

Aid flows to Puerto Rico but many still lack water and food

Associated Press

SAN JUAN, Puerto Rico — Thousands of Puerto Ricans were finally getting water and food rations Friday as an aid bottleneck began to ease, but many remained cut off from the basic necessities of life and were desperate for power, communications and other trappings of normality in the aftermath of Hurricane Maria.

There were many people across the island, especially outside the capital, unable to get water, gas or generator fuel. That was despite the fact that military trucks laden with water bottles and other supplies began to reach even some remote parts of Puerto Rico and U.S. federal officials pointed to progress in the recovery effort, insisting that more gains would come soon.

In some cases, aid that was being distributed by the Federal Emergency Management Agency was simply not enough to meet demand on an island of 3.4 million people where nearly everyone was still without power, half were without running water in their homes and the economy was still crippled from the effects of the storm that swept across the U.S. territory as a fierce Category 4 hurricane on Sept. 20.

"I haven't seen any help and we're running out of water," said Pedro Gonzalez, who was clearing debris to earn some money in the northern coastal town of Rio Grande. Increasingly desperate and with a daughter with Down syndrome to support, he had already decided to move to Louisiana to stay with relatives. "We're getting out of here."

FEMA sent Rio Grande officials shipments of food and water for the past three days and arrived Thursday to help distribute meal packets, water and snacks in one community. But people in nearby neighborhoods



Destroyed communities are seen in the aftermath of Hurricane Maria in Toa Alta, Puerto Rico, Thursday. AP Photo/Gerald Herbert

complained that they weren't told about the aid.

"This has been a complete disaster," said 64-year-old retiree Jenny Cordero as she filled plastic trash cans with water at the home of a neighbor who was among the lucky ones to have service restored.

Those who made it, however, were grateful. "This will help somewhat, so we don't starve," said Anthony Jerena, a 33-year-old father of two teenagers who managed to get two boxes of water, each containing 24 bottles and, three packages of meals-ready-to-eat.

Yolanda Lebron, a spokeswoman for the Rio Grande mayor, said they used a car with a loudspeaker to announce that FEMA would be registering people for aid, but did not mention there would be food and water given out. "We didn't dare," she said. "We didn't know if we were going to have enough."

Gov. Ricardo Rossello and other officials said they were aware of people's deepening frustration and of the difficulty, and danger, of living on a sweltering tropical island with no air condi-

tioning and little to no water. He blamed some of the delay on the logistical challenge of getting aid shipments out of the seaports and airports, which were knocked out of commission in the storm, and then distributing the supplies on debris-strewn streets.

Rossello said Friday that the government would seize all food still sitting in containers at the port that private business owners had not yet claimed and would distribute it to people for free. He said the government would use FEMA funds to repay the owners.

He said operations were also ramping up at the airport and that the government had requested drivers and other workers from various federal agencies to help distribute aid, which he expected to begin flowing within the next several days. "We know we have to do more," he said. "We're still not getting at the optimal point. But it has been a limitation on logistics and as soon as we get those assets we are going to put them on the ground."

The governor also said he would shorten the nightly curfew by three hours, requiring people to be off the

streets by 9 p.m. instead of 7 p.m., and would end a ban on alcohol sales that was in place since before the storm.

He spoke after touring the island with Acting Secretary of Homeland Security Elaine Duke, who drew criticism from the San Juan mayor and others for describing the recovery effort as a "good-news story." She sought to clarify the statement, saying she intended to praise the cooperation among the federal and local authorities in responding to a crisis.

"Clearly the situation here in Puerto Rico after the devastating hurricane is not satisfactory, but together we are getting there and the progress today is very, very strong," she said.

There were signs that the island was slowly emerging from the disaster.

Telecommunications were back for about 30 percent of the island, giving some people the critical ability to call relatives and others for help if needed. Nearly half of the supermarkets had opened, at least on reduced hours, and about 60 percent of the gas stations, though it could take hours to buy a rationed amount.

Trump's health secretary resigns in travel flap

WASHINGTON (AP) — President Donald Trump's health secretary resigned Friday, after his costly travel triggered investigations that overshadowed the administration's agenda and angered his boss. Tom Price's regrets and partial repayment couldn't save his job.

The Health and Human Services secretary became the first member of the president's Cabinet to be pushed out in a turbulent young administration that has seen several high-ranking White House aides ousted. A former GOP congressman from the Atlanta suburbs, Price served less than eight months.

Publicly, Trump had said he was "not happy" with Price for repeatedly using private charter aircraft for official trips on the taxpayer's dime, when cheaper commercial flights would have done in many cases.

