

# Puerto Ricans left with floods and vast trail of debris after hurricane

**Amanda Holpuch and Norbert Figueroa** San Juan

After hours of hurricane-force winds and torrential rain, Puerto Ricans emerged from shelters yesterday morning to find the island still under threat from landslides and floods and with crippled water and electricity systems.

Hurricane Maria, the most severe storm to hit Puerto Rico in more than 80 years, felled trees, smashed buildings and tore roofs off. Chest-deep floodwaters forced people into boats to seek medical help or reach family and friends.

"Devastation, it's everywhere," said Carlos Mercader, a spokesperson for Puerto Rico's governor. "It's total devastation." The full extent of the destruction was unclear as communications were severely disrupted, he added.

The governor of Puerto Rico, Ricardo Rosselló, said the only known fatality was a man who had been struck by a piece of wood blown by the wind. But the death toll was expected to rise as reports arrived from outlying areas.

The government has dispatched people with satellite phones to report on the scene in rural areas. A curfew was also put in place from 6pm to 6am.

The onslaught began early Wednesday morning after Maria made landfall as a category 4 hurricane with 155mph winds, before rampaging across the territory, knocking out the power supply and tossing vehicles from the roads.

As the storm cleared yesterday, rescuers had to thread their way through a maze of toppled trees and collapsed communication services. Mercader said 70% of the island was without drinking water.

In Levittown, a suburb of San Juan, about 40 families were rescued from the roofs of their homes overnight after several people managed to contact the governor's office. The suburb is less than



**In Dominica's capital, Roseau, a street is left strewn with wood after the storm. Below, a child in Punta Cana yesterday**  
Photograph: AFP/Getty Images



12 miles from downtown San Juan, but it took the national guard one and half hours to reach the neighbourhood, said Mercader. The rescuers went by boat and were working to save about 100 people.

Debris covered the streets of the Puerto Rico's capital. One resident cleaning up was Male Álvarez, whose home had been lashed by unrelenting wind and rain for hours. "The house shook - it felt like an earthquake." Her neighbourhood was without electricity, water and internet access, but she was emphatic that the island would build again.

In Carolina, east of San Juan, the community of Lomas de Carolina experienced high water levels; some residents had to flee to their second storey or roof to await rescue. Stephanie Rivera, a resident, said: "I took my paddle board to go around and see who needed help. I went a street over and helped an old lady and her pet. They were trapped in their home, so I had to break their garage door to make way."

Piñones, a popular beach area in Loiza, was severely affected by the wind and water surge. Most businesses, mostly bars and restaurants, lost their windows

and roofs, or were completely destroyed. "My bar is destroyed ... thankfully we are all safe and we will rebuild," said Hector Martinez, owner of Vereda Tropical.

Surprisingly, some businesses were open just hours after the storm passed, including 24 Marketplace, a convenience store in Isla Verde, that never ceased operations. At 6pm, just hours after the strongest winds died down, residents and tourist were lining up in front of the store to get food and water.

Thousands of people with relatives in Puerto Rico, and on other Caribbean islands, were yesterday still desperately trying to reach those whom they hadn't heard from in days. Mercader, despite his government connections, had not been able to reach his parents in Puerto Rico. He last heard from them on Tuesday, before

**'An old lady was trapped in her home and I had to break down the garage door'**

Maria arrived. "I'm a person of faith - I think that they're doing well," he said. He said he thought the government would provide guidance on how to communicate with the island once systems were restored. "Keep calm, the government's working very, very, very hard to reestablish communication," he said.

In 520 shelters on the island there were 14,000 people taking refuge. The government expected that number to increase, as typically people might return home only to realise that the extent of the destruction meant staying in a shelter.

The White House yesterday morning declared Puerto Rico "a major disaster" zone and ordered federal assistance for dozens of municipalities in the territory.

Before hitting Puerto Rico, Maria left a trail of destruction on other Caribbean islands including the British Virgin Islands, Montserrat and Dominica. Dominica's prime minister, Roosevelt Skerit, said 15 people died and 20 were missing.

Maria weakened across Puerto Rico overnight but regained strength by the morning as it headed towards the Turks and Caicos islands.

## Ex-PM Abbott headbutted in Australia

**Gareth Hutchens** Canberra

Australian former prime minister Tony Abbott has been assaulted in Hobart.

Abbott said he was headbutted by a campaigner for same-sex marriage as he walked towards his hotel in the Tasmanian capital, leaving him with a slightly swollen lip. He had been having lunch with campaigners opposed to same-sex marriage.

He told Melbourne's 3AW radio: "I was walking from the Mercury office across that docks area, that beautiful docks area in Hobart, towards my hotel.

"A fellow sung out at me 'Hey Tony!' I turned around, there was a chap wearing a vote yes badge. He says 'I wanna shake your hand'. I went over to shake his hand and then he headbutted me. Now he wasn't very good at it I've gotta say, but he did make contact. The only damage was a very slightly swollen lip.

"I was with a member of my staff [who] briefly grappled with this guy, and he then ran off swearing his head off basically."

A spokesman for Abbott said: "He didn't have a bloody nose or break his nose or anything like that."

Alex Greenwich MP, co-chair of The Equality Campaign, condemned the attack. "There is absolutely no place for violence in the marriage equality debate," he tweeted.

Australians are receiving postal ballots enabling them to vote on whether same-sex marriage should be legalised. If the majority are in favour, the government says it will table legislation this year.

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