Drought in Puerto Rico: mass suffering as Trump weaponizes the island against Latin America

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Since August 7, more than 180,000 households and businesses in Puerto Rico—roughly half a million people—have been cut off from running water for 48 hours at a stretch, going three and four days a week without service. Seven municipalities are under the order: San Juan, Carolina, Trujillo Alto, Juncos, Gurabo, Canóvanas and Loíza.

Over 72 percent of the island is suffering drought, and the Carraízo reservoir serving the metropolitan region has fallen to critical levels. San Juan has recorded its driest July in more than 120 years of record-keeping and its fourth warmest, while NOAA puts the odds of below-normal rainfall and above-normal heat through October above 70 percent.

The measures follow a state of emergency declared July 31 by Governor Jenniffer González Colón, who says she cannot say how long rationing will last. “This situation is not in our hands,” she declared. “It’s not raining.”

Many working-class families had gone more than a week without water when the rationing was announced; communities in Loíza report 13 months of unreliable service. Residents queue for hours at distribution points, and the water trailers FEMA has supplied for an initial 30 days come nowhere near meeting the need. Families ration what they can store in buckets and 55-gallon drums, while the wealthy in San Juan's high-rises draw on private cisterns.

On Tuesday, workers of the water authority (AAA) carried out a 24-hour strike to demand higher salaries, along with more personnel and investment. Protests have also erupted in San Juan, with hundreds of people affected by the rationing marching to demand the resignation of the governor and the water authority's president.

All of this takes place on an island still enduring rolling blackouts under the privatized grid operator LUMA Energy. Being without power is a hardship; however, being without water is a matter of life and death.

At the very moment half a million Puerto Ricans cannot wash, drink or flush, the island is the principal staging ground for the largest US military campaign in Latin America in half a century. Puerto Rico—a colony seized from Spain in 1898, whose people cannot vote for the president who commands its bases and have no voting representatives in the US Congress—is the launchpad for recolonizing the hemisphere and its resources, including the operation to take Venezuela's oil.

By late October 2025, some 10,000 US troops were in the region, roughly half of them in Puerto Rico. The Roosevelt Roads naval facility in Ceiba, shut in 2004 after mass protests drove the Navy from the island of Vieques, has been reactivated, its runways rebuilt to handle fighter jets and heavy cargo aircraft.

Ten F-35s, MQ-9 Reaper drones and V-22 Ospreys carrying special forces have been based there, while B-52 and B-1B bombers have flown from the island. Since May, the 24th Marine Expeditionary Unit—1,300 Marines and sailors—has operated from the island.

From this base, US forces have carried out at least 66 strikes on small boats in the Caribbean and eastern Pacific, killing at least 221 poor fishermen and crew, executed without charges, trial or the possibility of surrender.

On January 3, in a two-and-a-half-hour operation involving 150 aircraft staged from the Caribbean, US forces bombed Caracas and seized President Nicolás Maduro, flying him to the USS Iwo Jima and then a New York City prison. Trump declared the United States would “run the country” and take Venezuelan oil as “reparations.”

Analysts project Venezuelan output rising toward three million barrels a day over the coming decade, requiring some $100 billion in investment to exploit the largest known reserves in the world. which are also the most carbon-intensive. Venezuelan crude results in emissions several times higher than lighter, conventional crude.

Puerto Rico has also been used by the Navy for its operations against Cuba, interdicting tankers and causing a

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repeated grid collapse, greatly limiting the water pumped for human consumption and irrigation.

Vast resources for military as civilian infrastructure crumbles

There is no evidence the drought has degraded US military operations in Puerto Rico for a single day. There is abundant evidence of where the money has gone, however. The Puerto Rico Planning Board puts total military investment on the island at $832.5 million for fiscal 2026, including $325.9 million in construction. At Roosevelt Roads, $79 million in federal funds—supplemented by $2.5 million from the unelected Financial Oversight and Management Board—is going into grid upgrades and the reconstruction of the base's water and sewer system.

The speaker of Puerto Rico's House of Representatives is pressing for a further $100 million to finish it: a filtration plant rated at four million gallons a day, seven pumping stations, five storage tanks and 64 miles of pipe. A single five-month jet fuel contract at the base airfield came to $41 million. Roosevelt Roads, in other words, is being given a self-contained water supply of its own.

Compare this to the system the population depends upon. The Aqueduct and Sewer Authority loses 60 to 65 percent of every gallon it produces before it reaches a tap— a figure the Fiscal Control Board itself reported in 2023. Carraízo puts out 70 million gallons a day, of which only 30 to 35 million arrive at homes. The Dos Bocas reservoir is 70 percent silted and has never been dredged. As recently as June 10, the 72-inch Super-aqueduct main ruptured in Bayamón, cutting off 120,000 customers.

None of this is a mystery of engineering. It is a decision about whose water is worth paying for. The richest country in world history has the money, the engineers and the logistical capacity to rebuild a water system in Puerto Rico.

The same indifference extends to those sent to do the killing. The aircraft carrier USS Abraham Lincoln has been at sea since November 21, more than 260 days, after being redirected in January to join US operations against Iran. *Navy Times* and *Stars and Stripes* report that multiple sailors have attempted to jump overboard to escape intolerable conditions. Wall Street's geopolitical interests are the priority: the lives spent advancing them, including the colonial subjects, the enlisted sailors, or the workers in American cities, count for nothing.

In Puerto Rico, the military has been installed as the administrator of the emergency. Under Executive Order 2026-032, the National Guard launched "Mission Clear Source" on June 7. It had delivered only 505,000 gallons by July 31, compared to the roughly 40 million gallons a day Carraízo alone loses to broken pipes.

The drought is the intersection of two processes, both driven by capitalism.

The first is the century-long looting of the island: annexation in 1898; the transformation of the island into a corporate tax haven and then the 1996 withdrawal of corporate tax exemptions that gutted industrial employment; a $73 billion debt run up for Wall Street's benefit; and the imposition of PROMESA (Puerto Rico Oversight, Management, and Economic Stability Act) in 2016 as a bankers' dictatorship over an elected government. Hurricane María killed some 4,645 people in 2017 as a result of what a century of colonial neglect had already done to the island's water, power and hospital systems.

The second is the acceleration of global warming due to deregulation and the surge in operations of the world's largest institutional emitter of greenhouse gases: the US military. On February 11, the Environmental Protection Agency repealed the 2009 endangerment finding, the legal foundation of all federal climate regulation, boasting of "the single largest deregulatory action in US history." Two days later, it licensed five oil super-majors to go back into Venezuela. In Puerto Rico, $365 million earmarked for rooftop solar and battery storage was redirected into fossil fuel infrastructure.

As US imperialism moves to recolonize the hemisphere, Puerto Rico provides a key lesson: nationalism in all its variants—statehood, commonwealth, independence—is bankrupt. A planetary crisis of war and environmental catastrophe cannot be confronted within the borders of any nation state. Nationalism serves to blur the class line that runs through society, between the workers rationing water in Loíza and the officials, contractors and bondholders who profit from the ruin.

The allies of Puerto Rican workers are the workers internationally who produce all wealth but are denied clean water and basic necessities, as in Flint, Detroit, and Havana. The fight for water in San Juan is inseparable from the fight to end the war drive, abolish the colonial debt, expropriate the financial aristocracy and reorganize world production on a socialist basis.

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