

The Ongoing Misery of Puerto Rico

Puerto Rico's recovery from Hurricane Maria, which hit the U.S. territory on Sept. 20, remains slow and spotty with continued power outages, unsafe water and school closings, reports Dennis J Bernstein.

By Dennis J Bernstein

It's been nearly seven weeks since Hurricane Maria shredded the island of Puerto Rico and, still, conditions for millions of Puerto Ricans remain grim and barely livable. Thousands are still stuck in shelters, while many others remain in their homes with limited access to electricity and clean water.

Last Thursday, large swaths of San Juan were again without power and those without their own independent generators were thrown into darkness with little support. Once again, heavy rains flooded out the streets of San Juan, creating the conditions for various water-borne diseases like cholera to proliferate.

I spoke with attorney and human rights activist Judith Berkan about conditions on the Island, even as federal troops prepare to leave the struggling U.S. territory.

Dennis Bernstein: Tell us about your day today.

Judith Berkan: I had two court hearings and in the middle of the first one, which was in the federal court, we became aware that there had been a major blackout throughout the north coast of Puerto Rico. This one is supposed to last between twelve and eighteen hours. The system gets overloaded and then it goes out again.

Tuesday night there were incredible storms here in Puerto Rico. Because we don't have electricity, the pumps to drain water from the drains are not functioning. One of the attorneys at the first hearing had actually been pulled out of her car during the awful rains. In the afternoon, after getting out of my first court hearing, I called the court regarding my second hearing, which is an injunction to try to save people's wages during the hurricane aftermath.

When we got there, we had five minutes of generator power to be able to reschedule the hearing.

There are a lot of labor issues going on. People are losing their jobs, businesses are closing, people are not getting paid for days they work. Some businesses have paid their workers even if they could not come in, but those are exceptional cases.

There has been an inaccurate counting of deaths. The official number is 55 right now but every day you hear of situations where people are dying and whether they are attributed to the storm or not is a matter of great controversy. So many health and mental health issues are connected to the storm. The nursing homes are without air conditioning. There are four confirmed deaths from leptospirosis but we suspect there are a lot more.

Dennis Bernstein: The Army or the National Guard announced today that they are going to be removing one-third or one-half their forces because "they have other jobs to do." I guess they are not done, though, are they?

Judith Berkan: No, not at all. I can't say there have been no improvements since September 20. There is less debris around the streets. We are now at 42% of generator capacity. You get power for a time, then it goes away again. So there is no predictability in our lives. Today the entire San Juan area was out and, from what I understand, the entire north coast. And this is fifty days after the hurricane. And remember that about ten days before Maria we had hurricane Irma, which knocked out the electricity to a good portion of the country. So there have been a lot of people who have not had electricity since Labor Day.

Dennis Bernstein: I assume that people on the outer islands are in even worse shape.

Judith Berkan: It's a lot worse and delivering supplies is a lot worse. We also have very mountainous terrain in the middle of the main island and there are still barrios there which have not seen a single government official or even private institutions.

Dennis Bernstein: We also know that there is quite a substantial exodus from the island, people heading to Florida and New York.

Judith Berkan: Yes, about 100,000 people have already gone to Florida, out of a population of 3.5 million. Today FEMA said they would be giving passage to people to stay in hotels outside of Puerto Rico. A lot of our hotels were destroyed and the others are filled with military personnel and FEMA people, etc. So far only 300 families have accepted the offer. About 25% of people are still without water.

The school situation is devastating. There have been some very arbitrary decisions as to which schools will open and which will not. We fear that it has to do with preexisting plans to privatize the school system. Schools with very strong community bases have been excluded from this reopening process.

Yesterday there were arrests of nineteen teachers from the teachers' union who

were protesting at the superintendent's office. I don't know what has happened with their charges.

Dennis Bernstein: A lot of people are out of work now.

Judith Berkan: Old San Juan has been dark. It has something like 900 to 1,000 businesses, which are almost all locally owned. Yesterday it was announced that one of the major music clubs is closing. There are major factories and major shopping centers which have not reopened. Meanwhile, we all have more expenses than we used to have, because everything is getting more and more expensive and the Jones Act was suspended for only ten days.

Dennis J Bernstein is a host of "Flashpoints" on the Pacifica radio network and the author of Special Ed: Voices from a Hidden Classroom. You can access the audio archives at www.flashpoints.net.
