

TSF Mission report

Venezuela floods

24th July – 2^d August 2002

On Sunday July 21st 2002, an affluent of the river Apure that flows through the southern Venezuelan region of the same name burst its banks and flooded the entire town of Guasdalito (pop. 35,000) and the surrounding area. The equivalent of a whole year's worth of rain had poured down in just a few days. On Tuesday July 23rd, President Chavez declared a state of emergency in Apure and news of the disaster started filtering through to Europe.

Télécoms sans Frontières started its emergency stand-by procedure and contacted the Venezuelan Red Cross. The latter confirmed that there were 40,000 displaced people and expressed a vital need for telecommunications at the scene of the disaster: although one mobile phone operator was still active, its coverage was uneven and the network was often jammed. Furthermore, the Red Cross desperately needed access to Internet/email and fax facilities to transfer reports, information and photos back and forward to the Caracas headquarters.

TSF decided to intervene. Particular attention was paid to the security situation of the region, declared sensitive given its proximity with the Colombian border. A team was sent to the scene of the disaster with a number of Mini-Ms (satellite telephones), Gan M4s (offering access to Internet), a fax, laptops and a video-emergency system.

The TSF team members were welcomed at the airport by Red Cross representatives with whom they would travel to the affected area by military plane, the only available form of transport. They managed to take off despite bad weather conditions that impeded further flights that afternoon and the next day. During the flight, preliminary information was gathered about the situation in the Apure region and more particularly Guasdalito from the Red Cross team and the military officials aboard the plane. After a brief stopover in Baliras, the TSF team landed in Guasdalito at 18h30, less than 30 hours after President Chavez had declared a state of emergency in the region of Apure.

Trucks drove the TSF team through high waters to the army camp where the Red Cross had set up its crisis centre. TSF immediately set up a satellite telephone and Internet access.

The National Director of the Red Cross, Mr Arnaldo D'Yongh, gave a general briefing about the situation: 95% of Guasdalito was flooded and a new rise in the water level was feared because of rain in Colombia at the source of the river Apure. There was no electricity in the town, no fixed phone lines, one working but saturated mobile phone line. No electricity meant difficulties for recharging the batteries of the mobiles phones. There was a vital need for Internet and email. Furthermore, the Red Cross and other relief agencies' teams sent across different areas of the town were totally incommunicado once outside the crisis centre.

The next day, the TSF team members therefore decided to set up a fully operational telecommunications system with telephone/fax/Internet and data transmission at the crisis centre.

In parallel, satellite telephones were lent to a unit of the 'Defensa Civil' working in collaboration with the Red Cross whose crisis centre was located at the hospital, and to the hospital emergency doctors themselves who used them within the hospital and in the field as they travelled up and down the flooded streets of Guasdalito by boat to bring food, drinking water and medicine to isolated families.

Over the next few days, TSF set up satellite telephones in the evacuation centres dotted around the town to offer evacuees the possibility to phone their relatives.

"Estamos bien. Hemos perdido todo pero gracias a Dios estamos vivos" was the most recurring phrase (*"We're fine. We've lost everything but we're alive, thank God"*). Located in the town stadium, La Peliquera was typical of these camps. About 1 400 people remained there during the day but there were many more crowded under the tents at night, as families slept at the camps in fear of the rising waters but preferred to stay in their homes during the day to prevent looting.

After a few days, thanks to the equipment installed, the coordination of relief efforts for Guasualito was well organized and the authorities, the Red Cross and the other relief efforts were able to turn their attention to other areas of the region. In particular, reports had come through of an area with 4,000 isolated people, only accessible by helicopter. TSF decided to send three of its team members to the site, one person staying on in Guasualito.

TSF was the first NGOs to arrive in El Palmarito where it immediately set up a telecommunications' centre for the Defensa Civil.

The only means of communication available in El Palmarito was the radio station "*Fe y Alegria*" which continuously broadcast messages to the inhabitants of the area about the flood situation and the arrival of relief efforts. When the Defensa Civil arrived in El Palmarito, a message was broadcast over the radio to let inhabitants of the area know at specific meeting points, together with the distribution of food and medicines, there would be the possibility to make free telephone calls. The meeting points were only accessible by boat but thanks to this message, at the given time and place scores of families arrived to benefit from the assistance.

Finally, its mission completed in El Palmarito, the TSF team flew back to Guasualito. There, the telecommunication network having been partially restored and the emergency phase coming to an end, TSF decided to end the mission.

At a press conference held at the French Embassy in Caracas, the French Ambassador congratulated Télécoms Sans Frontières for its intervention.

During this mission, TSF gave 800 families the opportunity to contact their relatives. It also provided eight days of permanent Internet connections (MPDS and ISDN) to the relief efforts.