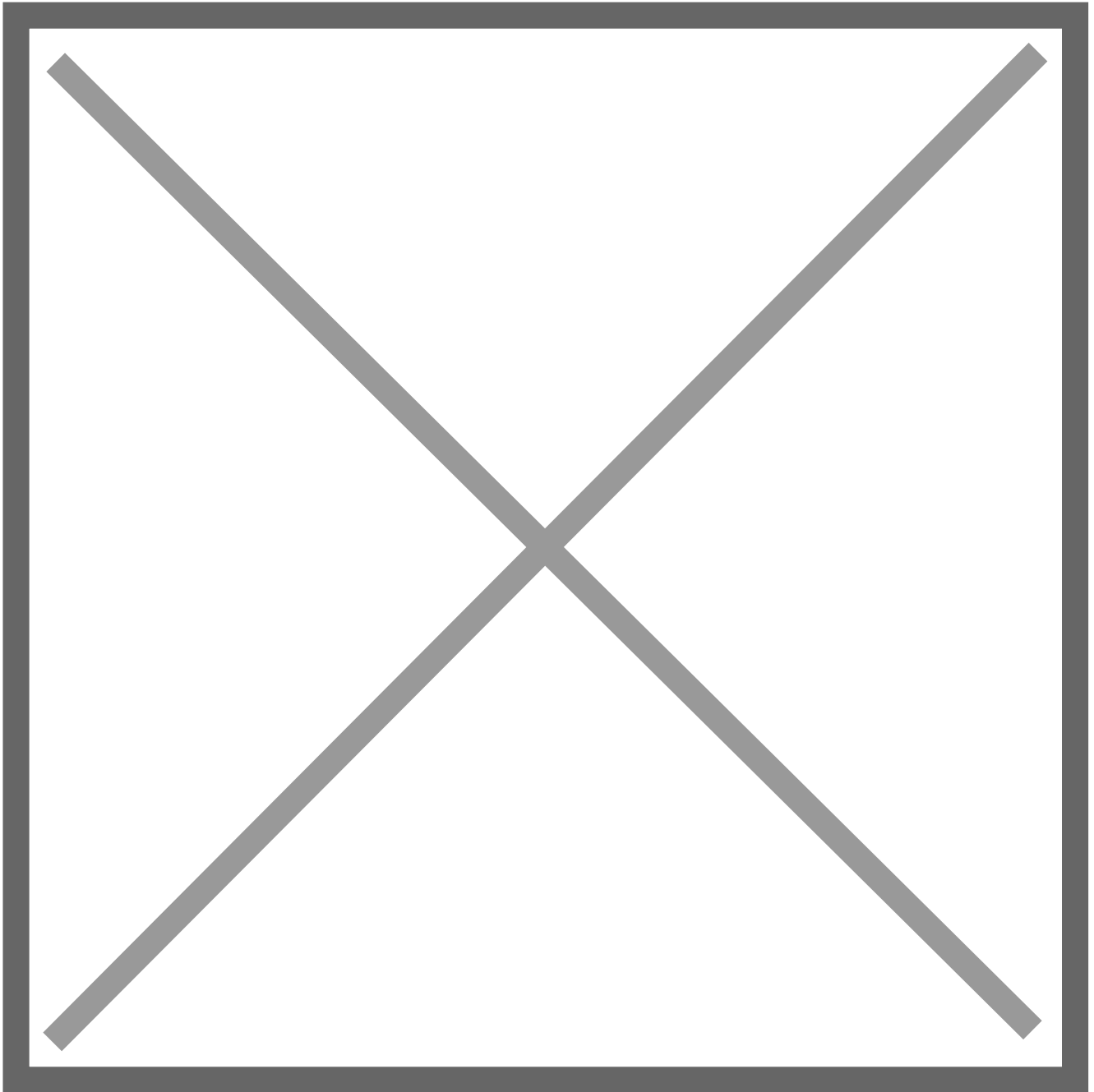




People line up in Catia La Mar, Venezuela, to receive aid July 9, 2026, at a makeshift shelter for displaced people at a baseball field, in the aftermath of the June 24 earthquakes. The death toll from the two earthquakes has risen to at least 4,500 with thousands still missing. (OSV News/Reuters/Leonardo Fernandez Vilorio)

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July 15, 2026

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Damage from two back-to-back earthquakes that struck Venezuela June 24 is "a lot worse than expected," said a Catholic Relief Services disaster response worker, who asked people to "keep Venezuelans in their hearts."

