

# Maria destroys homes, triggers serious flooding in Puerto Rico

SAN JUAN, Puerto Rico (AP) — The strongest hurricane to hit Puerto Rico in more than 80 years destroyed hundreds of homes, knocked out power across the entire island and turned some streets into raging rivers Wednesday in an onslaught that could plunge the U.S. territory deeper into financial crisis.

Leaving at least nine people dead in its wake across the Caribbean, Hurricane Maria blew ashore in the morning near the southeast coastal town of Yabucoa as a Category 4 storm with winds of 155 mph.

It punished the island of 3.4 million people with life-threatening winds for several hours, the second time in two weeks that Puerto Rico has felt the wrath of a hurricane.

“Once we’re able to go outside, we’re going to find our island destroyed,” warned Abner Gomez, Puerto Rico’s emergency management director. “The information we have received is not encouraging. It’s a system that has destroyed everything in its path.”

There were no immediate reports of any deaths or serious injuries on the island.

As people waited in shelters or took cover inside stairwells, bathrooms and closets, Maria brought down cell towers and power lines, snapped trees, tore off roofs and unloaded at least 20 inches of rain.

Widespread flooding was reported, with dozens of cars half-submerged in some neighborhoods and many streets turned into rivers. People calling local radio stations reported that doors were being torn off their hinges and a water tank flew away.

Felix Delgado, mayor of the northern coastal city of Catano, told The Associated Press that 80 percent of the 454 homes in a neighborhood known as Juana Matos were destroyed. The fishing community near San Juan Bay was hit with a storm surge of more than 4 feet, he said.

“Months and months and months and months are going to pass before we can recover from this,” he said.

Gov. Ricardo Rossello imposed a curfew from 6 p.m. to 6 a.m. daily until Saturday to allow rescue crews and officials to respond to the hurricane’s aftermath.

“We are at a critical moment in the effort to help thousands of Puerto Ricans that urgently need aid and to



AP Photo/Tatiana Fernandez  
**A woman covers herself with a plastic bag as she makes her way to work as Hurricane Maria approaches the coast of Bavaro, Dominican Republic on Wednesday.**

assess the great damage caused by Hurricane Maria,” he said. “Maintaining public order will be essential.”

As of 5 p.m. EDT, Maria had weakened into a Category 2 hurricane with winds of 110 mph. It was centered just off the northwestern corner of Puerto Rico, moving at 12 mph.

It was expected to pass off the northeastern coast of the Dominican Republic late Wednesday and Thursday.

Even before the storm, Puerto Rico’s electrical grid was crumbling and the island was in dire condition financially.

Puerto Rico is struggling to restructure a portion of its \$73 billion debt, and the government has warned it is running out of money as it fights against furloughs and other austerity measures imposed by a federal board overseeing the island’s finances.

Rossello urged people to have faith: “We are stronger than any hurricane. Together, we will rebuild.”

He asked President Donald Trump to declare the island a disaster zone, a step that would open the way to federal aid.

Many people feared extended power outages would further sink businesses struggling amid a recession that has lasted more than a decade.

“This is going to be a disaster,” said Jean Robert Auguste, who owns two French restaurants and sought shelter at a San Juan hotel. “We haven’t made any money this month.”

More than 11,000 people — and more than 580 pets — were in shelters, authorities said.

Along the island’s northern coast, an emergency medical station in the town of Arecibo lost its roof, while communication was severed with several emergency management posts. A hospital and a police station reported broken windows, and a tree fell on an ambulance.

As the storm closed in on the Dominican Republic, about 4,000 tourists in the Bavara-Punta Cana area on the eastern tip of the island were moved to hotels in Santo Domingo, the capital. About 100 flights were canceled and the government suspended school and sent workers home.

“The government has prepared itself for the worst case scenario and so should the people,” presidential administrative secretary Jose Ramon Peralta said.

Maria posed no immediate threat to the U.S. mainland. The long-range forecast showed the storm out in the Atlantic Ocean hundreds of miles off the Georgia-South Carolina coast by Monday morning.

Previously a Category 5 with 175 mph winds, Maria hit Puerto Rico as the third-strongest storm to make landfall in the U.S., based on its central pressure. It was even stronger than Hurricane Irma when Irma roared into the Florida Keys earlier this month.

# Trump: GOP health bill short of votes before deadline

WASHINGTON (AP) — President Donald Trump said Wednesday the Republicans’ last-resort “Obamacare” repeal effort remains two or three votes short, forecasting days of furious lobbying ahead with a crucial deadline looming next week.

