



Report on Federal Response to Hurricane Maria in Puerto Rico
October 2, 2017

By Congressman Darren Soto (FL-09)

I arrived in San Juan, Puerto Rico on October 1 during the afternoon. It was obvious upon arrival that most areas lacked electricity, cell phone service, and functioning traffic lights. Debris still covered many roads. Most buildings sustained minor or major damage.

I met with two FEMA officials, along with Puerto Rico government officials, who briefed me at the Emergency Operations Center. The Center appeared to have numerous personnel from FEMA, US military, as well as other federal and Puerto Rico agencies. New York State Police officers were also present, though they had not been dispatched with an assignment despite being there for a few days.



FEMA officials explained several reasons for response difficulties. The first alleged problem was "staging" for Hurricane Maria. Since Puerto Rico is an island, they could not prepare multiple tractor trailers in anticipation of Maria. The second alleged problem was that proper "sequencing", i.e. order of protocols taken during every disaster by FEMA, required certain steps to be taken before assets could be deployed (e.g. preparing ships, aircraft and equipment for departure).

FEMA officials estimated that they would need \$1.7B to fund their Puerto Rico operation for the next 6 months.

US military leaders have alleged that the government of Puerto Rico did not request all potential federal relief in a timely fashion. However, FEMA has traditionally presented all federal options available to Governors during other major disasters to ensure responses are not delayed by bureaucracy. This situation was exacerbated by the fact that the government of Puerto Rico lacks an ability to effectively communicate between officials and agencies or assess damage due to virtually no internet or cell phone service.

I was briefed by Puerto Rico's Senate President, Thomas Rivera Schatz, who stated that the federal response had been far more robust after Hurricane George. He explained that the lack of cell phone and internet services is their largest obstacle in identifying and rendering supplies and aid throughout the island. He pointed to persisting gas and driver shortages. Additionally, he confirmed that FEMA helicopter supply drops did not begin until Day 7 or 8 in the hardest hit communities.



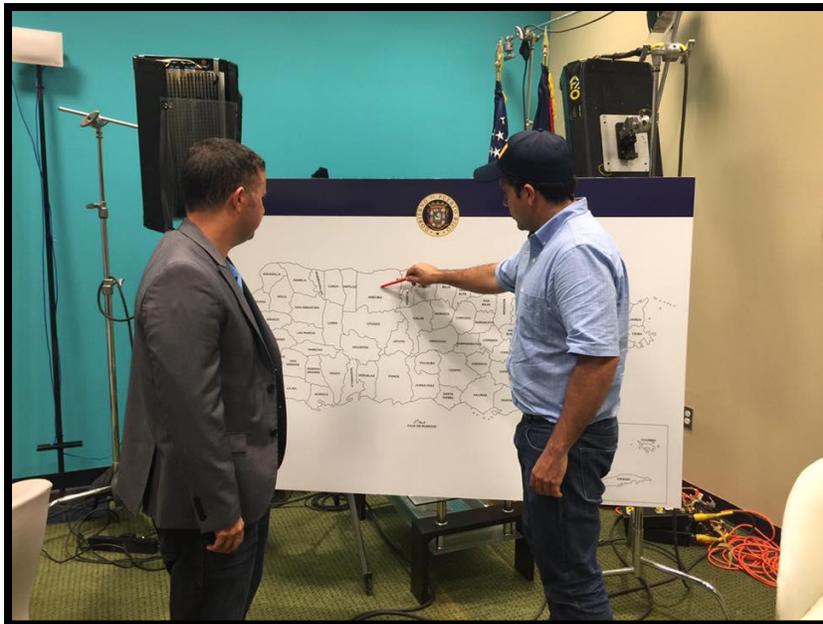
I also received a briefing by Governor Ricardo Rosselló and his staff. The governor indicated that Hurricane Maria had taken a southeast to northwest route. This was particularly damaging since power was primarily generated in the south. He also explained that the entire island had sustained damage by the storm amounting to approximately \$40B - \$70B. Vast parts of the transportation, communication and electric infrastructure will need to be rebuilt. Not to mention, over 100,000 homes were destroyed.





