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## People's fundraising initiative to save the only hospital. Msgr. Barreto (Quibdó): "Emblematic of the general situation"

A desperate attempt to save the only hospital in the poverty-stricken region. The citizens of Colombia have launched a heartfelt fundraising campaign to help workers at Quibdó hospital, capital of Chocó western department, but so far leaving the relevant institutions unperturbed. Workers at the San Francisco de Asís hospital, compelled to work exhausting shifts to cope with Covid-19, which hit hard in these areas and reappeared over the past few weeks due to the Omicron variant, have not received their salaries for five months. This is hardly a new issue, since payment delays were also reported a year ago. *As a result, people have taken to the streets spontaneously, they called for action and are collecting funds and basic necessities for their health care providers.* St Francis of Assisi Hospital is the only second-level facility in Chocó Department, the poorest and probably most forsaken Department in Colombia, mostly inhabited by Afro and indigenous people. This medical facility is one of the few existing public services - lacking on many counts since it is not possible to carry out diagnostic tests such as X-rays or CT scans. There are plans to turn it into a third-level hospital, but these have so far remained on paper. However, at the moment, even the limited services it offers are at risk. *The nearest hospital is in Medellín, a six-hour drive along an unpaved, dangerous road,* in an area with the highest rate of armed gangs. No answers or commitments are forthcoming from Bogotá, however. Pope Francis is among the few who have remembered this facility that bears the name of the saint of Assisi, and last April he donated some medical devices and equipment in response to the pandemic emergency. **"The local community is depending on us."** "We have devoted ourselves wholeheartedly to coping with Covid-19, and in spite of our own difficulties", Cecilia Córdoba, a young nurse and representative of the local trade union, told SIR from Quibdó. *We are here every day, come sunshine or rain, even though we face hunger. The local community is depending on us, we are a reference point for a vast area (more or less the size of Lombardy and Veneto combined, ed.'s note).* Many people arrive from rural areas." While we speak, Cecilia is at a stall - set up weeks ago - to promote the fundraising campaign and support the workers' protest. "People are helping us with this initiative. They are actively trying to support us and are backing our requests. We are asking that the crisis of this hospital be resolved definitively. *We are not only fighting for our wages, but also for improved medical services,* to equip the hospital with the necessary technological devices, including X-ray, CT scan, ultrasound or laparoscopy machines, which are currently lacking." The hospital's turbulent story is told by **Manuel Gil**, who serves as "veedor de salud", i. e. "guarantor of health" in Quibdó, a position envisaged under Colombian law. He details the long history of reports, complaints and attempts to compensate for the losses incurred by the San Francisco de Asís hospital since 2011. The Constitutional Court has issued a number of rulings, such as judgment A039 in 2017, regarding the right to health. Following the 2018 protests that culminated in a long public strike, the Ministry of Health, through the National Superintendency (the so-called Supersalud), settled the debts accumulated up to that point and ensured that the hospital was placed under new management. *"But after three years, things went back to the way they were before," Gil explains. "Now the government says that not even a penny is left, and we are stuck in this situation, in terms of both salaries and equipment. In the event of urgent medical examinations, we are forced to resort to private facilities."* According to the health guarantor, the crisis was caused by many factors: "During the new phase the hospital did not rely on another hospital structure to oversee its development. In addition, the accounting system was not very clear." Corruption is rife, "otherwise we would not be facing such a serious situation. When a number of ICU beds were created to cope with the coronavirus emergency, criminal organisations demanded bribes and threatened to extort money. It should be noted that these 30 intensive care beds were created without state funding, thanks to donations from international organisations." Looking ahead, Gil calls for "urgent interventions, together with a comprehensive development plan for another hospital. We

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also hope that a third level hospital will be created thanks to international cooperation funds." **A forgotten land.** Moreover, the hospital's vicissitudes are not surprising, and fully reflect the overall situation of basic services in Chocó. This fact was confirmed to SIR by Msgr. **Juan Carlos Barreto**, bishop of Quibdó, who extends the perspective starting from the hospital. "The Government is not contributing what it should be paying for," he explains. "Thus the hospital has plunged back into the same situation it was in a few years ago. As a result, healthcare is facing increasing deficits to the benefit of private facilities. *The hospital is emblematic of a general situation.* The education system is virtually non-existent, Chocó has the highest unemployment rate in Colombia, with a poverty rate of 70 percent", while extreme poverty is close to 40 percent, according to data from DANE - the Colombian Statistical Institute. In addition to this, violence is rife throughout Chocó Department, with numerous armed groups spreading death and terror, causing hundreds of families to flee their homes every year. *"Last year we managed to complete six humanitarian missions in conjunction with ecclesial and international organisations, but the situation is not improving".* And yet," concludes Msgr. Barreto, "despite our reports, letters and protests (many bishops from western and Pacific regions have released statements in recent years, as reported by SIR, *Ed.'s note*), the Government has refused to acknowledge the situation, claiming that much is being done for Chocó. It flaunted the arrest of the head of the Gulf Clan Otoniel, it challenges us by asking us to provide more information, as if it were not its duty to investigate the complaints it receives." Finally, a letter was sent to the President of the Republic, Iván Duque, asking for an urgent meeting on the situation in the region. (\*) journalist at "La vita del popolo"

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