building enforcement that allowed scores of shantytowns to spring precariously from mountainsides, Chavez and other officials insist that entire settlements must be relocated. In Caracas, authorities this week began moving 1,500 families in the Gramoven and Blandin shantytowns, saying they were the most extreme cases of the one million residents believed to live on unstable lands.

"It is preferable to have 5,000 angry people than to have 5,000 dead people," Civil Defense director Angel Rangel said.

Osborne, the U.S. Air Force colonel, said he believes government estimates that full recovery may take as long as seven years are reasonable.

"When you look just at the scope of the thing, just the amount of material to be removed off the roads and out of the towns, it is tremendous," Osborne said. "But obviously they are well on the way to immediate recovery."

He said he believed that only another month or two are needed "before minimal systems and services are provided throughout the area."