Hurricane Maria devastates Puerto Rico

Rafael Azul
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Hurricane María, which hit Puerto Rico Wednesday, has left the US territory in ruins. With much of the electrical, cell phone and road system severely damaged, the full scope of the devastation, including fatalities and serious injuries, is still not known, but losses to homes, businesses and critical infrastructure are expected to be massive.

María cut a 120-mile diagonal swath across the country. The leading edge of the storm began affecting southeastern Puerto Rico Tuesday night. Its eye entered the town of Yabucoa at 6 a.m. Eastern Time, and exited at noon on the northern coast between the cities of Arecibo and Barceloneta, west of the capital city of San Juan.

Governor Ricardo Rosselló, who declared an emergency and imposed a 6pm to 6am curfew, gave an initial account of the situation at 10 a.m. Wednesday, saying there had been "severe damage to infrastructure and great devastation." He also warned of the danger of floods and mudslides which will put "lives at risk" as the tail end of the hurricane continued to pummel Puerto Rico a few hours longer.

The governor called on US President Donald Trump to declare Puerto Rico a "disaster area," up from "emergency area," which would allow the allocation of unlimited federal funds for Puerto Rico, as opposed to a maximum of $5 million provided to emergency areas.

This is a pittance for the island, which declared bankruptcy prior to Hurricanes Maria and Irma. Puerto Rico is saddled with a debt of $74 billion in bonds and $50 billion in supposedly unfunded pension obligations. Its electrical utility, AEE (Autoridad de Energía Eléctrica, or PREPA in English), which defaulted on its $9 billion debt in July, is also in ruin.

Initial reports said that all 3.4 million residents were without power after the hurricane, while wide swaths of the island are without clean water. Many roads are impassable. Having lost the ability to borrow, Puerto Rico is now desperately in need. Other than remittances from Puerto Ricans living in the US and elsewhere, the funds that do come in will undoubtedly include punishing financial obligations to Wall Street.

Abner Gomez, head of the Puerto Rican Emergency and Disaster Management Agency (AEMEAD) painted a bleak scene of hurricane devastation. "We are going to find that our island has been destroyed. We are receiving information that leaves no room for hope. This [storm] system has destroyed everything on its path."

María did not spare San Juan, including working class and middle class high-rise apartment buildings that suffered broken windows and flooded rooms. Residents described to the local media torrents of water going down stairs from flooded apartments. Imy Rigaus, 53, described having to seek refuge in the hallway of her apartment. "Water cascaded down the stairs, and entered the apartments, and we are trapped in the hallways," she said.

In the Roberto Clemente stadium, which was designated as a shelter, rain cascaded through a wind-damaged roof, forcing evacuees to hide beneath the stands. "One of the guards told me that the roof is about to collapse," said Suzette Vega, an evacuee. "I looked up and the roof was waving around like a piece of paper. I asked, 'Is it made out of cardboard?' 'No,' they told me, 'it is cement.'"

Carmen Yulin Cruz, San Juan's mayor, informed its citizens that electricity would be out for a long time. "The devastation is all around us," declared Cruz, "our life as we knew it, has changed."

The Madrid daily *El País* paints a picture of utter devastation, torrential rains, floods, breached dams, six-foot storm surges, trees flying through the air, and windows exploding. Hardest hit was the central region, but no place in the island, no town, no square meter, was left unaffected.

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The San Juan daily *El Nuevo Día* gave further details. Many residential areas have been almost totally destroyed, including hospitals, where patients were sheltered in hallways, as hurricane winds of more than 160 miles per hour smashed windows. At least one of the government shelters was left “in pieces,” the web site reported.

Late arrivers to the shelters describe having to fight wind gusts that made the sheets of rain feel like “whips,” while trying to avoid all manner of flying objects.

Others described equally harrowing scenes of roofs being torn off. Half of Puerto Rico’s citizens live under the poverty line, many of them in precarious structures with zinc roofs.

Despite government evacuation orders, the majority of residents were not able to find their way to government shelters. Nydia Pérez, who lives in San Juan, told *El País*, “In my house a window exploded and a door was torn off. The wind and rain damaged my living room. Across the street, the entire roof blew off.”

Benjamin Morales said via Facebook, “Mobile service comes and goes; winds are still extremely strong; there is a lot of rain. All kinds of damage is being reported ... electric service is dead, as had been expected. My house has security windows rated at 300 kilometers (180 miles); at times I thought that they would be ripped off. Everybody at the radio station feels that nothing like this has ever happened before.”

With wireless communications gone, together with many landlines, Puerto Ricans from Florida, Chicago, New York, and other US cities have been flooding San Juan radio stations in an attempt to connect with relatives. Many ask for help for relatives that suffer from medical conditions, such as diabetes.

The Financial Oversight Board that rules over Puerto Rico on behalf of Wall Street banks and hedge funds, has yet to pronounce itself about Hurricane María’s destruction, other than some pro forma remarks from its chairman, José Carrión, who declared that the board is “extremely concerned.”

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