

Puerto Rican people still without aid a week after Hurricane Maria

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It has been seven days since Hurricane Maria swept over Puerto Rico. As each day passes, and with hundreds of towns and villages in the island's interior that have yet to be heard from, information emerges that helps complete the picture of chaos and devastation that Governor Ricardo Rossello and the islands' mayors and politicians are calling a "humanitarian crisis" for the island's 3.4 million inhabitants.

As part of its response to the disaster wrought by Hurricane Maria in Puerto Rico, the Pentagon has announced that it is shifting to land-based operations on the island. In addition to sending 1,000 troops and 16 helicopters, the Defense Department plans to mobilize 5,000 active duty forces and 2,500 National Guard elements on the island.

The military newspaper *Stars and Stripes* reported that the troops being sent to the US colonial territory "specialize in distribution of goods in hostile environments." Some National Guard units, including from Iowa, have been sent with the specific mission of beefing up local security forces.

A spokesperson for FEMA (the Federal Emergency Management Agency) defended this new military intervention as "dramatically increasing the federal footprint" in Puerto Rico.

Undoubtedly there is another motive underlying this military response to the humanitarian crisis: the escalating social tension that is becoming evident every day. As Puerto Ricans regain their balance from the blows of Hurricane Maria, they begin to direct their anger against government inaction.

Puerto Rico is already under a 7 p.m. to 5 a.m. curfew. Increasingly, the question raised is whether the island will be placed under martial law.

While thousands of containers and planeloads of supplies have arrived in Puerto Rico in the last several

days, they are still sitting in warehouses and in the Muñiz Air National Guard base. Agustín Arellano, an administrator of San Juan's airport, reports that no one has picked them up.

Along with a lack of sufficient numbers of trucks and damaged and blocked roads, there is a shortage of diesel fuel and gasoline to transport and distribute the needed supplies. There are reports that people in their desperation have taken matters in their own hands, assaulting fuel trucks.

The popular discontent is evident also on the issue of water. Forty percent of the island still has no access to safe drinking water.

On Wednesday, September 27, San Juan's daily newspaper *El Nuevo Día* published interviews with people waiting in line to buy gasoline, who identified water as their most pressing need. Glorivee Acevedo, a paramedic, summarized the situation in Lares (pop. 31,000), a mountain city: "There is thirst; there is no water; there is no oasis [water distribution center], nothing. People are looking for water and report that they are hungry."

"Water, water and water ... we need water," declared María Reyes at a gasoline line in the city of Utuado (pop. 34,000). "I am here waiting for gasoline, but what has me truly mad is that I cannot find water; and the government is not providing it."

Marilyn Santiago, also waiting in line for gasoline, declared: "Everybody talks about gasoline. I don't care if my car has gas or not, if I end up dying from thirst. Water is what is needed most."

In mountain areas, some people have taken to searching for water in mountain streams and springs.

Compounding this tragedy is the fact that even before the hurricane, fully one half of Puerto Ricans lived below the poverty line, the result of over a century of

US colonial oppression and a decades-long economic downturn.

The impoverished conditions of the population were exposed when the hurricane struck, tearing off the roofs of their precarious homes, exploding the windows of their high-rise apartments. While many Puerto Ricans lived in cement and brick homes that survived the initial impact of the storm, in many towns, attached to the cement home were “additions”, porches, and extra rooms to accommodate larger families.

An article in Madrid’s *El Pais* compares the incoming information to the state of a KO’d boxer that continues to receive blows.

Fifteen thousand Puerto Ricans remain in shelters, and many others are forced to live in the ruins of roofless homes.

There is a continuing danger of the collapse of the Guajataca Dam in Puerto Rico’s northwest coast, putting in peril the lives of 70,000 people.

A public health crisis is developing as hospitals and clinics run out of essential medications, and stagnant floodwaters become more toxic and disease and mosquito-ridden every day.

More toward the coasts, many homes in San Juan and elsewhere are still under water.

Estimates of casualties from the hurricane have gone from 16 to about 30 in the last few days. That number will unquestionably increase. Morgues across the island remain shut down, and in some cases bodies are only discovered once they begin to smell.

Rossello has stated that Puerto Rico will need “tens of billions of dollars” to recover from the destruction of Hurricane Maria and is demanding massive help from Washington, insisting that those suffering are all US citizens “and proud of it.”

US President Trump, who on Monday tweeted that his government expects a bankrupt Puerto Rico to fulfill its debt to the Wall Street banks and hedge funds, is expected to visit the island next Tuesday.

However the aid requested by Rossello will not come any time soon. The Trump administration has made it clear that it does not plan to ask Congress for money for Puerto Rico until next week, or the following week, supposedly because FEMA must first appraise the damage.

Meanwhile, the Trump administration has so far deflected demands raised for the suspension of the so-

called Jones Act, a 1920 ordinance that bars goods being shipped from one American port to another by anything other than US-owned and operated ships.

The law, which has long been a part of the colonial burden imposed on Puerto Rico, doubling the cost of imported goods for the island, was waived for both Texas and Florida during the destruction caused by both Hurricanes Irma and Maria.

However, in Puerto Rico’s case, Trump told the press Wednesday that, while such a waiver was under consideration, “...we have a lot of shippers and ... a lot of people who work in the shipping industry that don’t want the Jones Act lifted.”

In other words, foremost in the view of the White House are the profits of US capitalists rather than the needs of some 3.4 million people on the island of Puerto Rico without power and facing thirst, hunger, disease and homelessness.



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