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## PRESS BRIEFING ON THE HEALTH RESPONSE TO THE EARTHQUAKES IN VENEZUELA - REMARKS BY DR. JARBAS BARBOSA

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*As they were prepared for presentation*

Good morning, and thank you for joining us.

Today, I would like to provide an update on the health response to the devastating earthquakes that struck Venezuela on 24 June.

Nearly two weeks later, our message is clear: the emergency response continues, and the needs of affected communities remain urgent.

Let me begin by expressing, once again, my deepest condolences to the families who have lost loved ones, and my solidarity with all those whose lives have been forever changed by this tragedy.

Since the first hours after the earthquakes, first responders, health workers, and communities have worked tirelessly to save lives.

I want to recognize the dedication and courage of Venezuela's doctors, nurses, emergency medical personnel, ambulance crews, public health teams and all those working in health facilities—many of whom have continued caring for others despite being affected themselves.

To the healthcare workers of Venezuela, I want to say thank you. Your professionalism, courage, and commitment continue to make a difference in the lives of people affected by this emergency.

PAHO has been working side by side with Venezuelan health authorities, United Nations agencies and humanitarian partners since the first hours of the emergency.

PAHO has mobilized technical support while building on its longstanding presence in Venezuela, which has allowed us to respond rapidly and in close coordination with national counterparts.

Our support has focused on three immediate priorities: saving lives, maintaining essential health services, and preventing additional health risks in the weeks ahead.

To strengthen the response, PAHO has deployed emergency specialists and supported the deployment of Emergency Medical Teams. Currently, twelve teams are operational and are expanding healthcare capacity in the most affected areas.

Coordination between health authorities, response teams, and humanitarian partners is essential to make the best possible use of available resources and to help ensure that assistance reaches those who need it the most, and fast.

PAHO has established coordination mechanisms to strengthen this work and contribute to a more effective health response.

PAHO has also delivered six metric tons of emergency medical supplies from our Emergency Strategic Reserve in Panama and has facilitated support for vaccination, helping to protect affected populations and maintain essential health services.

The initial surge of trauma cases has begun to stabilize in several assessed health facilities, but the health emergency is far from over. The response is now entering a new and equally critical phase focused on stabilization, continuity of care and early recovery.

Hospitals continue to function despite structural damage, limited surgical and diagnostic capacity, and growing surgical backlogs.

The priority now is not only to keep health facilities open, but to ensure safe and timely access to essential health care, including emergency care, trauma services, intensive care, diagnostic imaging, oxygen, essential medicines and other critical services.

More than 17,000 people remain displaced, most of them in 87 transitional camps. There, access to primary health care, safe water, sanitation, vaccination and disease surveillance will be essential to prevent further illness.

The greatest health risks in the coming weeks may come from interruptions in health services, overcrowded living conditions, gaps in water and sanitation, and reduced access to vaccination and routine care.

Maintaining immunization, safe water and sanitation, and continuity of care for people with chronic diseases, pregnant women, older adults, children, people with disabilities and those needing rehabilitation will be essential.

Safe and dignified management of the deceased remains an important part of the response and of supporting affected families. However, from a public health perspective, the greatest public health risks following an earthquake are typically linked to disruptions to health services, safe water, sanitation, hygiene and vaccination, rather than to those who have lost their lives.

### **Mental health is also an urgent priority.**

After a disaster of this magnitude, treating physical injuries is not enough. Thousands of people have experienced loss, displacement, and uncertainty. Health workers are also carrying a heavy burden. Supporting their mental well-being is as important as treating physical injuries.

While the emergency response remains the priority, we must also look ahead.

Recovery cannot simply mean returning to what existed before. It must be an opportunity to build back stronger, safer, more resilient and better prepared health services for future emergencies.

The scale of the needs requires sustaining and expanding the response in the months ahead.

To support these efforts, PAHO has launched a US\$24 million emergency appeal to help meet urgent health needs through the end of the year.

These resources will allow us to sustain essential health services, strengthen epidemiological surveillance, expand mental and psychosocial health support, support rehabilitation and restore the functionality of damaged health facilities.

The international community helped save lives in the first days after the earthquakes. That solidarity must continue.

Timely and flexible funding is critical. It allows PAHO and partners to respond where needs are greatest and adapt as the situation evolves.

No single institution can respond to an emergency of this scale alone.

PAHO remains fully committed to supporting Venezuelan authorities and partners throughout emergency response and recovery.

Our priority remains clear: to save lives, protect health, and support affected people and communities in their recovery, while strengthening the health services they need today and in the future.

Thank you.

**Dr. Jarbas Barbosa**