

T201

2014 Disease Outbreak in Venezuela

Topic Description

In September 2014, Dr. Ángel Sarmiento, President of the State Bar Association of Medical Doctors in Aragua, Venezuela, announced that 8 people had died from a severe, acute unidentified illness in Maracay Central Hospital (El Servicio Autónomo Hospital Central de Maracay or SAHCM). Symptoms of the disease included high fever, spots that developed into blisters and boils, internal hemorrhaging, bleeding from the nose, mouth and ears, and organ failure. Initially the government denied there was a problem: Tareck El Aissami, then-Governor of Aragua state, said each victim had died of different causes, none of which involved hemorrhaging. He denounced Dr. Sarmiento as a member of Democratic Action (Accion Democratica) party and accused him of perpetrating a “terrorist campaign” and “psychological warfare” against the public. Venezuelan President Nicolás Maduro also authorized El Aissami to launch investigations and take legal action against domestic and foreign journalists and media who reported on the outbreak. Widespread public alarm, speculation, and rumors about the disease led to numerous conflicting claims about the cause of the outbreak, including Ebola, which was frequently in the news and already causing world-wide concern. On September 17, 2014, Maria Eugenia Landaeta, head of the infectious diseases department at the University Hospital of Caracas (Hospital Universitario de Caracas), said that the deaths were likely complicated cases of chikungunya (CHIKV), a mosquito-borne virus that was already known to be present in Venezuela. A diagnosis of chikungunya was made definitively around September 22, 2014. In the meantime, two more patients had died, and Dr. Sarmiento had fled the country.

Expected Conflicting Information

There is conflict as to whether the outbreak actually occurred, or was a hoax. The principal hoax narrative is the outbreak announcement was a “terrorist campaign” or “psychological warfare” being conducted by Dr. Sarmiento and foreign media to alarm the Venezuelan public, and possibly to discredit the Maduro government. With respect to the outbreak itself, conflicting reports exist about which disease caused the outbreak. Public speculation about the identity of the disease included chikungunya, Ebola, dengue, meningococemia, and variants of less specific terms such as “hemorrhagic fever”. Dr. Sarmiento also initially ruled out several diseases as causes of the outbreak, including Ebola, meningitis, dengue, and chikungunya. Conflict also exists about the specific medical conditions from which patients in the outbreak ultimately died. Non-governmental sources reported that patients died from several medical conditions, including: hemorrhaging, disseminated intravascular coagulation, organ failure, multiorgan failure, liver failure, and kidney failure. Government sources claimed victims died from a different set of unrelated medical conditions, in particular: poisoning, hypovolemic shock, cancer, skin infections, leukemia, diabetes, and not febrile hemorrhages. The number of deaths in the September 2014 outbreak is disputed. It may be reported as 8, 9, or 10, depending on the date (as more people died after the outbreak was announced). Relatedly, there is conflict about the overall number of cases of Chikungunya in Venezuela as of September 2014. The number of cases may be reported as 398, 634, 798, more than 34,000, at least 65,000, between 65,000 and 117,000, between 65,000 and 120,000.

Finally, there is some conflict about who was behind the outbreak, including speculation that a “developed country” attacked Venezuela with a virus, and a suggestion by Maduro that the Opposition introduced the disease as an act of biological warfare.

Queries:

T201_Q001	Why did Dr Ángel Sarmiento announce on September 11, 2014, that eight people had died from the outbreak of an unidentified disease in Venezuela?
T201_Q002	What caused people to die in the 2014 outbreak of an unidentified disease in Venezuela?
T201_Q003	How many people died in the 2014 outbreak of an unidentified disease in Venezuela?
T201_Q004	What medical condition(s) did people have in the 2014 outbreak of an unidentified disease in Venezuela?
T201_Q005	Who was behind the 2014 outbreak of an unidentified disease in Venezuela?
T201_Q006	How many people contracted chikungunya in Venezuela in 2014?
T201_Q007	Was there really an outbreak of an unidentified disease in Venezuela in 2014, or was it a hoax?