The legislation by Sens. Bill Cassidy of Louisiana and Lindsey Graham of South Carolina would repeal major pillars of former President Barack Obama’s health law, replacing them with block grants to states to design their own health care programs. Majority Leader Mitch McConnell is trying to round up 50 votes to pass the legislation before Sept. 30, when special rules preventing a Democratic filibuster will expire.

“We think this has a very good chance, Obamacare is only getting worse,” Trump told reporters covering the U.N. General Assembly meeting in New York. “At some point the Senate is going to be forced to make a deal.”

By his reckoning, “we’re at 47 or 48 already, senators, and a lot of others are looking at it very positively.”

Trump’s comments came several hours after McConnell’s office announced that the majority leader’s “intention” is to bring the legislation to the Senate floor next week, a question McConnell was noncommittal on a day earlier. After the embarrassing defeat of an earlier repeal bill in July, some Republicans believe McConnell would bring a bill to the floor only with the votes in hand.

In a Senate split 52-48 between Republicans and Democrats, McConnell has little room for error. GOP Sen. Rand Paul of Kentucky has already announced his opposition, saying the bill doesn’t do enough to repeal “Obamacare,” while moderate Republican Sen. Susan Collins of Maine is also

seen as a likely “no” vote.

With Democrats unanimously opposed, McConnell cannot afford to lose even one more Republican senator. The focus is on Sens. John McCain of Arizona and Lisa Murkowski of Alaska, both of whom opposed earlier versions of repeal legislation. This time may be McCain because his closest friend in the Senate, Graham, is a co-author of the bill.

One leading Republican, Chuck Grassley of Iowa, voiced pessimism Wednesday in a phone interview with home-state reporters, saying glumly: “I think we’re one or two votes short and I don’t see those other votes coming and I hope I’m wrong.”

Trump touched on one of the most contentious aspects of the bill in a tweet Wednesday night, asserting: “I would not sign Graham-Cassidy if it did not include coverage of pre-existing conditions. It does! A great Bill. Repeal & Replace.”

Whether it truly does protect people with pre-existing health problems is fiercely under debate.

Cassidy defended the health care bill against criticism from late-night TV host Jimmy Kimmel, who jumped into the debate after his son was born with a congenital heart defect in April.

“I am sorry he does not understand,” Cassidy said of Kimmel on CNN. “I think the price will actually be lower.”

“This guy Bill Cassidy just lied right to my face,” Kimmel said on his ABC show Tuesday night, referring to Cassidy’s promises to Kimmel and others that his health bill would pass the “Jimmy Kimmel test.” Cassidy coined the phrase to mean that people with pre-existing conditions would have protections and not face lifetime caps on coverage from insurers.

## BRIEFLY

### Mexico quake rescuers race to free girl, other survivors

MEXICO CITY (AP) — The wiggling fingers of a young girl trapped in the rubble of her collapsed school in Mexico City raised hopes among hundreds of rescuers working furiously Wednesday to try to free her — a drama that played out at dozens of buildings toppled by the powerful earthquake that killed at least 223 people.

But it was the ongoing rescue at the Enrique Rebsamen school, where 25 people including 21 children perished, that was seen as emblematic of Mexicans’ rush to save survivors before time runs out.

Helmeted workers spotted the girl buried in the debris early Wednesday and shouted to her to move her hand if she could hear. She did, and a rescue dog was sent inside to confirm she was alive.

Hours later the crews were still laboring to free her, as images of the rescue effort were broadcast on TV screens nationwide. Workers in neon vests and helmets used ropes, pry-bars and other tools, frequently calling on the anxious parents and others gathered around to be silent while they listened for any other voices from beneath the school.

At one point, the workers lowered a sensitive microphone inside the rubble to scan for any noise or movement. A rescuer said they thought they had located someone, but it wasn’t clear who.

“It would appear they are continuing to find children,” said Carlos Licona, a burly sledge-hammer wielding volunteer who came to help in any way he could. Asked if that made him optimistic, he said, “I hope so.”

It was part of similar efforts at the scenes of dozens of collapsed buildings, where firefighters, police, soldiers and civilians wore themselves out hammering, shoveling, pushing and pulling debris aside to try to reach the living and the dead.

By mid-afternoon, 52 people had been pulled alive since Tuesday’s magnitude 7.1 quake, Mexico City’s Social Development Department said, adding in a tweet: “We won’t stop.”

### Fed announces a start to reducing its bond holdings

WASHINGTON (AP) — The Federal Reserve will begin shrinking the enormous portfolio of bonds that it amassed after the 2008 financial crisis to try to sustain a frail economy. The move reflects a strengthened economy and could mean higher rates on mortgages and other loans over time.

The Fed announced Wednesday that it will let a small portion of its \$4.5 trillion balance sheet mature without being replaced, starting in October with reductions of \$10 billion a month and gradually rising over the next year to \$50 billion a month.



