

Trump, local officials lie about real extent of Puerto Rico disaster

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As news continues to surface of the continuing environmental and social disaster that Puerto Rico has been in since it was pummeled by Hurricane María on September 20 and 21, there is a concerted campaign by the Trump administration and local government authorities to conceal the full scope of the disaster.

While the official death toll was raised from 36 to 39 on Sunday, the real number of fatalities is still unknown. More than 40 percent of the island's residents still do not have drinking water and only 11.7 percent have electricity, leaving nearly 3 million residents powerless.

President Trump continues to praise his administration's response and denounce critics, including San Juan Mayor Carmen Yulín Cruz who tweeted Saturday that FEMA had ignored a request for help from one of the capital's hospitals, which had lost power and was forced to transfer patients. "The Hospital had requested support from FEMA and no response. Oh sorry they are collecting data..." she tweeted.

Trump posted a self-aggrandizing tweet Sunday evening, saying, "Nobody could have done what I've done for Puerto Rico with so little appreciation. So much work!" His post included a video entitled, "What the fake news media will not show you in Puerto Rico," which showed him looking presidential during his four-hour visit to the island last week.

Similarly, many of Monday morning's announcements from the US Government Control Center in San Juan were feel-good messages. The US Army Corp of Engineers announced it contracted with the US company Weston Solutions to restore Puerto Rico's electric grid, as part of a series of contracts with private industry.

NBC News hailed new money-making schemes being

contemplated by billionaire Elon Musk, Google and Amazon with Puerto Rico Governor Ricardo Rosselló who talked about the "opportunity" the disaster had opened up to restructure the publicly owned electrical utility. Lt. General Jeffrey Buchanan, who is leading the US military's hurricane relief efforts, said, "The power of America is not the federal government, it is local governments, private organizations all coming together."

On Friday the Puerto Rican Center for Informative Journalism (*Centro de Periodismo Informativo*, CPI) revealed that when Governor Ricardo Roselló announced last week that 63 of the island's 69 hospitals were fully operational, he declined to explain how that statistic had, in a matter of a few days, jumped from 56 shuttered hospitals, to practically all of them being open and functioning.

In addition the CPI questioned what Rosselló meant by the phrase "operational." The investigators contacted several hospitals on the governor's list and found that they were in no condition to receive patients.

Puerto Rico's largest hospital, the Río Piedras Medical Center in San Juan, has had to absorb an extraordinary patient load and set up tent clinics to try to accommodate a very large number of patients who cannot find help elsewhere.

The CPI also has shown the low official casualty count has been based on gross statistical calculations on how many would have died anyway during the same two days as the storm. In fact, according to CPI calculations, the final number may turn out to be in the hundreds just in the region surrounding San Juan. There is yet to be a similar rough estimate based on the possible number of deaths in other parts of the island.

CPI investigators have also discovered that, absent a full count, there are at least 30 missing people since

Hurricane Maria who had not been previously identified.

On Sunday night in the San Juan Metropolitan area, families were trapped in flash floods, produced by a tropical depression that drove torrential rains into the area. The weekend rains not only flooded San Juan but also caused flooding in western Puerto Rico and inland from the coast.

Rains that on other occasions would cause little damage are provoking floods and landslides due to the fact that the ground is still saturated from the hurricane that hit nearly three weeks ago, and that parts of Puerto Rico have been stripped of all vegetation. Alongside San Juan, flood watches and mudslide warnings have been issued for 78 other municipalities along the northeastern coast and in the island's interior.

At the same time, mayors of cities across Puerto Rico continue to plead for help. On Monday afternoon, José Gerena, the mayor of Florida (population 13,000), an inland city west of San Juan, urgently begged for help from local and federal authorities as waters from flooded sewers were inundating parts of the city. Gerena announced that he had received no response, despite the fact that such sewage lakes greatly increase the danger of infections and epidemics.



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