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## **Covid-19 threatens South America. Castro Méndez (infectivologist): “Nightmare scenario in Venezuela”**

What if it reaches Venezuela? "The problem is not IF it arrives in Venezuela but WHEN", pointed out to SIR Dr. **Julio Castro Méndez**, expert in infectious diseases, representative of NGO Médicos por la Salud (Doctors for Health), authoring a periodic report on the situation of Venezuelan hospitals. "I'm afraid it will be inevitable, it's only a matter of time, given that Covid-19 has started to spread to other countries of South America." It's a nightmarish scenario, "considering that the health system in Venezuela has been in a state of crisis for a long time. Hospitals are often short of water, which is essential in preventing the spread of the virus, and there are continuous power outages. 53% of healthcare facilities have no face masks supplies." **Epidemics also in South America.** Thus, while Covid-19 is very likely to spread there too, there is no doubt that it will be impossible to handle. Indeed, so far no one in the country has tested positive. This situation conflicts with the rest of the continent, where the virus has started to spread over the last few days, albeit to a much lesser extent than in Asia and Europe. In just ten days, it increased from a few cases to more than a hundred, doubling in just two days. On Saturday, Argentina reported the first death: a sixty-five year old man with breathing difficulties who had recently returned from Europe. The provisional situation of infected persons in the continent is the following, as of 9 March:

**30 tested positive in Brazil, 17 in Argentina, 15 in Ecuador, 13 in Chile, 9 in Costa Rica, 9 in Peru, 7 in Mexico, 5 in the Dominican Republic, 5 in the Lesser Antilles, 5 in French Guyana, 3 in Colombia, one in Paraguay and Panama.**

There are various interpretations on the lowest spread in the continent: some theorize - with no expert or health authority backing - that the virus' spread slows as temperatures rise. Others argue that Latin America, due to its long-standing experience with viral epidemics, is better equipped to isolate outbreaks. Others, in a much more fatalistic way, maintain that only few swabs have actually been taken and that, in any case, as Dr Castro himself explained, the virus started to spread at a later stage but it is expected to escalate soon. The trend of the last two days points in this direction. **Health system on the brink of collapse.** Venezuela is the country that raises the greatest concerns. There are doubts as to whether all positive cases are being disclosed, given that the Maduro government never reported anything about other epidemics in the country. "The Country is presently facing three outbreaks: malaria, measles, diphtheria. Dengue, with major outbreaks in other countries, especially Brazil and Paraguay, is seen in a smaller number of cases in Venezuela," the expert said. The country reported also many cases of tuberculosis. Castro Méndez said: *"These epidemics have been raging for three years, but the situation was reported by international organizations, certainly not by the government."* "Technically, there is a minimum screening capacity, I myself have been performing swab tests on incoming travellers from Europe in the last few days." But diagnosing large numbers of people in the present situation characterised by poor transparency and generalised crisis, is hard to imagine. It will largely depend on the number of cases "that occur in the coming weeks. But if the numbers were similar to those of Korea or Italy, the whole system would collapse in two weeks' time." The 2019 report by Médicos por la Salud gives an unequivocal picture. According to the study, 78% of Venezuelan hospitals had water shortages during 2019. In December, only 16% of all health facilities had water every day. Blackouts, which last year affected more than 60% of hospitals, remain frequent. The number of doctors in the country has fallen by 10%, and the number of nurses by 24%. ICUs operate at 60-70%, depending on the time of day, operating rooms at just under 50%. **Debilitated population.** In addition to this, there is a shortage of medicines, including essential ones, a situation that has been lasting for years, coupled by widespread debilitation and malnutrition that has weakened large sections of the population. "The fact is - said

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**Feliciano Reyna**, founder of the NGO Acción Solidaria, primarily involved in the fight against AIDS - that an eventual spread of the coronavirus would further aggravate the already fragile condition of the medical, nutritional and educational sectors. The shortage of water and personnel is extremely worrying, although a couple of years ago it was even worse, since humanitarian response has been put in place lately." *"The situation of elderly people who receive zero assistance, the poor and lonely, without education is of great concern", he added. "Let's just hope that when the spread of the infection takes place, its impact will be limited."*

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