T202

2017 Venezuelan Constituent Assembly Election

Topic Description

On March 29, 2017, following months of disagreement between the Venezuelan Supreme Tribunal of Justice (Tribunal Supremo de Justicia or TSJ) and the opposition-led National Assembly (Asamblea Nacional), the TSJ annulled the legislative powers of the National Assembly and shifted those powers to itself. Though the TSJ reversed its decision a few days later on April 1, protests and political unrest which had been sparked by the initial stripping of the National Assembly's power continued. On May 1, 2017, amidst an ongoing constitutional crisis in Venezuela, president Nicolás Maduro issued a presidential decree calling for a constituent assembly to rewrite the existing constitution. While the Venezuelan political opposition and some members of the international community claimed the move was an attempt by the president to consolidate power among himself and his allies, Maduro insisted that a new constitution was necessary to promote "reconciliation and peace". The constitution would be rewritten by the Constituent National Assembly (Asamblea Nacional Constituyente or ANC), the members of which would be decided by national elections to take place on July 30, 2017. Various protests leading up to and on the day of the elections resulted in violence which led to several deaths. The handling and results of the elections were heavily scrutinized, with both the government and opposition being accused of interference and several claims that the voter turnout figures and final results were fraudulent. Critics often cite the results of a counter-referendum held by the opposition on July 16, in which over 99% of respondents allegedly voted to reject the Constituent Assembly, as evidence of electoral misconduct by the government. Over 40 countries and supranational organizations, including the Organization of American States and the EU, did not recognize the new assembly.

Expected Conflicting Information

The legality of the elections and the presidential decree that led to them is one of the primary nodes of conflict within this topic. The previous rewrite of the constitution which had been adopted in 1999 was the result of a national referendum called for by then-president Hugo Chávez. Whether that constitution gave Maduro the authority to convene a similar constituent assembly by presidential decree is a topic of debate. There are also reports of both the government and opposition unduly influencing the results of the elections. Witnesses reported that voters had been coerced into participating by the government, which had allegedly threatened citizens with the loss of their jobs and government benefits if they did not vote. Further, several sources, including Smartmatic, a technology company which had assisted Venezuela with the elections, claimed that the turnout figures reported by the government had been manipulated to show a higher voter turnout. Despite the government's claim that over 8 million citizens had voted in the elections, Reuters reported that only 3.7 million people had voted by 5:30 PM on July 30, and the opposition announced a turnout figure as low as 2.1 million voters. Meanwhile, the opposition was accused of misconduct in the form of attempting to block voters' access to polling stations using barricades, violently attacking polling stations, and destroying polling materials. Though the government had banned protests for the duration of the election, demonstrations persisted which led to several deaths. The number of reported deaths which occurred during election-related violence on July 30 ranges from 1 to 17. Deaths had also occurred in unrest in the weeks leading up to the election, with reports conflicting on who was killed by whom and how. Confusion during an event in which Maduro attempted to vote publicly on the morning of the elections also led to a small node of conflict. When an election official

attempted to use a smartphone to scan Maduro's ID card before he cast his vote, television crews captured a message on the screen which read, "La persona no existe o la carné fue anulado," "This person does not exist or the ID was canceled." Though a hacker later claimed he had deleted Maduro's record from a government database, the incident fanned previously dormant speculation that Maduro, whose mother some believe to be a Colombian national, might not have been born in Venezuela, and therefore might be ineligible for the presidency.

