

Puerto Rico devastated by Hurricane Maria

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A clearer picture of the massive damage in Puerto Rico began to emerge Thursday, a day after Hurricane Maria smashed through the island, knocking out power for its 3.4 million residents and leaving a path of destruction through small towns, cities and the capital of San Juan. Homes and buildings were destroyed, power lines downed and trees uprooted and thrown across roads. The hurricane cut a 120-mile swath through the US colonial territory Wednesday.

The storm, which killed 15 on the island of Dominica before striking Puerto Rico, passed to the north of Hispaniola Thursday, causing flooding along the Dominican Republic's eastern and northern coasts, all the way to the border with Haiti. Maria is expected to hit the islands of Turk and Caicos Friday, revisiting destruction on the chain of small islands, which took a direct hit from Hurricane Irma two weeks ago.

The first images of the damage in Puerto Rico emerged yesterday showing the massive damage caused by rivers, which overflowed their banks. In the city of Guaynabo south of San Juan, horrified residents took stock of what was left of their homes, many without roofs. Authorities have asked citizens to seek higher ground due to massive flooding.

Videos of the storm posted on YouTube and seen by tens of thousands worldwide paint a picture of what it was like for residents as the winds raged and streets and neighborhoods flooded.

The first casualties in Puerto Rico have been announced. Eight people have been reported drowned in the impoverished town of Toa Baja on the north coast outside of San Juan. In the city of Utuado in the Central Highlands, three sisters have been confirmed dead. Another four have died in Canóvanas Bayamón, and Río Grande in the northern coast and Jayuya in the highlands. These numbers are preliminary since several towns in the center of the island are totally isolated from contact.

Marcos Cruz Molina, mayor of Vega Baja, on the northern coast, west of San Juan, described efforts to reach the mountain areas south of this city of 60,000. The towns of Manatí, Florida, Vega Alta, Dorado and Toa Alta are totally cut off from all contact, with no telephone lines or clear roads.

Those conditions exist across the highlands, and even in some of the coastal areas. So far, efforts by the *World Socialist Web Site* to reach supporters in the San Juan area and the southern coast via cell phone and the Internet have failed. Residents on the island as well as relatives in the US report being unable to communicate with loved ones.

Mayor Molina reported that his town has also been badly damaged, including his own home and City Hall, which “is destroyed; its doors have been torn off and its windows exploded.”

The mayor also named nearby coastal towns—Algarrobo, Puerto Nuevo, and Cabo Caribe—where elevated tides made it necessary to use boats to rescue residents in the wake of the hurricane. “What I have seen is devastating. There are homes with no roofs, light posts and power transformers on the ground,” he said. “In Naranjos, seeing the anxiety in children and their parents that have lost everything, and people with medical devices, is something that touches everyone.” The mayor also reported residents pleading to be rescued from their flooded homes.

Rescuers speak of fallen trees, and massive floods blocking highways and streets, preventing the movement of trucks and cars.

As in Texas and Florida, the human suffering caused by the hurricane was exacerbated by the absence of any serious evacuation plan and the lack of public resources. In the case of Puerto Rico, this is largely due to the endless looting of public assets by the hedge funds and wealthy bond traders that control the island's massive debt and the endless austerity measures they

have demanded.

Governor Ricardo Rosselló—a Clinton delegate to the 2016 Democratic National Convention—issued evacuation orders but left it up to individuals to find their own means to escape. This left thousands, who are elderly, infirm or poor to fend for themselves.

The island's electrical grid has also been left to rot due to mass layoffs and declining spending and maintenance at the publicly owned Puerto Rico Electric Power Authority, which has been targeted for privatization by financial speculators. Authorities say it may take months to restore power to some areas of the island.

Savage austerity measures, aimed at funneling more money to investors, have also devastated the island, which has an official poverty rate of 44 percent.

Eighty-nine years ago, Hurricane San Felipe II, equally devastating as Hurricane Maria, swept over Puerto Rico with a wave of destruction. The impoverished island, just before the Great Depression, suffered flooding, death and destruction. Songwriter Rafael Hernandez fixed that catastrophic event in collective memory with his song “Lamento Borincano” (Puerto Rican Lament), which brought worldwide attention to the tragedy that confronted this supposed island paradise.

This time, a much more urban and industrialized Puerto Rico confronts the destruction caused by Hurricane Maria in the midst of another economic catastrophe. The hurricane has revealed the underlying social inequality and oppression that still exists both in the impoverished towns of central Puerto Rico, which now wait in isolation from the rest of the island, as well as in the cities.

After suffering \$1 billion in damage from Hurricane Irma, initial estimates say the damage caused by Hurricane Maria will add up to \$30 billion.

The Oversight Board of Puerto Rico, the federal entity appointed to restructure the island territory's \$70 billion in debt and meet the demands of its Wall Street creditors, announced Thursday that it would approve reallocations of funds being funneled to the hedge funds and finance houses “up to an aggregate amount of \$1 billion” in light of the island's devastation. This represents a drop in the bucket in relation to the massive spending that would be required to restore livable conditions to Puerto Rico's three and a half

million people.



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