

# At the Center of the Storm

## *San Juan Mayor Carmen Yulín Cruz and the Response to Hurricane Maria*

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On the morning of Wednesday, September 20, 2017, Carmen Yulín Cruz, mayor of San Juan, Puerto Rico, huddled with hundreds of municipal workers and city residents in Roberto Clemente Coliseum as Hurricane Maria wreaked havoc outside. Having known for several days that Maria posed a serious threat to her city, Cruz had designated the Coliseum as both a municipal shelter and her base of operations for the duration of the storm. Throughout the morning, Maria's winds caused the building to shake violently, terrifying those inside.<sup>1</sup> But the Coliseum survived, and with the hurricane moving on to its next destination, the facility soon emerged as the hub of San Juan's relief efforts. From there, Mayor Cruz and her staff worked day and night in a frantic effort to secure and provide aid to their constituents, who were now in desperate need of assistance.

Maria was one of the most powerful and devastating hurricanes to hit Puerto Rico in modern history.<sup>i</sup> Traveling diagonally across the island, the storm triggered extensive flooding and caused an enormous amount of damage throughout the territory, including in and around San Juan. (See appendices 1 and 2 for maps depicting the track of the storm.)<sup>2</sup>

Mayor Cruz and her staff initially had difficulty getting a sense of this damage, however, as Maria had also knocked out the island's fragile electrical grid and taken most communications systems offline. To overcome this lack of situational awareness, the mayor decided they would simply walk out of the building to observe the damage firsthand. They would then tackle whatever problems they encountered as best they could.

What they found was heartbreaking. Neighborhoods were completely flooded. Roofs were torn off of homes. Businesses, healthcare facilities, and critical pieces of infrastructure had endured serious damage. They also discovered that a shockingly large number of elderly residents and medical patients had been abandoned by their caregivers. Many had died or were now barely clinging to life as a result.

Cruz understood that as mayor she was responsible for helping her constituents survive the crisis and begin moving forward. She knew this would entail juggling a demanding set of tasks, including making

<sup>i</sup> The National Hurricane Center determined that Maria was the strongest hurricane to strike Puerto Rico since 1928 (U.S. Government Accountability Office [GAO], "Puerto Rico Hurricanes: Status of FEMA Funding, Oversight, and Recovery Challenges," GAO-19-256 [Washington, DC: GAO, March 2019]).

decisions about resource allocations and other priorities; supporting municipal workers as they strove to relieve so much suffering; demonstrating to residents that she was working to address their needs; and liaising with external partners to advocate for her constituents.

Fulfilling each of these roles was challenging in its own right. But roughly a week after landfall, the mayor found herself grappling with one particularly difficult problem. Despite the slowness with which external aid was being distributed, the Trump administration had begun casting the overall relief effort as a success. On top of the many other tasks she was trying to manage, Cruz now had to determine how to respond to this emerging narrative—one that contrasted sharply with her own experiences. Was it her duty to speak out about conditions on the ground and publicly express her frustrations regarding the pace of relief? Would doing so prompt others to correct course and bolster the flagging response? Or would such a strategy backfire, alienating key partners and complicating efforts to build a more cohesive and effective relief operation?

## Before Maria: An Island under Stress

Located in the northeastern Caribbean, the Commonwealth of Puerto Rico was home to about 3.3 million people in 2017.<sup>3</sup> A Spanish colony for four centuries, it has been a territory of the United States since 1898. Puerto Ricans are US citizens but have limited political power and influence at the federal level; they cannot vote in presidential elections and lack full representation in Congress.<sup>4</sup>

Washington, however, has granted the territory a degree of political autonomy when it comes to local affairs. Puerto Ricans directly elect a Governor as well as members of a bicameral Legislative Assembly, which together constitute the territorial government.<sup>5</sup> Each of the territory's seventy-eight municipalities, meanwhile, are governed by a democratically elected mayor (who wields considerable political and administrative power) and municipal council.<sup>6</sup> With a population of approximately 340,000 at the time of Maria,<sup>7</sup> San Juan was Puerto Rico's largest municipality, as well as its capital.

