

Maria destroys homes, triggers flooding in Puerto Rico

By Danica Coto, Associated Press on 09.22.17

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Residents of San Juan, Puerto Rico, deal with damages to their homes after Hurricane Maria battered the Caribbean island. Maria slammed into Puerto Rico on September 20, 2017, cutting power on most of the U.S. territory as residents hunkered down in the face of the island's worst storm in living memory. Photo from Getty Images

SAN JUAN, Puerto Rico — The strongest hurricane to hit Puerto Rico in more than 80 years destroyed hundreds of homes, knocked out power across the entire island and triggered heavy flooding Wednesday in an onslaught that could plunge the U.S. territory deeper into financial crisis.

Leaving at least nine people dead in its wake across the Caribbean, Hurricane Maria blew ashore in the morning in the southeast coastal town of Yabucoa as a Category 4 storm with winds of 155 mph (250 kph).

It was expected to punish the island of 3.4 million people with life-threatening winds for 12 to 24 hours.

"Once we're able to go outside, we're going to find our island destroyed," said Abner Gomez, Puerto Rico's emergency management director. "The information we have received is not encouraging. It's a system that has destroyed everything in its path."

It was the second time in two weeks that Puerto Rico felt the wrath of a hurricane.

Puerto Rico's death toll of 10 people from the storm was expected to rise.

As people waited it out in shelters or took cover inside stairwells, bathrooms and closets, Maria brought down cell towers and power lines, snapped trees, tore off roofs and unloaded at least 20 inches (50 centimeters) of rain.

Widespread flooding was reported, with dozens of cars half-submerged in some neighborhoods and many streets turned into rivers. People calling local radio stations reported that doors were being torn off their hinges and a water tank flew away.

Felix Delgado, mayor of the northern coastal city of Catano, told The Associated Press that 80 percent of the 454 homes in a neighborhood known as Juana Matos were destroyed. The fishing community on San Juan Bay was hit with a storm surge of more than 4 feet, he said.

"Months and months and months and months are going to pass before we can recover from this," he said.

As of 2 p.m. EDT, Maria had weakened to a Category 3, with winds of 115 mph (185 kph). Its center was just off Puerto Rico's northwestern coast, moving at about 15 mph (20 kph). It was expected to pass off the coast of the Dominican Republic late Wednesday and Thursday.

Even before the storm, Puerto Rico's electrical grid was crumbling and the island was in dire condition financially.

Puerto Rico is struggling to restructure a portion of its \$73 billion debt, and the government has warned it is running out of money as it fights back against furloughs and other austerity measures imposed by a federal board overseeing the island's finances.

Gov. Ricardo Rossello urged people to have faith: "We are stronger than any hurricane. Together, we will rebuild."

He later asked President Donald Trump to declare the island a disaster zone, a step that would open the way to federal aid.

Many people feared extended power outages would further sink businesses struggling amid a recession that has lasted more than a decade.

"This is going to be a disaster," said Jean Robert Auguste, who owns two French restaurants and sought shelter at a San Juan hotel. "We haven't made any money this month."

More than 11,000 people — and more than 580 pets — were in shelters, authorities said.

Along the island's northern coast, an emergency medical station in the town of Arecibo lost its roof, while communication was severed with several emergency management posts. A hospital and a police station reported broken windows, and a tree fell on an ambulance.

As the storm closed in on the Dominican Republic, about 4,000 tourists in the Bavara-Punta Cana area on the eastern tip of the island were moved to hotels in Santo Domingo, the capital.

Maria posed no immediate threat to the U.S. mainland. The long-range forecast showed the storm out in the Atlantic Ocean hundreds of miles off the Georgia-South Carolina coast by Monday morning.

Previously a Category 5 with 175 mph (281 kph) winds, Maria hit Puerto Rico as the third-strongest storm to make landfall in the U.S., based on its central pressure. It was even stronger than Hurricane Irma when Irma roared into the Florida Keys earlier this month.

Irma sideswiped Puerto Rico on Sept. 6, causing no deaths or widespread damage on the island but leaving more than 1 million people without electricity. More than 70,000 still had no power as Maria approached.

