

# Trump's photo-op in Puerto Rico

By Rafael Azul  
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Two weeks after Hurricane Maria struck Puerto Rico, leaving millions without electricity, water and other basic necessities, US President Donald Trump did a quick fly-in and fly-out Tuesday to pronounce what a wonderful job his administration has done to address the crisis.

Trump's entourage included his wife Melania, some cabinet members, New Jersey Governor Chris Christie and Jenniffer González, chairwoman of the Puerto Rico Republican Party and the island's nonvoting member of the US House of Representative.

The president's handlers made sure that Trump—who clearly did not want to be there—appeared in public as little as possible to prevent any opportunity for public protest. After a little more than four hours, the president flew off, an hour ahead of schedule.

The people the president did speak to were preselected. He visited an upscale neighborhood in Guaynabo, west of the capital city of San Juan, which has been one of the fastest areas to have electricity, communication and other services restored. At a local church, he threw rolls of paper towels out to a crowd in the most demeaning fashion, later saying, "There's a lot of love in this room, a lot of love. Great people."

During his press conference, however, Trump could hardly contain his contempt for the population of the US territory. The recovery effort and the current situation on the island, he claimed, was "really nothing short of a miracle," adding that it was nothing like the "real catastrophe" that occurred during Hurricane Katrina in 2005.

Following the press conference, Trump visited the Muñoz Rivera housing project in Guaynabo. One of the housing project residents, Raúl Cardona, told Trump "he should visit the central parts of the islands, where a lot of people have no food, no water, where a lot of people have died. What he saw in Guaynabo was nothing compared to the rest of the island," Cardona

told *El Nuevo Día* newspaper about his words with Trump.

Only four percent of the island's 3.4 million residents have power, more than half do not have clean water, and many residents are washing in rivers. With temperatures in the 90s, the lack of air conditioning and medical attention could lead to further fatalities, particularly among the elderly and infirm. Roads are blocked with debris and standing water is attracting mosquitos that can carry deadly diseases.

Thousands remain in shelters, gasoline is scarce, ATMs are out of money, and many of the supplies sent to the island have been left on docks because of the lack of diesel for trucks. Public schools, which suffered devastating destruction, may not open for six months or more, officials have said.

Trump repeated the official claim of 16 hurricane-related fatalities. After the president left, Governor Ricardo Rosselló raised the death toll to 34. The number of fatalities is expected to grow once rescuers reach more isolated rural and mountainous areas.

Earlier in the morning, the island's Secretary of Public Health Héctor Pesquera announced there were more than 100 cadavers in hospitals around the island, which are currently being examined to determine if they died as a result of the hurricane, the most powerful storm to hit Puerto Rico in nearly a century.

Governor Rosselló—the MIT-trained politician who was a Clinton delegate during the Democratic Party convention last year—dutifully suppressed this information during Trump's visit. The president later praised Rosselló for "not playing politics."

Trump previously denounced Puerto Rican residents for the massive debt owed to the Wall Street banks, which is the result of the island's colonial legacy, a decades-long economic recession and wholesale looting by financial speculators who control Puerto

Rican debt. Rosselló and his predecessors have imposed savage austerity measures, and the island, which declared bankruptcy last May, is currently under the dictatorship of a financial oversight board imposed by the Obama administration.

During a press conference, Trump—who is proposing the largest tax cut for corporations and the rich in history—complained that the recovery effort was costing the US government too much money. “Now I hate to tell you, Puerto Rico, but you’ve thrown our budget a little out of whack because we’ve spent a lot of money on Puerto Rico. And that’s fine. We’ve saved a lot of lives.”

Rosselló, who has revised upward his government’s estimate of the cost of rebuilding the island’s infrastructure to \$90 billion, is seeking a low-interest emergency line of credit as soon as possible, saying otherwise the government will run out of public funds by next week.

Trump has complained that Puerto Rican residents are not helping themselves enough and are essentially expecting government handouts. Last week he poured scorn via text message from his luxury golf course on local officials, including the mayor of San Juan, for complaining about the slowness of the administration’s response.

Shortly after Trump had left the island, US federal authorities denied Puerto Rico’s petition that recipients of food stamps (which are used by 46 percent of the population) be allowed to purchase meals in fast-food restaurants, given the scarcity of food in the island’s supermarkets.

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