As popular anger builds, US sends military to Puerto Rico

Rafael Azul
29 September 2017

On Thursday, September 28, the USS Kearsarge, an amphibious assault ship, was dispatched toward Puerto Rico as part of the plan for military intervention in the island. Although the move has been presented by the Trump administration as a necessary response to the devastation caused by Hurricane Maria, it is chiefly aimed at containing potential civil unrest.

In addition to the 1,500 troops of the Puerto Rican National Guard already involved in rescue efforts, Governor Ricardo Roselló announced that thousands more US Army and National Guard soldiers will be sent. This will be the largest US military intervention in Puerto Rican history, according to government officials.

The ostensible purpose of the military operation is to make up for the collapse in logistics and physical infrastructure that has left vital supplies sitting in Puerto Rican ports with no means of getting to the people in the island's interior. Adding to the shortages of fuel and trucks, damaged roads and a totally destroyed electrical grid, there is also a shortage of truck drivers.

Some 15,000 people are currently in shelters, and thousands more are being sheltered by their families or are virtually homeless in what remains of their homes, lacking water, food and medical care.

There is growing concern of epidemics in the coming weeks, from highly toxic sewage, contaminated floodwaters and an exploding mosquito population.

Even before Hurriance Irma and Maria struck, there existed widespread anger among Puerto Rican workers from the effects of the profound recession and financial crisis affecting the island. On August 30, 20 days before Hurricane Maria, hundreds of Puerto Rican workers marched, denouncing austerity measures, layoffs, and attacks on pension rights mandated by the Financial Oversight and Management Board appointed on behalf of Wall Street by the Obama administration, and currently in charge of the island's finances.

Puerto Rico ranks as one of the five most socially unequal societies on the planet. While less than one-third of Puerto Rico's 3.4 million inhabitants have formal jobs, there were more luxury Porsches than in any other country in the Americas, according to a United Nations study. Hundreds of thousands of Puerto Ricans participate in the informal job market (by some estimates the informal sector represents one-third of Puerto Rico's economy) and depend on food stamps and other forms of welfare.

Alongside destroyed homes and apartment buildings destroyed by the hurricane there are empty homes and luxury apartments owned by the very wealthy.

The military effort includes several high-ranking military officers and is under the command of Brigadier General Richard Kim, whose previous tenure includes combat tours in Iraq, and, most recently in Afghanistan. He is currently Deputy Commanding General of the United States Army North division. He will be in charge of the entire US "recovery" operation in Puerto Rico, with responsibility over the military, the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA), other government agencies, and the private sector.

Kim effectively will rule as proconsul over Puerto Rico's Governor Ricardo Rosselló and civilian authorities.

The decision by the Trump administration to send in the military follows a more than two-week delay by the US Congress in providing material aid to the US colonial territory. The hurricane wreaked its destruction on September 20 and 21, and in place of promised assistance from FEMA, the US Department of Defense is putting together an operational command center for

© World Socialist Web Site

General Kim in San Juan luxury hotels.

In the manner of a banana republic, Puerto Rico's political leaders responded almost in unison to praise President Trump for his decision to militarize the recovery effort. Jenniffer Gonzalez Colon, leader of the ruling New Progressive Party (pro-statehood) hailed the operation and assured her listeners that President Trump had pledged himself to the reconstruction of the island even before hurricanes Irma and Maria struck.

Gonzalez Colon, the current representative of the Rosselló administration in Washington, lavishly thanked Trump for his "support" during this crisis and for appointing General Kim.

Alejandro de la Campa, who heads FEMA in Puerto Rico, promised that the US military would also be assigned to the restoration of electricity throughout Puerto Rico, and that within the next few days Puerto Rico's electric authority (AEE) would coordinate with the military to carry out this task. The state-owned utility has been the target of privatization and suffered from years of layoffs, budget cutting and lack of maintenance, leaving it vulnerable to the storms.

As with Haiti in 2010, what is surely guiding the decision to impose military control over Puerto Rico is the concern that the desperate conditions that Puerto Ricans now confront will trigger a social explosion. The military presence serves to contain the masses and to protect the profit interests of banks and corporations.

With every passing day, conditions become more desperate. Adding to the shortages of essential and vital supplies, water, food, fuel, and medicines, there is also a shortage of cash: banks are closed; long queues form at the few working ATMs that are still functioning and have not run out of cash. CNN spoke to Edna Escabi, a visitor from Phoenix, Arizona, stuck at the San Juan airport, who tried to use two ATMs that were out of cash. "I am very upset, very uptight; I have been crying a lot. Not even a movie could produce what we are going through."

The militarization of the relief efforts in Puerto Rico bring to mind the military occupation of Haiti, in the aftermath of the earthquake of January 2010. Its main purpose was to buttress and protect the government of President René Préval, and safeguard the interests of US imperialism in that impoverished nation.

That expeditionary force in fact was an obstacle to relief and reconstruction efforts and left Haiti six months later.

To contact the WSWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact

© World Socialist Web Site