

Puerto Rico declares emergency as drought leaves nearly 150,000 residents without water

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Puerto Rico's Governor Wanda Vázquez declared a state of emergency on June 29 due to an ongoing drought that has hit the island. On July 2, the Puerto Rico Electric Power Authority (PREPA) began limiting water services for nearly 150,000 residents for 24 hours every other day in an effort to strictly ration water on the island, including the island's capital, San Juan, indefinitely.

More than 32 percent of the island is experiencing a severe drought, while another 54 percent is experiencing a moderate drought, according to the US Drought Monitor. This has mainly affected the South and Northeast of the island.

PREPA, the island's utility company, has warned residents not to stockpile tap water, which has resulted in the limited availability of bottled water at grocery stores as people rush to buy essential reserves.

The drought is made all the more dire by the ongoing coronavirus pandemic. The US territory has had over 9,600 confirmed and likely cases of COVID-19 and 167 deaths as of July 12. So far, the island's capital San Juan has been the epicenter. There were 669 cases reported on July 6, the largest daily total to date. Since Governor Vázquez's return to work policy was enacted back in May, there has been a sharp increase of cases throughout the island.

A lack of consistent running water will make it more difficult to follow the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention guidelines that everyone wash their hands frequently, and will severely handicap people's ability to take showers and wash their clothes. The emergency declaration of June 29 prohibits, in most municipalities, watering gardens, filling pools, and the use of a hose and non-recycled water to wash cars. Those who are caught can be fined \$250 for individuals and \$2,500 for businesses.

The Vázquez administration and previous governments have come under scrutiny due to their role in the current water crisis. Had the governor or one of her predecessors ordered the reservoirs to be dredged, it would have eliminated sediments and lessened the excess loss of water. The island's water reservoirs haven't been dredged since the late 1990s and after Hurricane Maria in 2017 no effort was made to maintain them, leading to a further deterioration.

In June, the island's labor secretary, Briseida Torres, resigned due to public outrage over long delays in unemployment assistance, long lines at the unemployment offices and the unacceptable delays in sending stimulus checks which were supposed to go out months ago.

The economic crisis facing Puerto Rico, exacerbated by the coronavirus pandemic, has left thousands in worsening poverty and destitution resulting in the highest unemployment rate in the United States at 23 percent. There have been around 300,000 workers who have filed for unemployment assistance since the coronavirus pandemic forced the closing of thousands of businesses as well as schools and other institutions. Thousands of residents in Puerto Rico still have not received any assistance during the pandemic, while a large portion of the workforce is ineligible because they work in the "informal" sector of the economy.

Due to the immense job loss and poverty, thousands have turned to food banks and other institutions for assistance. An administrator at Comedores Sociales, a food bank in Caguas, told the *New York Times* that it received 8,000 requests for food assistance in the first two months of the pandemic alone.

The coronavirus pandemic coupled with the current drought is only intensifying the prolonged economic and social crisis facing workers and youth in Puerto

Rico. For over a decade, Puerto Rico has faced a protracted recession and severe austerity measures imposed on the population by successive governments as well the Financial Oversight and Management Board, which was appointed by Democratic President Barack Obama in 2016.

The island's population has been hit by crisis after crisis since Hurricane Maria hit in 2017, wiping out major infrastructure and taking the lives of over 5,000 people due to the stark indifference by the local and federal government to the plight of millions of Puerto Ricans.

In the summer of 2019, then Governor Ricardo Rosselló of the New Progressive Party (PNP) was ousted by a mass movement of over one million workers, youth and small business owners. The protests were sparked by the leak of 900 pages of texts which exposed outright corruption at the highest levels of the Puerto Rican government and the utter contempt Rosselló and his associates had towards the victims of the 2017 hurricanes. "Now that we are on the subject, don't we have some cadavers to feed our crows?" Rosselló's chief executive Christian Sobrino stated in one now infamous text.

Finally, since late December 2019, the island has been rocked by unending earthquakes and tremors, with over 9,000 of varying intensity in only 6 months. Hundreds of people have been displaced as the quakes have destroyed already crumbling infrastructure throughout the island. During the earthquakes, pedestrians found an abandoned building full of FEMA supplies such as gas tanks, diapers and other necessities that were meant to be distributed after Hurricane Maria in 2017, further shaking the administration of Vázquez and the PNP.



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