A member of Puerto Rico's Popular Democratic Party, Cruz was in her second term as mayor when Maria struck. Although she had served in the territory's Legislative Assembly since 2008, many had considered Cruz an underdog when she had first run for mayor in 2012 (she was a last-minute replacement for her party's original nominee, who had to suspend his campaign due to allegations of domestic violence).<sup>8</sup> She surprised many, however, by cobbling together a coalition of students, women, union members, immigrants, and the LGBTQ community to defeat a powerful three-term incumbent.<sup>9</sup>

Once mayor, Cruz pushed to devolve authority to neighborhoods and local organizations. She embraced participatory budgeting and signed agreements with more than twenty different community groups, formalizing many of the commitments she had made to them in her campaign.<sup>10</sup> These and other community-centric policies proved popular, and she won reelection in 2016.<sup>11</sup>

As the capital and commercial center of Puerto Rico, San Juan had more resources and a stronger economy than most other municipalities on the island.<sup>12</sup> But throughout her time in office, Cruz—like all other elected officials in Puerto Rico—also had to contend with a prolonged recession, ongoing population loss, and a severe fiscal crisis.<sup>13</sup> In 2014, the island's economy suffered a particularly tough blow when the territory's credit rating fell below investment grade and the government defaulted on a

series of debt payments. In response, Congress passed, and President Obama signed into law the Puerto Rico Oversight, Management, and Economic Stability Act (PROMESA) of 2016. Among other things, PROMESA established the Financial Oversight and Management Board (FOMB) to oversee Puerto Rico's budget and finances.<sup>14</sup>

Many Puerto Ricans considered the FOMB yet another example of unwelcome federal interference (the President of the United States appointed seven of the board's eight members).<sup>ii</sup> In fact, in the lead-up to PROMESA's passage, Cruz had expressed her own concerns about Washington's long history of controlling the territory's fiscal and political affairs. "As long as our options are defined by the powers of this Congress, we will always be at your mercy," she declared in Congressional testimony in June 2015.<sup>15</sup>

Meanwhile, as part of their own efforts to bring the territory's public finances under control, successive governments in Puerto Rico had implemented a series of austerity measures. Although intended to help turn around the economy, these measures had painful consequences for everyday life on the island, even in better-off municipalities like San Juan. The resulting cuts were most apparent in routine operations and services, but they also had implications for the island's ability to handle unexpected and disruptive events. Coupled with the effects of the economic recession, they arguably weakened the territorial and municipal governments' abilities to invest in and develop their response capacities, undermining disaster resilience throughout Puerto Rico.<sup>16</sup>

Meanwhile, in September 2017, just before Maria tore through the Caribbean, the federal response apparatus itself was stretched thin, due to the large number of disasters that had struck the country that year.<sup>iii</sup> In late August, Hurricane Harvey had stalled over Houston, TX, triggering a major flooding crisis as it unleashed a record amount of rainfall on the city.<sup>17</sup> Then, in early September, Hurricane Irma had slammed into parts of the Caribbean and Florida as one of the strongest Atlantic hurricanes ever recorded. At the same time, California began experiencing a series of wildfires that proved especially difficult to contain.<sup>18</sup>

These events required significant assistance from the federal government and unaffected states. As FEMA later observed:

The fact that these historic storms occurred concurrently . . . presented an unprecedented scale of operations, extremely complex logistics, and numerous novel challenges across the Nation. Leaders had to determine how to allocate and subsequently redistribute limited resources across disasters.<sup>19</sup>

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<sup>ii</sup> For more about the FOMB, see its website: <https://oversightboard.pr.gov/>.

<sup>iii</sup> 2017 was a historically busy and costly year for natural disasters in the US. One of the most active hurricane seasons in the country's history, 2017 saw seventeen named storms, ten of which reached hurricane status. Together with several other major disasters, these storms impacted an especially large number of Americans. For instance, FEMA estimated that Hurricanes Harvey, Irma, and Maria, along with the California wildfires, affected more than 47 million people (or about 15 percent of the country's population), (Federal Emergency Management Agency [FEMA], "2017 Hurricane Season FEMA After-Action Report," July 12, 2018, available at <https://www.fema.gov/media-library-data/1531743865541-d16794d43d3082544435e1471da07880/2017FEMAHurricaneAAR.pdf> [accessed April 16, 2019]).

