

As refugees from earthquakes increase, Puerto Rican authorities prioritize repressive measures

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After two weeks of tremors in Puerto Rico, peaking on January 7 with a 6.4-magnitude earthquake that destroyed hundreds of homes and buildings and left at least one dead, heavy seismic activity and warnings continue. With thousands losing or fleeing their homes, afraid that they will collapse, the response by local authorities and US government has been marked by callous austerity and fears of social unrest.

The island's Secretary of State, Elmer Román, announced Tuesday that there are 8,023 refugees in "official" camps administrated by the government or NGOs, while "many" more are sleeping in smaller camps and on sidewalks.

The authorities said they will stop providing shelter locally, while the aftershocks continue to cause structural damage, and federal authorities estimate a 17 percent chance of an earthquake of 6.4 magnitude or greater in the next 30 days. Even though experts have warned against mass relocations due to costs for refugees, pushing them to take risks, and a slower recovery process, Román announced that the government will not provide aid unless people travel to five "base camps" set up only until this week by the National Guard.

Puerto Ricans on the island and supporters in the continental US have taken their own initiative to provide staple goods and other aid, with hundreds of volunteers driving to the most affected towns.

The administration of acting governor Wanda Vázquez, who was installed last August after mass demonstrations involving up to 1 million people forced the resignation of two governors, has prioritized the preparedness for another social upheaval over preparedness for another natural disaster.

Beyond the deployment of the local 8,500 National Guard troops, all local police have been called back to duty from vacations and Washington will send 300 security officials from special task forces. Vázquez signed an executive decree so that the latter are immediately sworn in as "agents of peace," with special enforcement powers. The local legislature introduced a bill this week to request the deployment of Special Forces from the US military.

Another bill requests "financial institutions and telecommunication companies to create deferred systems of payments, without interest, to those affected," and a third orders a publicity campaign on legal issues for those who lost their homes "without limiting that insurance companies, financial institutions, banks and law firms in Puerto Rico organize their legal departments and personnel and reach out to camps themselves."

After a power outage across the entire island on January 7, power had been restored to most of the island by Tuesday, but 11,000 people were still without electricity in the Arecibo region and 15,000 without running water. Major repairs were still being carried out to the two main power plants of the island.

Last week, the Trump administration approved an emergency declaration for Puerto Rico, but doubts have been raised that even the meager \$5 million made available through the Federal Emergency Management Administration (FEMA) will be delivered after the scandalous response of the Trump administration to Hurricane Maria in 2017.

The estimated costs for rebuilding the island after Hurricane Maria surpassed \$100 billion, but the White House has only released \$1.5 billion of the \$8 billion

approved in federal aid. A Housing and Urban Development official told the *Washington Post* last week that Puerto Rico has only spent \$5.8 million, citing “strong financial controls” by the federal government.

Puerto Rican National Guard Major General José Juan Reyes declared this week that their relief operations have been affected by the fact that out of the \$550 million approved for the Puerto Rican National Guard in response to Hurricane Maria, the Trump administration reassigned \$420 million to build the border wall with Mexico.

With trillions assigned for war by overwhelming bipartisan majorities since Hurricane Maria, the Trump administration is preparing a devastating war against Iran as it starves the US territory of funds.

The corporate press has stressed the surprise factor of the earthquakes, claiming that “generations have not felt such an earthquake.” However, the alarm was raised by experts repeatedly, but was dismissed. The extent of the destruction and suffering this week is the result of official negligence by a government that places the profit interests of Wall Street above social needs.

A 6.0 earthquake on September 23 last year—50 miles off the coast compared to less than 10 miles during the recent tremors—raised alarms across the island, just like the 6.4 earthquake in January 2014, located 17 miles north of the coastline.

Shortly after the September 2019 earthquake, Christa Von Hillebrandt-Andrade, the former head of the island’s seismic network, warned: “The island of Puerto Rico is surrounded by faults that could generate very strong earthquakes, and other faults cross it that could lead to major earthquakes and a significant impact. One can expect an earthquake above magnitude 8... Puerto Rico has to be ready for an earthquake and tsunami, 100 percent 24/7.”

This week, Von Hillebrandt told AP, “For decades, scientists and people like me have been informing and alerting communities and the government of Puerto Rico of the physical threat,” denouncing that “not much action was taken.”

Moreover, while the immediate structural integrity of the schools is being assessed, officials are entirely silent about making the necessary renovations or reconstructions to guarantee the safety of students.

The president of the Puerto Rican Association of Engineers, Juan Alicea, said last October in response to a new study that found that 1,000 of the 1,200 schools in the country have not been subject to any of the necessary renovations to abide by 1987 anti-seismic building codes, “The worst thing is that we know what to do and how to do it, but it must be carried out.” This week, Alicea told AP that 200,000 homes are not built to code: “If we don’t take action, this is going to cost us a lot of money and a lot of lives.”

Those forces that channeled the protests last August behind illusions that Vázquez would respond to social pressures are chiefly responsible for the fact that power remains in the hands of stooges of the ruling financial oligarchy and the continued official negligence toward the lives and livelihoods of ordinary Puerto Ricans.

This includes “left” Democrats like Bernie Sanders and Alexandria Ocasio Cortez, who made empty appeals last year to the Financial Oversight and Management Board controlled by Wall Street to soften austerity measures, and also portrayed the installation of Vázquez as a “victory.” The local trade unions, chiefly those self-promoted as “combative,” like the Puerto Rico Teachers Federation (FMPR) and the electricians union UTIER, suppressed the protests by promoting illusions in Vázquez.



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