

Trump visits Puerto Rico as anger grows over government response

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Across the United States workers and middle-class people are organizing to send help to Puerto Rico, where hundreds of thousands are without electric power and face scarcities of food, medicine and water. The outpouring of support for residents of the hurricane-ravaged island contrasts sharply with the indifference of the Trump administration.

Facing popular anger over the slow response of the federal government, Trump is scheduled to visit Puerto Rico today, nearly two weeks after the devastating storm that has left 95 percent of the residents of the US territory without power and a still unknown number of fatalities. The president spent recent days firing off angry tweets from his luxury golf course in New Jersey denouncing Puerto Rican officials for complaining about the lack of aid.

According to Reuters the Puerto Rican government, which declared financial bankruptcy in May, is diverting what little money it has on hand for emergency response while it tries to secure aid from the federal government. Trump has made it clear the island will receive no relief from the \$72 billion it owes to creditors, tweeting last week that the massive debt “owed to Wall Street and the banks, sadly, must be dealt with.”

While US government aid has been slow, ordinary workers and young people in the US have collected and shipped relief supplies at their own cost. CNN reports that among those that are organizing help are high school students, such as those at Comsewogue High School in the Suffolk County suburbs of New York City, where donations of water, cereal boxes and cans of food have piled up as volunteers try to arrange transportation to the island.

Many aid groups are using social media to reach out and organize collections and deliveries.

In New Orleans, the Cajun Airlift group, pilots and aviation enthusiasts who collected and delivered 25,000 pounds of supplies to Texas after Hurricane Harvey, are now focusing on Puerto Rico. On Monday, an airplane chartered by Cajun Airlift reported on its Facebook page that its first plane had reached Puerto Rico loaded with medical and other supplies. The plane flew back evacuating 14 people. Cajun Airlift is also collaborating with #OperationBoricuaAirlift in transporting rescue supplies between Puerto Rican cities.

In Los Angeles, California #LA4PR was formed on September 20, the day Hurricane María hit Puerto Rico. It has enlisted the help of the local entertainment industry. “We have our hands tied in a lot of ways but we are not stopping,” said Ana Miró, a member of Los Angeles for Puerto Rico. The group already sent some donations on Delta and JetBlue relief flights and plans to send more aid in the coming weeks. “We plan to gather things and keep sending them,” Miró said. “We are not stopping for any reason.”

Truck drivers, firefighters, and construction workers from across the country are among those volunteering to help clear the logjam that has kept tons of supplies in warehouses, unable to reach those that need them.

Within the island, volunteers continue to provide whatever assistance they can. On Monday, over 600 volunteers were cleaning up the Rio Piedras campus of the University of Puerto Rico.

Every day that goes by brings in more offers of volunteers as well as material and financial help, in contrast to the Trump administration and the meager allotment of funds released by the Financial Oversight Board that has a stranglehold on Puerto Rico’s fiscal budget.

In addition to the \$72 billion in debt owed to vulture

investment funds and \$50 billion in underfunded public pensions, the island's public electric utility AEE is also being held accountable for its \$9 billion debt. The utility, which is in danger of being liquidated at fire sale prices, was vulnerable to storm damage due to years of cost-cutting that resulted in the lack of maintenance and the layoff of thousands of linemen, who are now desperately needed for repairs.

Nearly two weeks after the island was hit by the strongest storm since 1928 things continue to deteriorate. In cities in the Puerto Rican interior, such as Lares and Utuado, drinking water, food and fuels are being rationed. Electricity has yet to be restored. New estimates predict it may take one year to restore power to mountain cities and towns. In Lares, a mudslide has affected the local cemetery, dragging graves downhill and opening some caskets.

In Utuado another mudslide descended on part of the city, burying several vehicles.

Pablo del Llano, reporting from Lares and Utuado for *El País*, describes how people stop him in the street, confusing him with government officials who have yet to show up. "Are you from FEMA?" asks a man on the street, "when will we get our lights back?"

Many roads in the Puerto Rican highlands are still impassable. Fifty-five percent of the population still lacks running water; service is intermittent for many others. Of the 150 diesel generators that the water authority requested from FEMA, only three have been delivered.

In coastal Salinas, del Llano spoke to Nydia Rosario, 51, with two daughters. Last Thursday, all they had left was a box of canned food and 24 bottles of water. They had run out of money, and the ATMs are not working. With no fans or mosquito repellent, Nydia worries that disease-carrying mosquitoes may bite her daughters. "This Christmas there will be no lights," predicted Ms. Rosario.



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