Simply put, by the time Maria emerged, federal resources and capacity were seriously depleted. Even though Puerto Rico's struggling economy and its political dependency meant that it would likely require federal assistance in the event of a major disaster, Washington would have much greater difficulty providing that aid than in a typical year.

## Maria Pummels Puerto Rico

Of the disasters occurring prior to Maria in 2017, Hurricane Irma had the most direct impact on Puerto Rico. Passing just north of the island on Wednesday, September 6, just two weeks before Maria, the storm inflicted damage in many parts of Puerto Rico, including San Juan, where it knocked out power and shut down the airport.<sup>20</sup> The damage was extensive enough that the city's workforce spent most of the next several weeks focused on recovery: clearing streets, removing debris, and attempting to restore power. But because Puerto Rico had been spared the very worst of Irma, the territorial government was able to provide aid to places that had fared much worse, including the US Virgin Islands (USVI), to which it sent approximately 300 members of its National Guard. For its part, the federal government transferred supplies that it had staged in Puerto Rico to the USVI.<sup>iv</sup>

Unbeknownst to them at the time, Irma also provided San Juan officials a badly needed opportunity to prepare for Maria, which was about to form in the warm waters of the Atlantic. Having this "practice" was especially important because Puerto Rico had not experienced a major hurricane since Georges in 1998. This meant that while city officials had accumulated years of experience addressing routine emergencies (e.g., recurrent but localized flooding), they had not had to deal with complex and highly disruptive events, which often required a unique set of skills, resources, and modes of operation. Irma, however, suddenly forced them to devise and adopt strategies and actions for addressing a potentially significant disaster—strategies and actions they would turn to again just weeks later for Maria.<sup>21</sup>

The city's use of the Coliseum was one of the most visible examples of how San Juan's disaster preparedness and response activities flowed from one storm to the next. In the lead-up to Irma, municipal workers converted the city-owned sports facility into a shelter for residents of flood-vulnerable neighborhoods. City-employed doctors and nurses, along with staff from the Departments of Housing and Social Development, were on hand to provide medical care and other support. Cruz also decided to base many core municipal functions out of the Coliseum, which was more structurally sound and accessible than City Hall, a historic building located in the scenic but highly congested neighborhood of Old San Juan.<sup>22</sup> Cruz and her staff were still working out of the complex when, about a week and a half later, they learned of Maria, a newly formed tropical storm headed toward Puerto Rico. With the Coliseum having served them well during Irma, they decided to remain in the facility as long as this new storm posed a threat.

From the Coliseum, San Juan's leaders closely followed the forecasting models for Maria. The outlook was grim, with almost every model consistently indicating that the storm would make a direct hit on

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<sup>iv</sup> Although located in Puerto Rico, the warehouse where FEMA stored these supplies served all US territories in the Caribbean (Federal Emergency Management Agency [FEMA], "2017 Hurricane Season FEMA After-Action Report," July 12, 2018, available at <https://www.fema.gov/media-library-data/1531743865541-d16794d43d3082544435e1471da07880/2017FEMAHurricaneAAR.pdf> [accessed April 16, 2019]).

the island.<sup>23</sup> Consequently, at 5 am on Monday, September 18, the National Weather Service issued a hurricane watch for Puerto Rico. It upgraded the watch to a warning later that day.<sup>24</sup>

These developments prompted a flurry of activity on the part of San Juan officials. “We already knew that Maria was going to be humongous and devastating,” Cruz explained. “We all prayed that she didn’t hit us . . . but we had to be ready [if] she did.” Moreover, the mayor and her staff understood that the burden to prepare fell largely on their shoulders, a reality that authorities from the Puerto Rico Emergency Management Agency (PREMA) had made abundantly clear: For the first seventy-two hours following the storm, they should not expect any communication or aid from the territorial government.