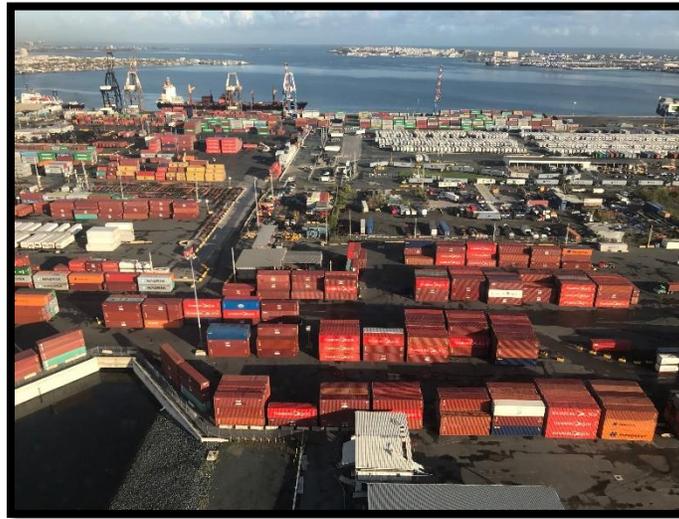
Governor Rosselló pointed to four areas that should be included in a potential FEMA Funding Package:

1. **Equal treatment of FEMA Funds** – Puerto Rico should be funded at a similar level as if they were a state
2. **Flexibility** - have the flexibility to meet their varied needs
3. **Waiver of cost sharing** - reduce cost sharing by Puerto Rico to 0% or as low as possible
4. **Lines of credit** - have the federal government back new lines of credit for the rebuild



The Puerto Rican government has enough money to run the government for 2 to 3 more weeks before they will run out of operating funds. Thus, time is of the essence in passing a supplemental relief package.

Many Puerto Rican government officials expressed continued frustration with the distribution of cargo. Known transportation obstacles include lack of cell phone service, clogged roadways, no street lights and lack of available local truck drivers (many were still dealing with the disaster themselves). I took a brief tour of the Port of San Juan and saw many containers stacked there but few trucks moving cargo out. A substantial force of military transportation professionals is desperately needed. In the meantime, hundreds of containers of essential food, water and medical supplies will continue to be slowly transported to the hardest hit communities.



The next day, October 2, I took a helicopter tour of the island. It was apparent from the air that thousands of homes had been destroyed, and few had received blue tarps. Flooding had begun to subside but many neighborhoods were still very wet. Due to high winds, most trees were destroyed or leafless.



Many brick and mortar businesses still appeared to be closed. Since many residents operate small businesses out of their homes, many of these were also affected. This will continue to hamper Puerto Rico's tax collection and budget.

Hurricane Maria decimated the banana crop and damaged the coffee plants. Various agricultural structures such as chicken coops and barns had also been destroyed. After meeting with Puerto Rico's Secretary of Agriculture, Carlos Flores Ortega, I learned that the island sustained massive livestock loss and the decaying of animals posed a health risk to residents.



We flew over the Guajataca Dam, and observed that it had been breached on the right side, had flooded adjacent roadways and was overflowing the river. Numerous homes are in danger of flood damage should the river continue to rise.



I landed in Utuado, which is located in a rural mountainous area of Puerto Rico. The buildings and roads were severely damaged. The electricity and water was still out. The local market admitted only 4 to 5 people at a time. Most residents were without cash and the use of ATM's, credit cards, and NAP (Nutrition Assistance Program) cards were not possible due to power outages. The Utuado residents also confirmed that they had not been contacted by FEMA and only saw a few members of the military at the local hospital. They were not aware of any FEMA or military airdrops of supplies or other aid available to their area. The hospital appeared to be functioning by generator.



While in the air, I saw no other helicopters flying, no military vehicles driving around, and no federal personnel. Rural towns will continue to suffer if resources and personnel are not dispatched to these areas.

As I flew back to the airport, the pilot pointed out a disturbing trend of large trash piles beginning to form in empty lots on the side of roads and next to rivers. This growing trash problem coupled with rotting debris could pose a major potential health hazard if not corrected soon.



The official death toll stands at 16. Several sources believe the death toll related to Hurricane Maria will ultimately be much larger due to lack of medical supplies and treatment, lack of potable water and food, as well as the continued harsh living conditions. We must have a surge in our humanitarian efforts to avoid a larger scale loss of American lives.



CONCLUSION

There is an immediate need for more **military and FEMA personnel** to procure, coordinate and distribute aid including food, water, medical supplies and blue tarps.

Congress needs to pass a robust **Supplemental Disaster Relief Package** over the next two weeks to keep FEMA funded, ensure a robust relief effort and keep the government of Puerto Rico from shutting down.

Puerto Rico will need a strong **Community Development Block Grant (CDBG)** program to rebuild its devastated communications, transportation and electric infrastructure.

HHS personnel are needed to address the emerging health crisis.

USDA must assess the total crop loss and assist in recovery.

SBA and HUD will be needed to assist with business and housing relief.