Arriving in the Latin American nation July 9, Robyn Fieser — who is coordinating CRS emergency communications on the ground — found "there were literally blocks of buildings that were just pancaked onto themselves. There was massive destruction for blocks."

"It looked a little bit like a war zone," said Fieser, speaking to OSV News from Venezuela in a July 13 call.

At least 4,500 were killed during the 7.2 and 7.5 quakes, which took place just 39 seconds apart.

Thousands remain missing, with many survivors struggling to excavate the bodies of loved ones amid the rubble.

"I talked to one man who said he felt the earthquakes, immediately ran home, put his shoes on and went out to start helping," Fieser said. "He was one of those just trying to help people get out any way they could."

Electrical, water and sanitation infrastructure has been severely degraded by the quakes.

Catholic leaders and organizations quickly mobilized to provide aid, with CRS — the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops' official overseas humanitarian and development agency — "working extremely closely" with its in-country partner Caritas Venezuela, CRS spokesperson Brittany Wichtendahl told OSV News July 8.

Both organizations are part of Caritas Internationalis, the universal Catholic Church's global humanitarian network.

CRS and Caritas Venezuela have together distributed hundreds of emergency food and hygiene kits, along with tarpaulins for shelter.

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"People have lost their homes," said Fieser. "I met three nurses who are staying in tents in a little plaza right by their church."

CRS and Caritas Venezuela are working to provide Venezuelans with the basic necessities for daily life as they work to rebuild, she said.

"They need food, they need water," said Fieser. "We're providing hygiene kits so people can wash and brush their teeth, and we're taking care of diapers for their children. We're providing blankets, food — they need everything, because they're not home."

The disaster compounds ongoing, multiyear crises in the Latin American nation. In a situation update posted to its website, CRS noted that prior to the two earthquakes, "an estimated 7.9 million people were already in need of assistance due to years of economic crisis, food insecurity and weakened public services."

Current leader Delcy Rodríguez — who ascended to power following the U.S.'s January capture and indictment of then-President Nicolás Maduro and his wife, Cilia Flores — has faced growing ire from many Venezuelans, who have pointed to her government's slow response to the quakes.

Fieser said that the damage is far more than physical.

"Every single person that I've spoken to is traumatized — every single person," she said.

One woman with whom Fieser spoke emerged from her apartment after the quakes to see "people covered in dust, people lying on the ground" as an alarm sounded on her phone.

Now, "any type of loud noise that even resembles an alarm scares her," said Fieser.

Those who still have access to their homes remain wary, especially since "there have been a lot of aftershocks," she said.

"I've talked to people who say they can't close the doors when they're showering because they're too afraid to be caught in a room," said Fieser, adding that some "are sleeping next to the front door of their houses because they don't want to be caught."

Still others "are just crying nonstop," Fieser said. "The trauma aspect of this is extremely powerful. And I think that emotional support is as important, in some ways, as other life-saving things like food and water. People are seriously traumatized by this."

Fieser admitted that, with bodies still under the rubble, "you can smell" decomposition.

Yet despite the horrific consequences of the quakes, she said, "what's so impressive is that even though people are traumatized — and they're living, obviously, next to buildings where there are bodies, and many people still don't know where their loved ones are — there's a spirit of coming together."

She pointed to the three nurses who are living in a tent "but went right back to work the next day at the hospital to tend to the injured and the grieving."

"I feel like people are really getting some kind of relief by uniting and helping and being together during this really tragic moment," said Fieser.

Still, she said, "it's a long road" to recovery.

"It doesn't happen in a day, and the need remains very tremendous," said Fieser, asking people to "keep the Venezuelans in their hearts."