PREMA’s message, the mayor said, was a sobering wake-up call prompting her to realize, “I’m in charge” of San Juan’s response. To start with, this meant conveying just how severe a threat Maria was. Gloriana Salgado, special assistant to the mayor, recalled that Cruz attempted to do so by repeatedly comparing the looming storm to Irma. “It’s going to be worse, it’s going to be worse, it’s going to be worse,” the mayor stressed repeatedly.

As she reflected on what else she needed to do, Cruz decided to convene and consult with her executive committee (made up of key advisors and senior city officials). She did so immediately, despite the late hour. “I texted them about 1:00 in the morning, and we were on the phone perhaps between 1:30 and 2:00,” she recalled. Cruz was especially focused on stockpiling supplies. “I said, ‘buy everything you can in the next two days.’”

In response, municipal workers scrambled to acquire whatever they could. “All we did was buy, buy, buy,” Cruz said. Among other items, they purchased medical supplies, generators, diesel fuel, and ice. “It’s better to have more and to be more efficient than to have less and lack,” the mayor explained.<sup>v</sup>

Cruz also took decisive action when it came to making arrangements for sheltering city residents. Although response plans had pre-designated schools run by the territorial government as emergency shelters<sup>vi</sup> the mayor had serious concerns about the commonwealth’s capacity to manage them. More confident in San Juan’s ability to care for its residents, she decided the city would operate its own shelters during Maria (as it had also done for Irma). “I learned very quickly in my first term as a mayor [. . .],” she said, “that what you as a city control is what you as a city really have ownership of.”

San Juan officials thus proceeded to open shelters in seven different city-owned facilities. The Coliseum was by far the largest, ultimately housing close to 800 residents and over 250 municipal workers. Another 400 residents took refuge in an adjacent facility. In addition, the city housed residents in a municipal school, several homeless shelters, and City Hall in Old San Juan.<sup>25</sup> Of her decision to open up the latter, Cruz explained, “It was very important for me to have City Hall be a shelter because it would

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<sup>v</sup> But San Juan did not horde the supplies for itself. After Maria hit, the city donated generators and other essential supplies to several other badly affected municipalities that did not have the same level of access to resources as did the island’s capital city. “[We] knew that there had to be a sharing of responsibility, that we were all in this together,” Cruz said.

<sup>vi</sup> Per the plans, municipalities would be responsible for operating the shelters in the first day or two after a storm, but the territorial government would then step in to manage them in the days and weeks that followed (Cruz interview, February 1, 2019.)

let people know that if you could have at City Hall homeless people staying with folks that had homes, that would set the tone for what we wanted to convey.”

These shelters were intended for residents of San Juan’s most flood-vulnerable neighborhoods as well as those living in structures unlikely to withstand Maria’s winds or storm surge.<sup>26</sup> The city spread word that the shelters were open by deploying sound trucks to targeted neighborhoods and by asking key contacts, who served as unofficial community leaders, to share the news with their networks. “It’s usually a woman who everybody knows, who has lived there forever, and her grandparents lived there. So, it’s somebody who we know is reliable and can get the information [out],” Salgado explained.

With Maria passing the Virgin Islands at category five strength on Tuesday, September 19, hundreds of San Juan residents sought refuge in the city-run shelters. The storm now had Puerto Rico directly in its crosshairs, and they were eager to get out of harm’s way. All the same, those gathering in the shelters represented just a small fraction of the local population. The vast majority of the city’s inhabitants instead chose to hunker down in their homes hoping that they had done enough to successfully ride out the storm.

Ultimately, Maria proved to be a terrifying experience for almost every Puerto Rican, no matter where they sheltered. Making landfall near the municipality of Yabucoa shortly after 6 am on Wednesday, September 20, the storm slammed into Puerto Rico as a high-level category four hurricane.<sup>vii,27</sup> As the hurricane moved diagonally from the southeast corner of the island to its northwest, 155 mile-per-hour winds, torrential rain, and storm surge caused unprecedented destruction. Maria felled and defoliated trees and plants, transforming the tropical island into a barren landscape; triggered flooding that washed out whole villages; contaminated potable water supplies; damaged or destroyed hundreds of thousands of homes and commercial properties (the exact number of affected structures, many built illegally, was unclear); and decimated roads and bridges, harbors and marinas, and other pieces of critical infrastructure.<sup>28</sup>

