

Hurricane Fiona triggers massive flooding and damage in Puerto Rico

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Heavy rains and flooding produced by Hurricane Fiona continued to batter Puerto Rico Monday, leaving millions without power, clean water and safe shelter. Even as the Category 1 hurricane moved onto the impoverished Dominican Republic, destroying roads and power lines, as much as 30 inches of rain continued to pour down on parts of Puerto Rico yesterday.

The US territory is still reeling from the effects of Hurricane Maria, which hit Puerto Rico exactly five years ago today. The island's largely working class population has been rendered more vulnerable to such disasters by the looting of its state-owned utilities and other public assets under the terms of the financial restructuring imposed on the debt-ridden island by the US government.

Climate scientists have explained that Hurricane Fiona's heavy rainfall is an example of how global warming is influencing the intensity of storms. "If you have warmer water, you'll have more evaporation, which means you have more moisture in the atmosphere, which means you can get more precipitation," Kevin Reed, an associate professor of atmospheric science at Stony Brook University in New York told NBC News. A study co-authored by Reed published in April found that the 2020 Atlantic hurricane season was 10 percent wetter due to the impact of climate change.

Although weaker than Maria, a Category 4-5 hurricane, Fiona's slow-moving storm system and torrential rainfalls have produced even greater flooding than in 2017, according to authorities. The National Weather Service in San Juan on Monday urged residents to move to higher ground "immediately," with Richard Pasch, a specialist with the National Hurricane Center, adding, "Heavy rainfall and catastrophic flooding continues across much of Puerto Rico."

Authorities have reported at least three deaths, including a 58-year-old man swept away by a flooded river in the inland town of Comerio, but more fatalities are expected as rescuers reach remote areas cut off by mudslides and raging floodwaters.

An island-wide blackout by the newly privatized electric

company, LUMA Energy, which occurred Sunday morning before the hurricane made landfall, has left the island's 3.2 million residents without electricity. Officials admit it could take days if not weeks to restore power to many residents. An estimated two-thirds of the island's residents also lack clean water.

Many residents only saved themselves from rising flood waters by climbing onto the roofs of their homes. There have been at least 1,000 water rescues, according to a press update Monday by the island's Governor Pedro Pierluisi. Evacuations of the towns of Caguas and Toa Baja were also taking place, the governor said. Pierluisi was elected governor as the candidate of the pro-statehood New Progressive Party (PNP), but joined the Democratic caucus in the US House of Representatives when he was the island's non-voting representative.

Residents posted pleas for help on social media. A woman identified as Génesis Lían posted an appeal on Facebook, according to a report in the *Miami Herald*, begging for help for a group gathered with her that included a minor, a disabled person and an elderly person with diabetes. "We need help, we need to get out of our houses in Playa de Salinas urgently. I already called emergency management and nothing, I swear I'm swimming and I'm very, very cold. I need to get us out of here, literally the beach is in the house," she wrote.

In a cruel irony, a temporary bridge built by the National Guard after the previous one was destroyed by Hurricane Maria was washed away in the northeastern pueblo of Utuado on Sunday. Videos went viral in 2017 when residents of the town built a makeshift zipline to ferry supplies across the raging river in a shopping cart because of the lack of official support.

Carmen, a retired New York City sanitation worker who lives in the southeastern city of Arroyo, described the devastating conditions in an interview with the WSWS Monday. "We lost power at 10 a.m. Sunday and there has been no electricity in all of Puerto Rico since yesterday. The entire island has been affected due to so much rain and

flooding, especially in the more mountainous parts. Trees and electrical posts have been knocked out, and the floodwaters were so strong they've washed away a bridge. Many people are stuck in their homes until emergency crews can clear the roads and rescue them. There are some shelters to go to, but so many have lost their homes."

"This kind of flooding is worse than what happened during Hurricane Maria," Carmen said. "The southeast is where the most devastating accumulating rain is occurring. In Guayama, Maunabo, Patilla, near the beach areas, there has been intense rain and flooding that has destroyed homes and businesses.

"Only 30 percent of the island has potable water. We have 78 pueblos in Puerto Rico, but only around 14 trucks of National Guard are helping, the governor said. FEMA and more first responders are supposed to be coming from the US mainland."

Carmen also talked about LUMA Energy, the joint venture between Houston-based Quanta Services and Alberta, Canada-based ATCO, which took over the island's electrical transmission and distribution system from the Puerto Rico Electric Power Authority (PREPA) on June 1, 2021. Since then, residents have continued to be plagued by decaying infrastructure and frequent blackouts.

"The private utility company LUMA has been here more than a year," she said. "They have not done enough for all the money they're receiving. In the last months, there have been many demonstrations protesting the 15-year contract the government negotiated with LUMA."

"I saw the devastation of Maria," Carmen concluded. "There is little or not enough effort to help the countryside in construction and rebuilding. The money has not been used to repair the damage, like for the schools. Instead, it has gone into some politicians' pockets and not sent to where it is needed."

According to a report in the Associated Press, the government has completed only 21 percent of more than 5,500 official post-hurricane projects in five years, and seven of the island's 78 municipalities report that not a single project has begun. Only five municipalities report that half of the projects slated for their region have been completed, according to an Associated Press review of government data.

As Hurricane Fiona bore down on Puerto Rico, more than 3,600 homes still have tattered blue tarps serving as a makeshift roof, the AP reported.

President Joe Biden signed an emergency declaration for the island on Sunday and claimed that the federal government has "hundreds of personnel on the ground" to assist residents. "Jill and I are keeping the people of Puerto Rico in our prayers as Hurricane Fiona passes over your

beautiful island," Biden tweeted Monday morning. "We are here for you, and we will get through this together."

But residents can expect no more from the Democratic president than they did from Republican former President Donald Trump, who contemptuously tossed paper towels to desperate islanders after Hurricane Maria hit.

Biden was vice president when President Barack Obama signed into law the bipartisan Puerto Rico Oversight, Management, and Economic Stability Act (PROMESA) in 2016. The act imposed a virtual financial dictatorship over the island, modeled on the robbing of public employee pensions and other city-owned assets in Detroit in 2013-14 and overseen by some of the very same federal judges.

The action was aimed at making the island's residents—nearly half of whom live below the poverty line—pay for the nearly \$70 billion in debt controlled by Wall Street hedge funds like Aurelius Capital and other investors, who, according to the *New York Times*, had bought up "the island's bonds at a discount, pocket[ed] the high interest and persuade[d] politicians to make decisions that would raise the value of their investments."

The unelected oversight board imposed draconian measures, including the privatization the public schools and electrical services, the slashing of public employees' jobs, wages and pensions, and increased unemployment. In 2019, the austerity measures combined with the disastrous response to Hurricane Maria triggered mass protests that led to the collapse of the corrupt administration of then-Governor Ricardo Roselló, alarming the US and Puerto Rican ruling classes.

According to a report in the *San Juan Star*, US District Court Judge Laura Taylor Swain, who is presiding over Puerto Rico's Title III bankruptcy cases, including that of PREPA, suspended a planned hearing on Monday because lawyers for the retirement systems were "unable to consult their clients because they lack power service."



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