

Puerto Rico faces health catastrophe as Trump tweets “We have done a great job”

Andrea Lobo
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In anticipation to his scheduled visit to the island on Tuesday, President Donald Trump sent a barrage of tweets throughout the weekend from his luxury golf course in Bedminster, New Jersey, which essentially blamed Puerto Ricans for the suffering they are facing.

After San Juan Mayor Carmen Yulín Cruz criticized the administration’s response—comparing conditions on the US territory to “something close to a genocide”—Trump branded all criticisms as “fake news” and attacked Cruz’s “poor leadership.”

“They want everything to be done for them when it should be a community effort,” Trump tweeted Saturday, typifying the contempt of the US financial oligarchy to the island’s 3.4 million people. To Wall Street the demands of the island’s population for water, electricity, cell phone connections, gasoline and other basic necessities is an unwanted interruption to milking the island for debt repayments.

The president escalated his attacks on Sunday, criticizing “politically motivated ingrates” and insisting “We have done a great job.” He fraudulently declared in another tweet that all buildings had been inspected even though many towns, especially in rural and mountainous areas, remain out of reach of rescuers, let alone building inspectors.

Aping Trump, the right-wing correspondent for Fox News Geraldo Rivera confronted Mayor Cruz Sunday morning, cynically declaring, “I don’t see people dying.”

Speaking on Sunday, David Lapan, spokesperson of the Department of Homeland Security, which integrates FEMA, indirectly criticized the San Juan Mayor for any suggestion that they are not all in the “life-saving team”.

There is every indication officials are grossly under-reporting the death toll, which stands at 16. The Center

for Investigative Journalism contacted several of the hospitals and the Forensic Science Institute finding that dozens and perhaps hundreds of corpses are piling up and going unreported.

Including the 1,500 national guardsmen in Puerto Rico, the number of military personnel deployed to the island is now over 6,400 soldiers, according to Caribbean FEMA director, Alejandro de la Campa. Eleven days after the hurricane, FEMA has received 63,000 claims of damaged homes. De la Campa indicated that a mere \$21 million has been approved via FEMA’s infrastructure program for an “initial response.”

In addition, about 3,000 road obstructions are blocking half of all highways. Of the 69 hospitals, only one functions fully and 55 partially. Less than 5 percent of the electrical grid is operating, only half of the supermarkets are open, although they are running out of food, and ATMs and credit cards are largely not working.

Ricardo Ramos, executive director of the publicly-owned electric agency AEE, said only 3 percent of the electric grid had been restored across the island. Ramos acknowledged that the island-wide blackout was connected to decades of austerity measures and, more recently, to the decisions by the Financial Oversight Board, which oversees Puerto Rican finances on behalf of Wall Street.

“Our plants are very antiquated. Our generating infrastructure is very old and was designed for another epoch. Part of our fiscal plan was to build it with more resistance to the pounding of storms. It was rejected [by the Financial Oversight Board]; it was not meant to be, evidently,” declared Ramos. Due to austerity measures, 4,500 badly needed linesmen have been sacked since 2012. “They are the ones most urgently needed right

now,” said the AEE director.

Officials have also said the cities of Isabela and Quebradillas would continue evacuating because of the danger of a collapse of the Guajataca dam, whose breach is expanding two to four inches each day. Repairs are scheduled to begin today.

Even in the areas where it is reported as available, the water service is being frequently interrupted. The pumps for the aqueduct that feeds water to the north of the island keep running out of fuel, shutting off water.

The head of the Aqueduct and Sewage Authority (AAA), Eli Díaz, indicated that the problem would be resolved over the weekend after a “deal” with FEMA. Such “deals” underscore the anarchic character of relief efforts, which are still being carried out on a for-profit basis. The availability of fuel and energy for water, hospitals, and other critical infrastructure is dependent on FEMA’s ability to sign contracts with private diesel or gasoline suppliers.

The dean of Public Health School at Florida International University, Tomás Guilarte, warned in an op-ed in the *Miami Herald* that the lack of electricity means sewer systems are failing. “This leads to bacterial infections—such as cholera, dysentery, E. coli and typhoid—that can be disastrous. The typical treatments, like tetanus shots or powerful antibiotics, are not readily available on the island, where medical supplies are quickly running out.”

The mosquito-borne diseases dengue and conjunctivitis are already showing outbreaks, according to a report Thursday by the *Washington Post*, which also indicated that thousands are not receiving urgent care and have had critical surgeries postponed.

The warning of a cholera epidemic underscores the devastated state of the infrastructure, given that Puerto Rico hasn’t suffered such an outbreak since the 1850s.

Guilarte also warned about the grave risks from the exposure to chemicals and pollutants, given the 18 open and six closed Superfund toxic sites in Puerto Rico, which he describes as areas where “mismanagement of contamination threatens human health and the environment.”

The EPA’S 2014 Climate Change Adaptation Implementation plan warns Superfund cleaning teams explicitly to plan for “increased intensity of hurricanes” to protect people from toxic releases. Not only did these warnings not prevent 13 sites from being flooded

in Texas and leaking chemicals after Hurricane Harvey, but the report, even for future consideration, was removed from the web site by President Trump after his inauguration.

An EPA spokesperson warned last week that it was getting its teams in place to assess the Superfund and oil sites and other regulated facilities. Juan Declet-Barreto of the Union of Concerned Scientists warned that toxins will “add even more to what is undoubtedly going to be a public health crisis.”

A 2013 study by the Puerto Rico Climate Change Council reported that natural drainage for storm water was being undermined through real estate development, particularly in the cities. It notes that fully half of the population lived in areas susceptible to landslides, while a “relatively high poverty rate increases the island’s social and economic vulnerability to climate change impacts.” Nearly half of the population lives below the official poverty line.

A 2016 Congressional report found that more than half of Puerto Rico’s landfills were in violation of EPA regulations. InsideClimateNews reports that a five-story coal ash pile near the impoverished city of Guayama could be of greatest concern, a risk already compared by EPA advisor Michael Dorsey to the polluted water in Flint, Michigan.

Governor Roselló indicated that two regions in the island still have “disconnected communities.” Eliván Martínez, a journalist for the Center of Investigative Journalism, reported last week from Guaonico, one of the villages still inaccessible in the Utuado district, that residents are getting water from a nearby river and scavenging the forest for food. “The mountains near my house melted... We have gone back to ancient times, bathing in the river with muddy water. In this situation, human pride crumbles down,” said neighbor Edgardo Matías.



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