In San Juan, horrific scenes played out in all types of settings, including in the city’s emergency shelters. In fact, sheltering at City Hall turned out to be, as one municipal official put it, an especially “traumatizing experience,” with the elderly, children, and homeless who had sought refuge there witnessing firsthand the destruction of the storm. “It was [a lot of] running around like crazy, looking for safer places,” she recalled. [...] “A lot of the doors and windows were just exploding.”<sup>29</sup>

Having wreaked havoc on Puerto Rico’s fragile and antiquated electrical grid, Maria also left the territory’s 3.3 million residents without power and wiped out almost all cellphone and wireless service.<sup>viii</sup> These and other damages, NOAA concluded, made it “by far the most destructive hurricane

<sup>vii</sup> Because Maria damaged or destroyed almost all of Puerto Rico’s wind sensors, as well as the FAA/NWS-operated weather radar on the island, it was impossible to conclusively determine the storm’s maximum wind strength, which many believed reached category five levels (Michon Scott, “Hurricane Maria’s Devastation of Puerto Rico,” *Climate.gov*, August 1, 2018, available at <https://www.climate.gov/news-features/understanding-climate/hurricane-marias-devastation-puerto-rico> [accessed June 12, 2019]).

<sup>viii</sup> The collapse of the island’s electrical grid was the largest disruption of power in US history, based on number of hours of customer service lost (Robert Walton, “Federal Agencies Prepare to Wind Down Puerto Rico Power Restoration in May,” *Utility Dive*, April 12, 2018, available at <https://www.utilitydive.com/news/federal-agencies-prepare-to-wind-down-puerto-rico-power-restoration-in-may/521135/> [accessed July 31, 2020]).

to hit Puerto Rico in modern times” and the “third costliest hurricane in U.S. history.”<sup>30</sup> The worst consequence of the storm, however, was undoubtedly the terrible toll it took on human lives. Directly and indirectly causing the deaths of approximately 2,975 Puerto Ricans, Maria ranked as one of the deadliest natural disasters to ever occur on US soil.<sup>ix</sup>

## In Maria’s Wake: San Juan Mounts Its Response

As Maria began moving away from San Juan, Mayor Cruz and other city officials based at the Coliseum considered their next steps. Recalling PREMA’s warning that they would be on their own for the first several days after the storm, they understood that whatever they did next would have critical implications for people’s lives. But due to the collapse of the electrical grid and wireless networks, they had no way to communicate with the outside world.

San Juan’s leaders thus initially found it difficult to settle on a course of action. Without any insight into the level and form of damage or about who was doing what to respond, how should they proceed? What should they prioritize? These were important questions, but some officials had little interest in continuing to debate the options. In particular, the city’s emergency management staff was eager to take to the streets, arguing that many citizens were likely in desperate need of assistance. Their sense of urgency motivated Cruz. “I said, ‘Well, if you’re going to go and put your life at risk, I have to go [too].’”

With tropical storm-force winds continuing to whip around outside, Cruz and a team of city officials opened the doors to the Coliseum. What they encountered as they began wading through San Juan’s flooded streets was gut-wrenching. “I’ve never seen so much devastation,” Cruz said. She recalled, too, how many of the survivors were in total shock.<sup>31</sup>

Witnessing this suffering was extraordinarily difficult—but it was also crucial in informing Cruz’s approach. She would spend the next several weeks out in the field as she led teams of municipal workers through waist-high water to engage with and deliver supplies to survivors. “There is no substitute for seeing the eyes of the people when they are in pain . . . ” she said. “You can’t do that from a bunker with air conditioning.”

