



Puerto Rico wants US aid after quake but not second-class treatment

Nitza Perez and Leila Macor

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The calamity of Hurricane Maria could not have come at a worse time for Puerto Rico.

The US island territory buckled under the weight of \$70 billion in debt and filed for bankruptcy protection in May.

Now, with its power grid wiped out and many roads, homes and buildings water-logged ruins, the Caribbean vacation destination faces months of slow, painful reconstruction.

Still, people here say something good might come out of so much woe: soul-searching about the Spanish-speaking commonwealth's relationship with Uncle Sam and perhaps even a stronger sense of self-reliance.

And maybe creditors holding all that debt will cut Puerto Rico a break, given its new dire straits, and give it more time to pay back what it owes.

For now, the big question is aid money and how much the federal government will pony up to help the island get back on its feet.

President Donald Trump has declared Puerto Rico a disaster area, which frees up funds for loans, subsidies, humanitarian aid and money to rebuild infrastructure wrecked by the Category Four hurricane that hit early Wednesday on its vicious tear across the Caribbean.

But Puerto Ricans are sceptical, and say that even before all this mess they have traditionally been treated like second-class Americans. Puerto Ricans are US citizens but do not vote in presidential elections, for instance, and have no voice in Congress.

People are wondering aloud if reconstruction money will be as forthcoming for them as for those hit by Hurricane Harvey in Texas and Irma in Florida.

"We expect the federal government to do what it is supposed to do," said Jaime Coll, a 70-year-old artist eating breakfast in one of the few restaurants open in San Juan. "Even though we are a colony, we are supposed to be American citizens."

"This is not the time for political partisanship, for arguments about nationality. It is the time for compassion."

Puerto Ricans are divided among those who see the United States as a condescending colonial power and want independence, those who prefer the status quo as a US commonwealth and those who want the island to become the 51st US state.

So sentiment on the island tends to waver between the defiant tone of people like Coll and a kind of we-can-do-it island pride.

"I think we have enough resources right here. From the US, as from anyone else, we can receive money and donations to put us in action. But I think the action plans have to come from Puerto Rico," said Susana Barnett, a 67-year-old retiree.

- A new start? -

"The hurricane is a crossroads at which we Puerto Ricans are going to have to ask ourselves where we are headed, what we expect, what is going to change in our attitude toward the United States and in the US attitude toward us," said Astrid Arraras, of the department of politics and international relations at Florida International University. She herself is Puerto Rican.

Some of the questions being raised center on a fiscal control board sent from Washington to oversee the island's finances after the bankruptcy declaration.

The board has been accused by local officials of acting with colonial arrogance because, for instance, it wants to impose unpopular measures such as reducing government employees' salaries by having them work fewer days a month.

"But now the game has changed. Another game has started," said Arraras. "We are in the midst of a crisis so big that they cannot hit us with pressure and deadlines. We simply cannot pay, what with this reconstruction disaster."

- Belt-tightening -

The hurricane is blamed for 13 deaths in Puerto Rico and the island is still flooded. Power and telecommunications are down, drinking water is scarce and roads are blocked. More rain is forecast, so there could be mudslides.

And the island was already bankrupt, anyway. Its economic crisis has prompted 10 percent of the population to leave since 2006. The jobless rate is 12 percent and 46 percent of the population lives below the poverty line.

"This is Greece on steroids," said Juan Carlos Hidalgo, a public policy analyst at the Cato Institute, referring to Greece's repeated debt woes in recent years.

But he said that amid the disaster there is an opportunity for something helpful.

"After a tragedy of this magnitude, in which the damage to the Puerto Rican economy is incalculable, creditors could adopt a slightly more conciliatory position," said Hidalgo.

But he expressed caution, saying there are so many creditors that dealing with them as a bloc would be like trying to "herd cats."

He said the most Puerto Rico can hope for is not debt forgiveness but more time to pay back what it owes.

Hurricane aid money from the federal government will help temporarily but the underlying problem is the government's chronic budget deficit.

"Puerto Ricans are going to have to tighten their belts," said Hidalgo.