

Dam collapse threatens to kill thousands in Puerto Rico

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Sunlight finally shone intermittently in San Juan, Puerto Rico, on Friday following a night of heavy rain—more than three feet fell in the previous twenty-four hours. There are flash flood warnings and people are being told to seek higher ground. Stores that are still open are running out of water bottles. Those that still have them are rationing them. Two days after the hurricane, virtually every necessity is in short supply.

That food, fuel and other essentials are in short supply so soon, despite having been rationed since before Maria hit the island, is an indictment of the current administration of Ricardo Rosselló, the ruling Financial Oversight and Management Board, and the American government which has kept the island under colonial subjugation for over a century. All three are guilty of criminal indifference and lack of preparation.

All over the island streets are blocked by hundreds of toppled electric posts, leaving all of Puerto Rico with no public electric power. Hundreds of trees have also been yanked out by the sustained 150 mile-per-hour winds.

The heavy rains caused a partial failure in the Guajataca Dam, on the northern coast about 70 miles west of San Juan. The breach sent streams of water toward the cities of Isabela (pop. 45,000) and Quebradillas (pop. 26,000), prompting calls for the last-minute emergency evacuation of some 70,000 people.

Abner Gomez, executive director of Puerto Rico's emergency management agency, said "thousands of people could die" if the dam suffers a total failure.

On Puerto Rico's southern coast, the historic city of Ponce, Puerto Rico's second largest, is incommunicado from the central government. Its mayor, María Meléndez, declared that the city "is devastated." While no casualties have as yet been reported, 1,295 people remain in shelters. There is no electricity in Ponce;

many parts of the Ponce metropolitan area have no water. There has been extensive damage at Ponce Beach and in other tourist areas, as well as in the port of Ponce. Ponce leaders have launched an appeal for food, beds for the shelters, and fuel for the area hospitals.

Bernardo Márquez, mayor of the town of Toa Baja, a western suburb of San Juan, reported that eight people drowned there. Four thousand people have been rescued from the flooded parts of the town. On Wednesday, three elderly sisters that had sought refuge in an empty house in Utuado died from a mudslide.

Further to the west, there are reports that the city of Aguadilla (pop. 61,000) suffered massive damage, including destroyed homes, toppled traffic lights and dividing walls. Aguadilla's mayor, Carlos Méndez, gave the following details: "Homes have floated away; roofs are gone; it is impossible to travel on highway 2; all this is a disaster... Aguadilla is no more."

The death toll from Hurricane Maria's waves of destruction and flooding of Puerto Rico and other smaller Caribbean islands, stands at 32; 15 died in Puerto Rico. Also hit with deadly consequences were Saint Croix, part of the US Virgin Islands chain, Dominica, Guadeloupe and Martinique.

Health professionals now predict that, as in Florida and Houston in the aftermath of Hurricanes Irma and Harvey, the mosquito population will explode in the coming weeks, leading to a potentially disastrous increase in infectious diseases such as Zika, dengue, malaria and Nile virus.

The flooding of antiquated sewer systems in San Juan, Ponce, Arecibo and many other coastal cities increases the danger of cholera and other diseases.

On top of these natural disasters is the economic and financial disaster of this semi-autonomous colony of

the US after declaring bankruptcy a little over a year ago and then defaulting on \$74 billion in debt. Puerto Rico does not have access to the International Monetary Fund or the World Bank.

This financial debacle did not materialize out of thin air; it is the product of decades of economic decline, coupled with 15 years of deindustrialization and capital flight, combined with flight of human labor-power, a record wave of emigration by young workers and professionals in search of jobs and better opportunities.

In the wake of these twin disasters, natural and economic, Puerto Rico is up against a wall, reeling as it is pushed back in time to the conditions of the nineteenth century. In a nutshell, conditions for the great majority of Puerto Ricans will more and more approximate those of Haiti, Honduras and other impoverished Caribbean and Central American nations.

Whatever economic activity remains will not be enough to spur a quick recovery. What is required is massive investment in housing, education, healthcare, roads, bridges, dams, sewers, and mosquito abatement.

An article in Miami's *Nuevo Herald* marveled at how citizens of San Juan spontaneously took to the streets on Thursday to help in whatever they could, removing debris, clearing trees and power poles from the roads, directing traffic, and using their vehicles to transport people to clinics.

Be it in Mexico, Florida, Houston, Mexico City, or Puerto Rico, these demonstrations of popular solidarity contrast with the indifference and lack of preparation and effort of the ruling class and their political agents, such as governor Ricardo Rosselló and, in Puerto Rico's case, the Financial Oversight and Management Board of Puerto Rico. For all their bombastic talk about the resiliency and spirit of the Puerto Rican people, the Puerto Rican capitalists and their Wall Street masters lick their chops over the "opportunity" of big profits at the expense of the Puerto Rican population.



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