As with their first foray into their disaster-stricken city, Cruz and her team continued to largely improvise their actions over the next several days. As Gloriana Salgado put it, this early phase of the

<sup>ix</sup> The number of fatalities attributable to Maria was a highly controversial and politicized issue. Federal authorities determined that the storm resulted in sixty-five deaths (Pasch et al., “Tropical Cyclone Report: Hurricane Maria”). But this figure was roundly criticized as far too low, and after several independent studies concluded that the death toll actually numbered several thousand the territorial government commissioned The George Washington University (GW) to conduct its own review. Puerto Rico officially accepted the results of the GW study, which found that Maria caused the deaths—directly and indirectly—of 2,975 Puerto Ricans. GW’s approach (with a focus on excess mortality), however, made it difficult to compare loss of life from Maria with that of other disasters, given that official fatality counts usually differentiate between direct and indirect deaths (Milken Institute School of Public Health, The George Washington University, “Ascertainment of the Estimated Excess Mortality from Hurricane María in Puerto Rico,” August 28, 2018, available at <https://publichealth.gwu.edu/sites/default/files/downloads/projects/PRstudy/Acertainment%20of%20the%20Estimated%20Excess%20Mortality%20from%20Hurricane%20Maria%20in%20Puerto%20Rico.pdf> [accessed July 31, 2020]; Charley E. Willison et al., “Quantifying Inequities in US Federal Response to Hurricane Disaster in Texas and Florida Compared with Puerto Rico,” *BMJ Glob Health* 2019 [4].

response was “kind of ad hoc,” organized and staffed by those who had either sheltered at the Coliseum or who had self-deployed in its wake. But the mayor and her advisors also understood that responding to Maria would be a massive undertaking, requiring the involvement of every available municipal worker. “[So] she made a call out to the employees,” Salgado said, “and [asked]: ‘Who is willing to help with this?’”

In response, municipal employees representing a wide range of departments and professions flocked to the Coliseum, often volunteering for assignments they had never performed.<sup>x</sup> The city’s communications staff, for instance, assumed responsibility for preparing three meals every day for thousands of municipal workers and people living at the Coliseum.<sup>32</sup> Personnel from the Parks Department, meanwhile, helped set up a system for receiving and distributing supplies, a task they at first found difficult due to their lack of experience with managing distribution systems, and one that would grow ever more challenging as the scale of the operation increased.

At the same time, Cruz and her leadership team began taking steps to bring more structure to the city’s response. Personnel assignments gradually became less ad hoc and more directly linked to an individual’s skill set and experience. They also settled into a daily battle rhythm. At nine every morning, Cruz and about fifty other senior city officials crowded into a conference room at the Coliseum to discuss daily objectives. Then, at nine every night, they reconvened to review whether they had met these objectives, and if not, what adjustments needed to be made. During these meetings, attendees placed particular emphasis on quantifying results. “[The mayor’s] obsessed with numbers,” Salgado explained. “So, everybody would tell her, ‘we’ve picked up this much debris, we’ve delivered this much food, we’ve served these many people.’”

For the most part, however, the response continued to be a highly decentralized operation. Municipal workers spent most of their day scattered across San Juan, operating with little direct oversight. “Ultimately, you have to trust your team,” Cruz observed. “You have to trust them even when you don’t see them.”

The vast majority of city officials, the mayor stressed, rose to the challenge. All the same, some were unable to do so—and faced consequences as a result. “I didn’t have any qualms about firing people in the middle of the crisis, if they weren’t working [hard], or if they weren’t putting their heart [into it],” she said. Although she faced some criticism for taking disciplinary action during such a difficult time, Cruz stood by her personnel decisions, explaining that she first confirmed whether or not a worker was experiencing any personal issues. If they were, she tried to give them the time and space they needed to heal.

In fact, Cruz and her advisors were highly concerned about their employees’ well-being. Not only were city workers constantly grappling with the devastation and suffering caused by Maria, they were often separated from their loved ones for days on end. Moreover, they were already exhausted from Irma. “We were all so immersed in [our] work that we tended to forget that we also had to take care of

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<sup>x</sup> San Juan had by far the largest workforce of any municipality in Puerto Rico, with about 6,000 employees (Salgado Interview, January 31, 2019).

ourselves,” observed Héctor Rivera, a lawyer and aide to the mayor who also served as a point person for the many outside groups that eventually descended on San Juan to provide aid.<sup>33</sup>

That way of operating, Cruz realized, was unsustainable. “It is to everybody’s best interest that those that are more able to help take care of themselves,” she explained. “So, we did. We made sure that every employee had food, took water home, had medication, took food home.” Those who demonstrated signs of emotional distress were encouraged to take leave and get some rest.