Privately, Trump has been telling associates in recent days that his health chief had become a distraction. Trump felt that Price was overshadowing his tax overhaul agenda and undermining his campaign promise to "drain the swamp" of corruption, according to three people familiar with the discussions who spoke on condition of anonymity.

On Friday the president called Price a "very fine person," but added, "I certainly don't like the optics." Price said in his resignation letter that he regretted that "recent events have created a distraction."

The flap prompted scrutiny of other Cabinet members' travel, as the House Oversight and Government Reform committee launched a governmentwide investigation of top political appointees. Other department heads have been scrambling

to explain their own travel.

Interior Secretary Ryan Zinke faced scrutiny over three charter flights while in office, including a \$12,375 late-night trip from Las Vegas to his home state of Montana in June. On Friday, he dismissed the controversy over charter flights as "a little BS over travel," but he said taxpayers do have the right to know official travel costs.



Tom Price

Price's repayment of \$51,887.31 for his own travel costs did not placate the White House. The total travel cost, including the secretary's entourage, was unclear. It could amount to several hundred thousand dollars.

An orthopedic surgeon turned politician, Price rose to Budget Committee chairman in the House, where he was known as a fiscal conservative. When Price joined the administration, Trump touted him as a conservative policy expert who could write a new health care bill to replace the Obama-era Affordable Care Act.

But Price became more of a supporting player in the GOP's futile health care campaign, while Vice President Mike Pence took the lead, particularly with the Senate. The perception of Price jetting around while GOP lawmakers labored to repeal "Obamacare" —including a three-nation trip in May to Africa and Europe— raised eyebrows on Capitol Hill. Price flew on military aircraft overseas.

Although much of Trump's ire over the health care failure has been aimed at the Republican-controlled Congress, associates of the president said he also assigns some blame to Price, who he believes did not do a good job of selling the GOP plan.

BRIEFLY

Nebraska court ends beer sales near South Dakota reservation

LINCOLN, Neb. (AP) — Four Nebraska beer stores criticized for selling millions of cans each year next to an American Indian reservation where alcohol is banned will remain closed after the state Supreme Court on Friday rejected their appeal.

The court thwarted the last-ditch effort to resume beer sales in Whiteclay, Nebraska, a tiny village on the border of South Dakota's Pine Ridge Indian Reservation. The ruling upholds an April decision by state regulators not to renew the stores' licenses amid criticism that the area lacks adequate law enforcement.

The Pine Ridge Indian Reservation is plagued by a litany of alcohol-related problems, including high rates of fetal alcohol syndrome, and activists complain that Whiteclay fuels those issues. The four stores — in a village with just nine residents — had sold the equivalent of about 3.5 million cans of beer annually.

Whiteclay has also served for decades as a remote hangout for people to panhandle, loiter, fight and pass out on sidewalks. Its residents rely on a county sheriff's office 23 miles away for law enforcement.

U.S. considers ending protections for northwest Montana grizzlies

BILLINGS, Mont. (AP) — On the heels of lifting protections for Yellowstone-area grizzly bears, the U.S. government is considering the same action for bruins in northwestern Montana, home to the largest group of grizzlies in the Lower 48, federal officials said Friday.

Hunters and trappers widely exterminated grizzlies across much of the U.S. early last century. But after being granted threatened species protections in 1975, the animals have made a dramatic comeback around Yellowstone and a second area centered on Glacier National Park, known as the Northern Continental Divide Ecosystem.

The mountainous ecosystem along the Canadian border has about 1,000 bears. The population has more than doubled since 1993, and biologists say the bears now occupy at least 22,000 square miles.

Trump to travel to 5 countries in Asia in November

WASHINGTON (AP) — The White House announced Friday that President Donald Trump will take a five-nation trip to the Asia Pacific region in November as the U.S. seeks to curb North Korea's growing nuclear threat.

The White House said Trump will travel to Japan, South Korea, China, Vietnam and the Philippines from Nov. 3-14, a trip that will also include a stop in Hawaii. It will be Trump's first visit to the region as president, and it comes as North Korea moves closer to its goal of having a nuclear-tipped missile that could strike the U.S.

The White House said Trump's visit would "strengthen the international resolve to confront the North Korean threat and ensure the complete, verifiable, and irreversible denuclearization of the Korean Peninsula."

Trump has offered fiery rhetoric and a tough stance against the North's nuclear weapons program, declaring in a speech to the United Nations General Assembly last week that the U.S. would "totally destroy" North Korea if provoked.



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