The last Category 4 hurricane to blow ashore in Puerto Rico was in 1932, and the strongest ever to hit the island was San Felipe in 1928 with winds of 160 mph (250 kph).

As Maria closed in, Trump offered his support via Twitter: "Puerto Rico being hit hard by new monster Hurricane. Be careful, our hearts are with you - will be there to help!"

The storm's center passed near or over St. Croix overnight Tuesday, prompting U.S. Virgin Islands Gov. Kenneth Mapp to warn people to sleep in their street clothes and shoes just in case. St. Croix was largely spared by Irma.

There were no immediate reports of deaths or injuries on St. Croix, but it was still too dangerous Wednesday to venture out and conduct a thorough check, said Nykole Tyson, a spokeswoman at the U.S. Virgin Islands Emergency Operations Center.

On the island of Dominica, which got slammed late Monday, Hartley Henry, an adviser to the prime minister, reported at least seven deaths and a "tremendous loss of housing and public buildings." He said the country was "in a daze," with no electricity and little to no communications.

Dominica's airport and seaports remained closed, and authorities used helicopters to carry emergency food, water and shelter materials to the island, said Ronald Jackson, head of the Caribbean Disaster and Emergency Management Agency.

Quiz

- 1 Read the sentence from the article.

"Once we're able to go outside, we're going to find our island destroyed," said Abner Gomez, Puerto Rico's emergency management director.

Which sentence from the article BEST supports this idea?

- (A) As people waited it out in shelters or took cover inside stairwells, bathrooms and closets, Maria brought down cell towers and power lines, snapped trees, tore off roofs and unloaded at least 20 inches (50 centimeters) of rain.
- (B) Puerto Rico is struggling to restructure a portion of its \$73 billion debt, and the government has warned it is running out of money as it fights back against furloughs and other austerity measures imposed by a federal board overseeing the island's finances.
- (C) As the storm closed in on the Dominican Republic, about 4,000 tourists in the Bavara-Punta Cana area on the eastern tip of the island were moved to hotels in Santo Domingo, the capital.
- (D) Previously a Category 5 with 175 mph (281 kph) winds, Maria hit Puerto Rico as the third-strongest storm to make landfall in the U.S., based on its central pressure.

- 2 Read the paragraph from the article.

There were no immediate reports of deaths or injuries on St. Croix, but it was still too dangerous Wednesday to venture out and conduct a thorough check, said Nykole Tyson, a spokeswoman at the U.S. Virgin Islands Emergency Operations Center.

Which of the following conclusions can be drawn from this paragraph?

- (A) The U.S. Virgin Islands Emergency Operations Center is working around the clock to help those affected on St. Croix.
- (B) The location of St. Croix saved it from the devastating destruction Puerto Rico experienced.
- (C) The damages and harm caused by Hurricane Maria on St. Croix may be worse than originally thought.
- (D) The dangerous conditions that are still present on St. Croix indicate that more storms might occur.

- 3 Which of the following ideas did the author develop LEAST in this article about Hurricane Maria?
- (A) the reactions of leaders in Puerto Rico in response to the damage caused by the storm
 - (B) the effect the storm will likely have on Puerto Rico's already struggling economy
 - (C) the statistics related to strength, destruction and fatalities caused by the storm
 - (D) the role the United States will play in assisting Puerto Rico's recovery from the storm
- 4 What are the reasons why Hurricane Maria could negatively affect Puerto Rico's economy?
1. *Widespread power outages could reduce the revenue earned by businesses across Puerto Rico.*
 2. *Puerto Rico's government is struggling against financial restrictions implemented by a federal board.*
 3. *Puerto Rico is obligated to send financial aid to Dominica and St. Croix after they were hit by the hurricanes.*
 4. *Buildings, power lines and property were destroyed across the entire island of Puerto Rico.*
- (A) 1 and 3, only
 - (B) 1 and 4, only
 - (C) 1, 2, and 3
 - (D) 2, 3, and 4