For her part, Cruz—who would spend the next several months living out of the Coliseum—felt obligated to hold herself together on behalf of her constituents and the many municipal workers who had dedicated themselves to the response. “I couldn’t [get visibly upset]. I didn’t have that luxury,” she said. That said, the extent of the devastation and the stress from trying to deal with it affected her, too, and she could not help but break down at times. “But,” she said, “I never did in front of people.”

## External Aid: Critical Support and Agonizing Delays

Although city leaders were proud of their efforts in the immediate aftermath of Maria, they also realized that the resources they had on hand were woefully inadequate to address the level of suffering they saw in one neighborhood after another. They were in critical need of assistance from higher levels of government and other external partners.

The territorial government provided some of that support. But it, too, faced significant constraints. Given the island-wide devastation, every municipality required assistance, meaning that none could have its full attention. Moreover, the effects of the economic and financial crises had limited the amount of resources available for the response. And it also had to grapple with the functional collapse of PREMA. Not only had Maria destroyed the agency’s headquarters, but it had so overwhelmed its leadership that it was never able to assume its primary role of coordinating the territory’s response. At the governor’s request, the commissioner of PREMA eventually resigned from his post, while the Puerto Rico National Guard took on some of the agency’s core functions.<sup>34</sup>

Collectively, these factors severely hampered the territory’s ability to provide assistance to San Juan and the island’s other municipalities. They would instead have to rely on a variety of off-island sources. Some of this aid arrived surprisingly quickly and seemingly out of the blue—including support provided by New York City (NYC), which showed up less than a week after the storm. Mayor Cruz recalled her surprise: “All of a sudden, I’m in the midst of [this] rural area of San Juan, and this group of men come in and say, ‘Hi, we’re from New York, and Mayor [Bill] de Blasio sent us here to help you.’ And I thought, ‘What the hell?!’”

As it turned out, de Blasio had taken the initiative to deploy a team of officials from the NYC Emergency Management agency (NYCEM). De Blasio’s show of support, San Juan officials said, was an example of preexisting alliances paying off, stemming in this instance from the strong personal and political relationships between Mayors Cruz and de Blasio, as well as Melissa Mark-Viverito, the

speaker of the NYC Council.<sup>xi</sup> It also reflected the influence of the Puerto Rican diaspora, a sizable population in NYC.

In addition to delivering medical supplies and food, the NYCEM delegation provided badly needed technical knowledge and advice regarding how to run a large-scale relief operation. Héctor Rivera noted that because he and his colleagues had little experience managing crises, NYCEM's expert guidance was especially important. "They were the ones . . ." he said, who "helped us navigate the waters of crisis management." The city's director of housing and social development, José Cerra-Castañer, offered a similar perspective: "[My staff and I] deal with social emergencies all the time, but not usually something this big; and everyone was still a bit in shock and trying to figure out things for our own families and what not. And to receive assistance from New York was excellent. . . . Because then they helped us set up a plan."

Among the many tasks NYCEM helped with was professionalizing San Juan's supply distribution system. "They said you should put this here, here, or here, and you get your tables and what not," Rivera recalled. "They were the first that made inventory, they were the first that lined the pallet tub, they were the first that started counting what we received. They'd tell us, 'Okay, you have this for this amount of people for this amount of days.'"

With NYCEM's guidance, San Juan officials had soon transformed the Coliseum into the city's central distribution hub for the supplies that were beginning to arrive on the island—most of which initially came from private entities, such as Goya Foods, or from other US cities and states. "The City of Chicago, the City of Miami, the City of New York; all the mayors from those cities, they provided the first aid that we distributed forward," Rivera recalled. To make room for these and other donations, the city began moving residents still sheltering at the Coliseum back to their homes or to other temporary shelters if city inspectors deemed their residences uninhabitable.