AP Photo/Moises Castillo  
**Rescue personnel work on a collapsed building, a day after a devastating 7.1 earthquake, in the Roma neighborhood of Mexico City, Wednesday.**

The central bank left its key short-term rate unchanged but hinted at one more hike this year — most likely in December. The Fed policymakers’ updated economic forecasts show an expectation for three more rate increases in 2018.

The Fed’s policymaking committee approved its action on a 9-0 vote after ending its latest meeting.

Stocks turned lower after the announcement before finishing mixed. Bond yields rose, reflecting expectations of higher rates.

### Prospects for air traffic control privatization slim

WASHINGTON (AP) — President Donald Trump has made airlines’ longtime goal of privatizing air traffic control a key part of his agenda to boost America’s infrastructure. But his prospects for closing the deal with Congress appear slim.

A House bill that would put the aviation industry in charge of air traffic control has repeatedly stalled and prospects appear even worse in the Senate, where there has been no effort to take up the issue. While the White House and airline lobbyists have pushed for privatization, there has been fierce opposition from private pilots, corporate aircraft owners and others who fear they will have to pay more to use the system and would lose access to busy airports.

Airlines have pushed for getting the government out of air traffic operations for decades and seemed to have the brightest prospects after meeting with Trump early this year. Trump embraced the idea as part of his overall plan to boost infrastructure — a big part of his campaign promise to create

jobs. While Trump has offered few other specifics about his overall infrastructure plans, he put the spotlight on air-traffic privatization at a White House infrastructure event in June.

Three weeks later, the House transportation committee approved a bill by its chairman, Pennsylvania Republican Bill Shuster, to spin off air traffic control from the Federal Aviation Administration and place it under the authority of a private, non-profit corporation run by aviation interests, including airlines.

But the bill still hasn’t come to the House floor. Trump’s special assistant for infrastructure policy, D.J. Gribbin, told an airline industry conference last week that House leaders are planning a vote in early October. But the bill’s supporters acknowledge the vote would have already happened if there was enough support to pass it.

### Manafort offered to brief Russians during campaign

WASHINGTON (AP) — In the middle of Donald Trump’s presidential run, then-campaign chairman Paul Manafort said he was willing to provide “private briefings” about the campaign to a Russian billionaire the U.S. government considers close to Russian President Vladimir Putin.

Manafort’s offer was memorialized in an email exchange with a former employee of his political consulting firm in July 2016. It was first reported by The Washington Post, which said portions of Manafort’s emails were read to reporters.

Manafort spokesman Jason Maloni confirmed to The Associated Press that

the email exchanges were legitimate but said no briefings ever occurred. The email involved an offer for Oleg Deripaska, a wealthy Russian who made his money in the aluminum business.

The July 7, 2016, email came a little over a week before the Republican National Convention, while Manafort was leading the Trump campaign’s day-to-day operations. It also occurred about a month after Manafort attended a meeting with a Russian lawyer at Trump Tower. That meeting was brokered by Donald Trump Jr., who was told in emails that the meeting was part of a Russian government effort to help his father’s campaign.

The Manafort email exchange regarding Deripaska is one of thousands of pages of material turned over to congressional committees by the Trump campaign. It is also in the possession of special counsel Robert Mueller, who is investigating whether there was any coordination between Trump associates and Russians looking to interfere in the presidential campaign. Mueller is also probing Manafort’s taxes and his foreign banking as part of an investigation related to his consulting work in Ukraine.

### Huge sea turtles coming back from brink of extinction

WASHINGTON (AP) — Sea turtles are lumbering back from the brink of extinction, a new study says.

Scientists found more populations of the large turtles improving than declining when they looked at nearly 60 regions across the globe. That’s a big change from a decade or two ago, experts said.

Long-living sea turtles have been pushed to endangered levels by hunting, accidentally being caught in fishing nets, habitat loss, plastics pollution and climate change, experts say.

But massive efforts to save the egg-laying turtles by changing fishing nets and creating protected and darkened beaches are working, said study lead author Antonios Mazaris, an ecology professor at Aristotle University of Thessaloniki in Greece.

“There’s a positive sign at the end of the story,” Mazaris said. “We should be more optimistic about our efforts in society.”

The research was published Wednesday in the journal *Science Advances*.

There are seven different species of sea turtles, all but one endangered.

The slow creatures live for several decades with some species weighing about 100 pounds and others well over 1,000 pounds.

Mazaris pointed to Hawaiian green sea turtles, once in trouble 40 years ago, as story of success. Maybe too much success.

“They have more turtles than they know what to do with,” said Roderic Mast, advisory group chairman at the International Union for Conservation of Nature.