

Thousands displaced as Puerto Rico enters third straight week of relentless earthquakes

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For more than two weeks, the impoverished US island territory of Puerto Rico—population 3.2 million, more than the state of Iowa—has been struck repeatedly by more than 1,000 earthquakes and aftershocks of varying magnitudes. Even as the full extent of the destruction is still being determined the quakes are expected to continue.

Across the island, people have begun living outside, in tents, or in their cars out of fear that their houses will collapse on top of them. Relief agencies estimate that more than 2,000 people have been displaced from their homes since the swarm of earthquakes began.

The string of quakes and aftershocks began on December 28. The largest have been a 6.4 magnitude quake on Tuesday, January 7—the largest quake to hit Puerto Rico in over 100 years—and a 5.9 on Sunday morning.

Earthquakes of magnitude 6.0 or higher are considered “strong” and can cause severe damage in populated areas, like Puerto Rico’s second largest city Ponce, population 166,000, which closed its downtown area due to the persistence of concrete debris falling from buildings onto the street.

So far, thousands of homes across Puerto Rico have collapsed or been damaged, along with damage to other buildings, roads and infrastructure. Officially, one person has died, but the largest quake on January 7 knocked out electricity for most of the island and cut off some 250,000 or more people from clean water. The sudden loss of electricity puts the elderly and ill at particular risk of death, cutting off access to critical medical equipment. Service had not been fully restored by the time the 5.9 quake hit on Sunday morning.

Residents of Macana, a rural community outside the city of Guayanilla, one of the worst hit areas, reported that many faced difficulties in reaching official shelters

and receiving desperately needed supplies with little or no aid from the government.

“We’re thankful, because if the cell phones weren’t working, nobody would get here,” Diego Cruz, a 59-year-old army veteran told the *Daily Beast*. “Through phone calls and reaching out, that’s how people have gotten here. We’ve had help from different people, but no help from the government.”

The seismic activity is centered just 10 or so miles from Ponce, off the southern coast. Most of Puerto Rico’s electrical power generating stations are in this region. The largest one, the Costa Sur plant in Guayanilla, which supplies a quarter of the island, suffered “destruction on a grand scale,” in the words of José Ortiz, executive director of the Puerto Rico Electric Power Authority (PREPA). He said at a press conference that the plant could take up to a year to repair.

The earthquakes have compounded the social and economic crisis on the island as many Puerto Ricans are still suffering from the destruction wrought by Hurricane Maria in 2017 and the criminal government indifference which followed.

In that disaster, electricity, clean water and roads were also knocked out for extended periods of time. The inadequate response of the federal and territorial governments meant a general breakdown of society in which major hospitals did not function and medical care was unobtainable. A year later, the official death toll of 64 was revised to over 3,000, with some studies placing it over 5,000.

Javier, a university professor in San Juan, told the WSWWS about the difficulties residents now face, the response of Puerto Rican workers coming to the aid of victims and what the disaster has revealed about the state of society on the island more than two years after

the disaster of Hurricane Maria.

“Before the earthquakes, Governor Wanda Vázquez went to all of the public schools on the island and reported that they were retrofitted for any natural disaster, but because of the earthquakes, now we know that was a lie.

“Because of the inadequate response by the government, many people around the island took it upon themselves to help the southern part of Puerto Rico. No one has any trust in the government anymore. People are doing the work that the government should be doing, and in the process are getting into harms way. It’s a dangerous situation, and if there’s another higher magnitude quake, those trying to help will be stuck in the south.

“We don’t believe that we’ll have any meaningful help from the US. The government in Puerto Rico is just playing politics with our lives, not helping. They’ll go to the cities and give away bags with small goods with their party logo on them.”

Puerto Rico remains a social powder keg after last year’s mass demonstrations which were driven by the desperate conditions facing the working class and resulted in the ouster of Governor Ricardo Rosselló. The protests were sparked by leaked texts messages showing that Rosselló had conspired to downplay the hurricane death toll and had used the disaster to push through the privatization, in the service of Wall Street, of the state-owned power authority PREPA.

Governor Vázquez, like Rosselló a member of the Democratic Party-aligned New Progressive Party, is continuing the hated austerity regime which prevailed under Rosselló and is enforced by the Financial Oversight and Management Board established by the Obama administration.

While the Trump administration declared a national emergency in Puerto Rico following the 6.4 earthquake last week, \$18 billion in federal aid promised in the aftermath of Maria is still being held up by the US government.



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