Queries

T202_Q001	Who interfered with voter participation in the 2017 Venezuelan Constituent Assembly election?
T202_Q002	In what ways was voter participation interfered with in the 2017 Venezuelan Constituent Assembly election?
T202_Q003	Who has the authority to convene a Constituent Assembly in Venezuela?
T202_Q004	What was voter turnout for the 2017 Venezuelan Constituent Assembly election?
T202_Q005	Who was killed as a result of the violence on July 30, 2017 related to the Venezuelan Constituent Assembly election?
T202_Q006	Who killed the people who died as a result of the violence on July 30, 2017 related to the Venezuelan Constituent Assembly election?
T202_Q007	How many people were killed as a result of the violence on July 30, 2017 related to the Venezuelan Constituent Assembly election?
T202_Q008	How were people killed as a result of the violence on July 30, 2017 related to the Venezuelan Constituent Assembly election?
T202_Q009	Who was killed as a result of the violence between July 1, 2017 and July 29, 2017 related to the Venezuelan Constituent Assembly election?
T202_Q010	Who killed the people who died as a result of the violence between July 1, 2017 and July 29, 2017 related to the Venezuelan Constituent Assembly election?
T202_Q011	How many people were killed as a result of the violence between July 1, 2017 and July 29, 2017 related to the Venezuelan Constituent Assembly election?"
T202_Q012	How were the victims killed who died as a result of the violence between July 1, 2017 and July 29, 2017 related to the Venezuelan Constituent Assembly election?
T202_Q013	What country is Nicolás Maduro a citizen of?

T203

Drone Explosions in Caracas

Topic Description

On August 4, 2018, Venezuelan President Nicolás Maduro was giving a speech after a military parade to onlookers and hundreds of soldiers assembled on Avenida Bolívar in Caracas Venezuela, at a ceremony to honor the Bolivarian National Guard. About one hour into the speech (which was broadcast live on state television), Maduro, his wife, and others on the stage flinched and looked up. A few seconds later, there was an audible explosion, and men rushed around Maduro to shield him. Initially, it was unclear what had happened, including whether Maduro had been injured or killed. Ultimately, authorities and most observers agreed that two DJI-M600 drones had exploded: the first in mid-air, less than a block from the site of Maduro's speech (and within his line of sight), and the second 14 seconds later and two blocks away (after it hit a nearby apartment building). Though Maduro was unharmed, the government said that several soldiers were hurt in the incident. In the wake of the drone explosions, the government began making arrests and cracking down on members of the opposition.

Expected Conflicting Information

Conflicting information about the drone explosions centers on whether the incident was an assassination attempt on Maduro and who may have been involved in the attempt. However, media reports also conflict on several details of the incident itself, including how many drones were present, what caused the drone(s) to explode, how many people were injured by the explosions, from where the drones were detonated, and what the assembled troops did after the explosions. Maduro and his administration have primarily characterized the incident as an assassination attempt on Maduro, while others have claimed that the attack was a hoax staged by the Venezuelan government to justify cracking down on the opposition. Those who consider the explosions an assassination attempt have blamed and implicated a range of parties for the attack, including Colombian President Juan Manuel Santos (working with ultra-right groups in Venezuela), Venezuelan opposition leaders (including Julio Borges and Juan Requesens), a former Venezuelan security official (Juan Carlos Monaterios Vanegas), and other countries (including Russia and the United States). In addition, a number of other parties have claimed responsibility for and/or foreknowledge of the incident, including Soldados de Fanelas "Soldiers in T-shirts", a former police chief named Salvatore Lucchese, Peruvian-American journalist Jaime Bayly, The Resistance, and various unnamed groups of civilians and military defectors and dissidents.

Queries

T203_Q001	How many drones were present in Caracas on August 4, 2018?
T203_Q002	What caused the destruction of the drone(s) in Caracas on August 4, 2018?
T203_Q003	Who carried out the drone attacks in Caracas on August 4, 2018?
T203_Q004	Who assisted in the drone attacks in Caracas on August 4, 2018?
T203_Q005	Who was behind the drone attacks in Caracas on August 4, 2018?

T203_Q006	How many people were injured by drones in Caracas on August 4, 2018?
T203_Q007	How did the troops assembled on Avenida Bolívar on August 4, 2018 respond to the drone attack?
T203_Q008	What caused the fire in the Don Eduardo building on August 4, 2018?