

Catastrophic Hurricane María heads for Puerto Rico

Rafael Azul
20 September 2017

Hurricane María was expected to begin hitting Puerto Rico head-on in the early hours of Wednesday morning. Not since 1928 has a more powerful hurricane struck the island nation.

Seventy-nine years ago, on September 13, 1928, Hurricane San Felipe 2 devastated Puerto Rico with winds of 160 miles per hour. María is the second Category 5 hurricane to affect Puerto Rico in recorded history. It is expected to hit Puerto Rico from the southeast with estimated wind speeds of 165 miles per hour.

An emergency has been declared across the island. Particularly hard hit will be the islands of Vieques and Culebra on the eastern side of the island, already reeling from Hurricane Irma. Directly in the path of the storm are Ponce, a city of 150,000 and Guayama, with 85,000 inhabitants. If, as expected, it continues on its current path, it will slice Puerto Rico diagonally, with a devastating impact on the mountains of the island, destroying the flower industry there.

There have been dire predictions that the cities in between Guayama and Ponce, such as Arroyo (population: 20,000) and Salinas (population: 32,000), will literally be wiped off the map. The storm surge is expected to raise water levels by six to nine feet near the center of the hurricane, which is predicted to bring 10 to 15 inches (25 to 38 centimeters) of rain across the islands, with more in isolated areas.

The devastation caused by San Felipe 2—at least 300 dead, the destruction of sugar and coffee plantations, the toppling of trees, the near total destruction of homes and buildings—gives an example of what may be in store this time.

On Monday, María smashed into Dominica (population 75,000) unleashing fierce winds and rain over the mountainous Antillean island, ripping the

roofs of homes, including the prime minister's residence. The prime minister, Roosevelt Skerrit, wrote on his Facebook page of "widespread devastation" and expressed his fear that there will be deaths from rain-fed landslides. "So far the winds have swept away the roofs of almost every person I have spoken to or otherwise made contact with," reported the prime minister, appealing for emergency international aid.

María also struck the densely populated islands of Martinique and Guadeloupe, both French possessions (population 350,000 and 405,000 respectively). In Martinique at least two towns were left without water; 25,000 households have been left with no electricity. In Guadeloupe there are reports of flooded roads and homes as the rains continue.

Forecasters warned María could even intensify in its approach to Puerto Rico. The diameter of its "eye" has shrunk to 10 miles across. "María is developing the dreaded pinhole eye," declared one. This signals that an extremely strong hurricane will become even stronger, according to Brian McNoldy, a hurricane expert from the University of Miami, comparing it to a spinning ice skater who brings her arms together to spin faster.

The popular mood in Puerto Rico is being described by media observers as desperate. There are still 70,000 people in towns that have been without electrical power for two weeks since the winds of Hurricane Irma. Roads are also damaged in the interior of the island, and hundreds are still in shelters since Irma. Neither the administration of Governor Ricardo Rosselló nor the US government have indicated any desire to mount anything but a minimal rescue operation.

Hector Pesquera, the public safety secretary, urged citizens to evacuate from the path of the storm, "otherwise you are going to die; I don't know how to make this any clearer," he declared. According to

Pesquera it would be “suicide by hurricane” for citizens not to leave, particularly if they inhabit wooden structures. There are countless wooden houses along the hurricane’s path.

Despite all these warnings, as the hours count down, there is very little activity on the part of the Rosselló administration to help people flee, other than advise them to move in with relatives who live in sturdier homes. For those who cannot reach their relatives, or who don’t have any with secure homes, some 500 shelters are being provided that residents must reach on their own.

Rossello himself gave a cynical, fawning speech in English thanking President Trump for “his personal attention and the tremendous support that we have gotten from his administration in this process.”

“Before this hurricane season started, our island had been battered by a storm of fiscal and demographic challenges,” declared Rosselló, referring to Puerto Rico’s state of bankruptcy after defaulting on a \$72 billion debt to Wall Street hedge and vulture funds, and to the continuing emigration of unemployed workers and professionals from the island.

Rosselló assured his audience that while major damage to Puerto Rico was “inevitable,” his government had done “everything within our power” to prepare for this hurricane. He praised the “resiliency” of all Puerto Ricans, their generosity towards Hurricane Irma’s victims on other islands, and called for prayers from all Americans.

In fact, Rosselló, Pesquera and the rest of Puerto Rico’s ruling elite have already washed their hands of any responsibility for actively evacuating people. The stage is being prepared to blame the victims of Hurricane María, those who are unable for whatever reason to move to safer buildings or to higher ground for whatever fate they suffer.

Puerto Rican officials assure that the 500 shelters are capable of receiving 133,000 and that the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) will provide water and other supplies to those in shelters. At the same time, the governor has warned that power outages will occur that will “last some time,” due to the electric company’s heavily damaged infrastructure.

As with the fiscal “storm” that has battered Puerto Rico, neither Rosselló, the Puerto Rican ruling class, nor the Financial Control Board appointed on behalf of

Wall Street, intend to take any responsibility for the collapsing infrastructure that prevented an adequate response to Hurricane Irma, and that now stands in the way of rescue and aid efforts in the face of this very catastrophic Hurricane María. The impact of Hurricane María undoubtedly will be followed by renewed calls for sacrifice and “resiliency” by Puerto Ricans to make sure that the profit interests of Wall Street are taken care of.

On Tuesday there were reports of price gouging in markets in response to the extra demand for emergency supplies, extra food and water. Many residents expect to remain incommunicado during the three or four days before they can expect help from first responders.



To contact the WSWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact