

Puerto Rico governor orders review of official hurricane death toll

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Puerto Rican Governor Ricardo Rosselló announced Monday that he had ordered a review of every death on the island since Hurricane Maria made its devastating landfall in late September.

The announcement came amid growing pressure from Puerto Ricans angry over the official death toll, which currently stands at 64, an absurdly low number. The official cover-up of the death and destruction caused by the storm compounds frustration and bitterness within the population over the lack of a coordinated effort to restore power to the island and distribute much needed food and fuel supplies.

Puerto Rico's administrators as well as officials from the Trump administration have resisted efforts to raise the official death toll despite mounting evidence that the real figure far exceeds the current number. Rosselló told reporters at a press conference Monday that the death toll "may be higher than the official count certified to date," but that he would not adjust the count based on "statistical analysis."

Rosselló's review promises to be a drawn-out process involving interviews with doctors, medical staff and family members to determine the circumstances surrounding each death.

Given the current state of the island's infrastructure, a thorough investigation of this sort carried out in a timely manner is effectively impossible. Moreover, some 911 bodies have been cremated since the storm, as their deaths were officially determined to be the result of "natural causes," ruling out the possibility of an autopsy in these cases.

Most of the US territory was thrust into 19th century living conditions overnight by the storm, with the island's already fragile power grid knocked offline and residents forced to collect water for cooking, cleaning and drinking from mountain streams. Tens of thousands

of people have been compelled to leave the island to seek work in the United States.

Nearly three months after the storm, more than a million people, living primarily in working class neighborhoods and rural mountain villages, are still without power or running water. Cell phone service, which was knocked out completely after the storm hit, remains spotty in many areas.

The lack of consistent electricity has created an impossible living situation for the elderly and infirm, who rely on electricity to power dialysis machines for diabetes, equipment for easing respiratory illnesses and sleep apnea, and refrigeration for medicines.

Following multiple reports in the mainstream American media documenting the fact that the real death toll exceeds 1,000, it has become increasingly difficult to conceal the real situation on the island. Two Democratic members of Congress, Nydia M. Velazquez of New York and Bennie Thompson of Mississippi, submitted a request last week with the Government Accountability Office for a federal review of the death toll in Puerto Rico and the US Virgin Islands.

A study by the Puerto Rico-based Center for Investigative Journalism (CPI) of data from the island's Demographic Registry found that 985 additional people died in September and October when compared to 2016.

During the two months following the storm, fatalities spiked in every age group over 18, but particularly among those over the age of 50. The CPI reports that a majority of additional recorded deaths came among those in nursing homes and hospitals suffering from complications related to diabetes, Alzheimer's, kidney disease, hypertension, pneumonia and other respiratory diseases.

The *New York Times* reported that its own analysis of

daily mortality data found that in the 42 days after the storm made landfall, 1,052 more people died than the average in 2016 and 2015. The greatest increase in deaths, up nearly 50 percent, came from sepsis, an immune response caused by a bacterial infection due to unsanitary conditions.

The data which the *Times* examined was incomplete for the month of October and did not cover November or December, when many were still without power, meaning the true death toll is even higher.

A third survey by CNN of half of the island's funeral homes found 499 additional deaths, which funeral directors attributed to the storm.

Reporters from the *World Socialist Web Site* have interviewed multiple Puerto Ricans who have corroborated these reports, relating cases of family members who died because of a lack of electricity as well people being swept away by the flood waters. Some recounted reports that residents in rural areas buried the dead before they could be counted, after being cut off from contact with the outside world for days or weeks due to downed power lines, fallen trees and washed out roads.

A doctor from San Juan told the WSWS that people were buried alive in mud slides and there has as of yet been no effort to recover their bodies. Medical clinic workers have reported an increase in the number of people coming in with suicidal thoughts.

The effort to obscure the true death toll in Puerto Rico and sweep the reality of the devastation under the rug underscores the contempt of the American ruling class for the island's working class. At the same time, raising the official death toll will by itself do little to ease the burden residents confront. Nor will it unlock any additional federal aid.

President Donald Trump exhibited the true outlook of the ruling oligarchy when he visited the island two weeks after the storm and lobbed paper towels into a crowd. Trump contrasted the low death toll, which was then only 16, to the "real catastrophe" of Hurricane Katrina in 2005, which killed more than 1,800 in New Orleans and along the US Gulf Coast.

"You can be very proud of all of your people, all of our people working together. Sixteen versus literally thousands of people," Trump boasted. "Everybody... can really be very proud of what's taken place in Puerto Rico." The president subsequently threatened to

remove the limited aid being provided by the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) and other federal agencies and suggested that the Puerto Rican people were responsible for the disaster.



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