

UNASUR and CELAC Must Expand Mitigation Methods to Deal with Natural Disasters

*By Odeen Ishmael, Senior Research Fellow
Council of Hemispheric Affairs*

In aftermath of Ecuadorian earthquake . . .

The foreign ministers of Union of South American Nations (UNASUR) met at the organization's headquarters north of Quito on April 23 to discuss plans by the continental bloc will help Ecuador deal with the catastrophic earthquake that hit the country on April 16. The disastrous earthquake killed more than 650 people and seriously injured 12,500 others.¹ It also destroyed 7,000 buildings, damaged about 2,400 more and left homeless more than 26,000 residents in the western coastal area of the country.²

Regional efforts to assist Ecuador

So far, over 2,000 rescue workers, mostly from UNASUR countries arrived in Ecuador to help in rescue efforts and to remove bodies buried under the rubble. The Ecuadorian government stated that "there has been an extraordinary response from at least twenty-four countries around the world, but especially from neighboring South American countries and more from the UNASUR and other nations in the Americas who expressed their solidarity through aid and rescue workers."³

Countries in the regional bloc, such as Venezuela, Bolivia, Brazil and Colombia, have donated tons of medical and humanitarian supplies and sent teams of rescue workers. The first group of rescue workers arrived from Venezuela within twenty-four hours after the earthquake struck.⁴

¹ <http://www.cnn.com/2016/04/20/americas/ecuador-earthquake/>

² <http://www.telesurtv.net/english/news/Ecuador-to-UNASUR-We-Cried---We-Cant-Deal-With-Tragedy-Alone-20160423-0006.html>

³ Ibid

⁴ <http://www.telesurtv.net/english/news/Venezuela-Sends-Rescuers-to-Ecuador-to-Help-Earthquake-Victims-20160417-0001.html>

Even before the establishment of UNASUR almost a decade ago, South American countries have been very quick in rendering assistance to their neighbors at times of natural disasters. For instance, they responded rapidly when Chile was hit by earthquakes and when there were disastrous flood in Guyana (in 2005) and Bolivia (in 2015).

At the UNASUR meeting, both the Ecuadorian foreign minister (Guillaume Long) and the Secretary General (Ernesto Samper) reminded the participants that not only Ecuador is experiencing "very tough times,"⁵ but also Uruguay and Chile, which after months of drought, have suffered from torrential rains that have extensively caused deaths and massive damages to infrastructure.⁶

Economic pressures

President Rafael Correa said that about US\$3 billion will be required to reconstruct the country.⁷ This is itself a very steep challenge to the country's economy. Mainly due to declining income from oil, Ecuador's biggest earner, economic growth is expected to be near zero this year;⁸ and exports of bananas, flowers, cocoa beans and fish could be negatively affected by ruined roads and port delays as a result of the earthquake. Fortunately, the oil industry did not suffer any serious damage and the main refinery of Esmeraldas was due to start up again and to function at full capacity.⁹

To finance the costs of the emergency, the government announced that some \$600 million in credit from multilateral lenders was immediately activated. It has also signed off on a credit line for \$2 billion from the China Development Bank to finance public investment.¹⁰ China has been the largest financier of Ecuador since 2009 and the credit was negotiated before the earthquake struck.

In addition, President Correa announced that sales tax would be raised from 12 percent to 14 percent.¹¹ He explained that all Ecuadorians have to shoulder the burden of the earthquake and that it should not be disproportionately placed on the people in the affected areas.

⁵ <http://www.telesurtv.net/english/news/Ecuador-to-UNASUR-We-Cried...-We-Cant-Deal-With-Tragedy-Alone-20160423-0006.html>

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ <https://panampost.com/sabrina-martin/2016/04/21/after-earthquake-in-ecuador-rafael-correa-announces-more-taxes/>

⁸ <http://www.reuters.com/article/ecuador-quake-idUSL2N17L0FY>

⁹ <http://uk.reuters.com/article/uk-ecuador-quake-idUKKCN0XE007>

¹⁰ <http://www.reuters.com/article/ecuador-china-idUSL5N17L5Y7>

¹¹ <http://www.reuters.com/article/ecuador-quake-idUSL2N17L0FY>

Importance of a regional mitigation strategy

The disaster in Ecuador illustrates the importance of actions to mitigate problems arising out of such tragic circumstances in the region. While UNASUR's Mechanism of Coordination and Mutual Assistance to assist in the event of natural disasters can be effective, that process must be expanded and streamlined to effect re-development of societies and economies that suffer from widespread natural tragedies.¹² The Argentine volunteer group known as the White Helmets (managed by the UN) is extremely useful in this regard, as evidenced by its work in Haiti over the years.¹³

Regional and hemispheric institutions just cannot wait until disasters strike before they begin to mobilize resources; thus, it is now necessary for the urgent establishment of a special regional permanent unit to quickly coordinate assistance to affected countries. This body should meet on a planned regular basis to map out strategies, thus ensuring its effectiveness as one of the best forms of disaster preparedness.

Necessity for a regional corps of development volunteers

Back in 1994, at the first Summit of the Americas in Miami, the late Guyana's President Dr. Cheddi Jagan urged Latin American and Caribbean countries to coordinate their efforts to implement initiatives to combat inequality and boost their human capital. In this respect, he proposed the establishment of a "corps of development volunteers"¹⁴ drawn from all the countries of the region and aimed at supplementing the work of the White Helmets (which includes medical specialists) to assist in emergency situations in various countries. Dr. Jagan envisaged that the corps of development volunteers—disaster relief workers, health workers, engineers, teachers, social workers, scientists, etc.—would assist in regional countries affected by natural disasters and to help in special social and economic follow-up programs to help in their recovery.

While this proposal won unanimous support at the summit and was included in the summit's action plan, it was never implemented.¹⁵ Dr. Jagan also incorporated this idea in his proposal of a New Global Human Order, which was adopted by the United Nations in November 2000 for implementation.¹⁶ However, much political foot-dragging has slowed down this process, but it is now imperative that either UNASUR or the larger Community of Latin American and Caribbean States (CELAC) takes the lead to establish this corps of development volunteers to assist in Latin American and

¹² <http://www.reuters.com/article/ecuador-quake-idUSL2N17L0FY>

¹³ <http://www.unasursg.org/en/node/664>

¹⁴ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/White_Helmets

¹⁵ http://jagan.org/CJ%20Tributes/Remembering/rememering_cj3.html#ishmael

¹⁶ <http://www.summit-americas.org/miamiplan.htm#20>

Caribbean countries affected by natural disasters— earthquakes, hurricanes, floods, droughts, epidemics, etc.—and also, at the same time, help to battle poverty, ignorance and disease throughout the region.

(Dr. Odeen Ishmael, Ambassador Emeritus (retired), historian and author, served as Guyana’s ambassador in the USA (1993-2003), Venezuela 2003-2011) and Kuwait and Qatar (2011-2014). He actively participated in meetings of UNASUR from 2003 to 2010 and has written extensively on South American integration issues He also serves as a Senior Research Fellow at the Council on Hemispheric Affairs (COHA).

