
Quarantine in the La Guajira desert: the Wayuu indigenous people are dying of hunger before being hit by Covid-19

Whoever thinks that the best place to be quarantined is the desert, should look into the situation of La Guajira, a unique region, for the most part desert, extending across Colombian and Venezuelan territory, inhabited primarily by the Wayuu natives, among the largest indigenous groups in South America. La Guajira is a stretch of land separated from the rest of the continent by high mountains, with breathtaking landscapes. It is also a deadly place, abandoned by local authorities and plundered of its water sources, a vital element in an arid area, diverted to mining sites. *In the past years the La Guajira desert has turned into a hotbed of hunger, often even death, especially for many children.* In this context, the quarantine imposed - with different modalities - by the Colombian and Venezuelan authorities, has a heavy impact, leading to increasing water scarcity and malnutrition. Informal artisan work (the Wayuu are renowned for their "mochilas", the colourful backpacks) is now impossible to carry out, while thousands of Venezuelan migrants returning from Peru, Ecuador and Colombia have flooded into the region in the last few weeks. In fact, the Colombian-Venezuelan border is virtually non-existent here, but the local population fears the spread of the epidemic, which until now miraculously spared Venezuela, while in Colombia only few cases have been reported to date. It would have disastrous consequences on a population with a pre-existing poor health system.



[.who, together with other colleagues, has been raising public awareness and sending out a cry for help over the past weeks:](#)

["Not only children, also adults are starving to death."](#)

[Objectively speaking, it's hard to know if this tragic phenomenon \(some 4,800 children have died from starvation in the last eight years, according to estimates, especially in the Colombian area, the largest and most deserted\) continues during the ongoing isolation period. One thing is certain: the neglect of this area grew worse over the past few weeks, as confirmed by the indigenous leader, who stressed the scarcity of water, food and economic resources, along with a virtually non-existent health care system. The same journalist informed us of the protests of the indigenous people, the delays in the arrival of aids and the long walks that the population is forced to make to receive the few food items that are being shipped. Communications are also problematic, including telephone communications, as we have experienced ourselves: it can take up to a week to conduct an interview, given poor telephone line connections and frequent blackouts. Father Rafael Morales, the parish priest of San Rafael de El Moján and episcopal vicar of La Guajira, shared his reflections with SIR speaking also on behalf of the archdiocese of Maracaibo, Venezuela. "The Wayuu people can hardly afford living in a state of isolation" he explained. "They need to go out every day to seek food and water to survive." A few months ago a basic amount of foodstuffs and fuel arrived from Venezuela into Colombia, today the opposite is happening. People are demanding a sort of 'pass', a 'tax' on every vehicle passing through in order to eat. They are not asking for money, just any kind of food product." The priest confirmed: "So far, the only suspected cases among the Wayuu people involved two residents in the city of Maracaibo. No cases have been reported in this area so far. But there is a widespread underlying fear, linked to the return of the migrants passing through here. The fact is that we lack medical instruments to treat and assist whoever should be infected with Covid-19. Fortunately some international organizations are based here, such as UNHCR, Red Cross, Caritas, Unicef. Should the infection spread, it would be devastating for us. The Wayuu people are extremely vulnerable, due to the many elderly and to chronic malnutrition. Caritas Social Pastoral Care in the Diocese of Riohacha, assisting some Venezuelan families, also operates in Colombia to counter malnutrition." With regard to cases of death from starvation Father Morales clarified that "at the](#)

moment there are no official reports to this effect", but he mentioned a recent episode: "We were recently in an indigenous community, where 86 out of 1,500 children suffered from serious malnutrition, and approximately 250 from moderate malnutrition. We are trying to respond with the so-called 'ollas comunitarias', but unfortunately our efforts are insufficient." The parish priest described the situation of migrants returning to Venezuela: "Their condition is dramatic. Many arrive on foot through illegal crossings. They are robbed, mistreated, victims of trafficking and crime. *They have been forced to leave the countries where they were living because they could not sustain themselves during the quarantine.* A number of humanitarian channels have been created. There are four quarantine sites in the Vicariate of La Guajira, but they themselves are sometimes forced to go out in search of food and risk being carriers of the virus." Finally, from Colombia comes the voice of **Remedios Uriana**, a Wayuu leader living in Bogotá: "It's not true that La Guajira lacks water and resources, the problem is that they are being plundered and aid money are lost through graft. At the moment, the quarantine has made everything harder and many of our people are unable to go out and work."

Bruno Desidera