

Puerto Rico continues to languish as tropical storm Nate threatens US Gulf Coast

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The current hurricane season in the Caribbean Sea and Gulf of Mexico is proving to be one of the most destructive on record.

On October 5, tropical storm Nate struck Central America and skirted Mexico's Yucatan Peninsula; it is now headed toward the Gulf Coast of the United States.

Nate is fast moving and is headed in the direction of the Mississippi River Delta; New Orleans, Louisiana; Mobile, Alabama; and Pensacola, Florida, where it is expected to strike late tonight as a category one hurricane, with winds of 75 miles an hour.

An early count shows seven casualties in Costa Rica and 15 in Nicaragua. Costa Rican authorities also reported that 15 people are missing and some 5,000 were evacuated to emergency shelters. Louisiana has declared a state of emergency and ordered evacuations of low-lying areas.

Further to the east torrential rain and high winds are being predicted for Puerto Rico this weekend, still languishing from hurricane Maria, which struck more than two weeks ago knocking out the US territory's entire electrical grid. Approximately 90 percent of the island remains without power and access to clean drinking water is limited.

Rain fell hard in Ponce and other southern cities on Friday increasing the danger of flash floods and mudslides. There are predictions of 10 inches of rain across the island by Sunday. Puerto Rican authorities issued a flash flood warning for the entire island.

Lares and Utuado, in the center of the island, are among the most damaged by Hurricane María, and still largely isolated, facing floods and mudslides. Directly to the north from them are the cities of Quebradillas and Isabela, close to the damaged Guajataca Dam. If this weekend's rains force authorities to release more water from the dam into the Guajataca River, more

flooding will impact those two cities and other coastal communities. The rainstorm is also limiting shipping around the island.

Meanwhile, Trump administration officials have continued to insist that President Donald Trump did not mean to say in a Tuesday night interview on Fox News that Puerto Rico would not have to pay its \$74 billion debt obligation.

White House Press Secretary Sarah Sanders declared that the president does not believe that the debt should be erased. What he really meant, said Sanders, is that the island should continue with the bankruptcy process under the Promise Act, administered by the Financial Oversight and Management Board.

"There's a process for how to deal with Puerto Rico's debt, and it will have to go through that process to have a lasting recovery and growth," Sanders insisted. "This was a process that was put in place and set up under Obama, and that has a board of advisors that deals with that debt. And it will go through that process as we move forward."

Sanders spoke a day after White House budget director Mick Mulvaney urged people not to take the president's remarks literally.

The grim reality is that a \$74 billion debt that was "not payable" in 2015, in the words of Governor Alejandro Padilla, before the one-two punch of Hurricanes Irma and María, is ever more so now that there are no significant assets for the vulture funds to pillage, and as a greater portion of the Puerto Rican population migrates to the US. Puerto Rico will now have to raise some \$90 billion just to rebuild the inadequate infrastructure and housing that existed the day before Irma struck.

Recovery across the island is slow, there are reports that some public schools may reopen by the end of the

month, and electricity is being restored at a snail's pace. People continue to cue up for gasoline and for cash. According to one resident, "fuel has become like gold." Forty percent or more of the population continues to be out of water.

The existence of water distribution centers, which in many cases consist of just one faucet or garden hose, are often not being advertised by the government with people finding out about them through word of mouth. The lack of water combined with no electricity to power air conditioners and fans in the island's tropical heat is fast becoming a public health catastrophe.

Two weeks on there has yet to be a credible accounting of the extent of the damage, of how many people actually died from the storm; how many were injured; how many remain missing; an exact count of destroyed homes and businesses; how many people are still employed; or how the mosquito population exploded bringing with it the danger of Zika and other diseases.

As with London's Grenfell Tower Fire, authorities are keen on hiding this information, surely out of concern that it will trigger a social explosion. Many of the reports coming in appear in the Facebook pages of volunteer groups in the mainland organizing the delivery of supplies and the rescue of those of that need to leave the island.

New information, particularly from the south and southeast, where the hurricane hit first and hardest, indicates that conditions are much worse than initially expected. Eleven thousand homes were destroyed in just four suburbs of Ponce, for instance. Yauco and Juana Díaz to the west survived the harshest pummeling of the storm only to be inundated a day after by the flooding of the Luchetti River, entirely covering many homes with water.

On Wednesday a resident of a Río Piedras home for the elderly committed suicide in desperation. Meanwhile, in at least one hospital, the stench of rotting corpses in its morgue forced it to sharply curtail all but emergency operations.



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