NYCEM also functioned as a key liaison between the city and other levels of government involved in the response. It was able to do so in part by drawing on its extensive experience with managing large-scale, intergovernmental operations, but also due to a key logistical decision it had made when it had arrived on the island: Not only did NYCEM base itself out of the Coliseum, where Cruz and her advisors remained focused on directing the city's relief efforts,<sup>xii</sup> but it also established a presence at the San Juan Convention Center where the governor and representatives of his administration along with federal authorities had set up a Joint Field Office (JFO) to coordinate the island-wide response. "The emergency management office from New York helped us bridge that gap in communications which was really, really useful," Rivera said.

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<sup>xi</sup> San Juan's longtime relationship with the AFL-CIO also proved highly beneficial (San Juan was the only unionized municipality in Puerto Rico). Following the storm, more than 300 AFL-CIO members came to San Juan to assist the city in its relief and recovery efforts. Many stayed at the Coliseum or at the neighboring Hiram Bithorn Stadium. At Cruz's urging, they also lent support to several other municipalities on the island. "They took care of us," she said.

<sup>xii</sup> According to Héctor Rivera, San Juan's leaders were fully consumed by the activities being run out of the Coliseum. "We [were], at all points, 100 percent focused on recovery here and we [were] 100 percent focused on our people."

## Competing Narratives

Bridging the gap between San Juan officials and federal authorities proved to be an especially difficult—and at times seemingly impossible—task, however. With each passing day, city leaders grew ever more frustrated over the pace of delivery of federal aid; by the time the response had hit the one-week mark, tensions between Cruz and the Trump administration threatened to quash any chance of effective intergovernmental collaboration.

To be sure, the federal government had taken a number of steps to provide aid in the immediate aftermath of Maria. At the request of Puerto Rico Governor Ricardo Rosselló, President Trump issued a major disaster declaration for the territory on Wednesday, September 21, a day after landfall.<sup>35</sup> In doing so, Trump made available to Puerto Rico a significant amount of federal resources in support of both the emergency response and longer-term recovery.<sup>xiii</sup> By the 21st, a team from US Army North (ARNORTH) had arrived on the island to lay the groundwork for the provision of military support,<sup>36</sup> while FEMA Urban Search and Rescue (USAR) teams had begun conducting damage assessments and carrying out rescue operations.<sup>37</sup>

As the days wore on, however, Cruz and other city officials became increasingly convinced that the federal government was not doing nearly enough to address the urgent needs of their constituents. Compounding their anger, the Trump administration appeared to have provided more aid to Texas and Florida in the aftermaths of Hurricanes Harvey and Irma than it was now doing for Puerto Rico, even though the effects of Maria were either comparable to or even more severe than the other two storms.<sup>38</sup> For instance, nine days after landfall, the federal government had deployed significantly fewer employees to the island (10,000) than it had to either Texas (30,000) or Florida (16,200) in the same timeframe. It had also delivered smaller quantities of essential supplies—such as food, water, and tarps—to Puerto Rico than it did to Texas and Florida during similar intervals.<sup>39</sup>

Defending itself, the Trump administration pointed to the burden of responding simultaneously to three major storms. It also noted that Puerto Rico's location made the logistics of transporting personnel and supplies to the island far more difficult than to Texas or Florida.<sup>40</sup>

San Juan officials acknowledged that the federal government had its hands full by the time Maria hit Puerto Rico. "They were fighting a couple of disasters," Héctor Rivera conceded. He went on to say, however, that FEMA and its partner agencies had failed to adequately prepare for the possibility of several large-scale emergencies happening at or around the same time. As a consequence, he said, "FEMA never had enough resources for Puerto Rico." Nor, he said, were federal agencies sufficiently prepared for the logistical challenges of delivering aid to the island—something they should have anticipated.

The contrast between the level of support that Washington had provided to states on the mainland and what it was now making available to Puerto Rico was utterly demoralizing to Cruz and her top aides. As City Administrator Esperanza Ruiz put it, she and her colleagues could only conclude that in the eyes of the administration, "we [were] second class Americans."<sup>41</sup>

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<sup>xiii</sup> For more on the disaster declaration process, see: <https://www.fema.gov/disaster-declaration-process>.

Yet the mayor and her advisors clung to the hope that the situation would soon improve. According to Cruz, she had several promising interactions with federal authorities in the week following landfall, including a constructive conversation with the White House about how to expedite the delivery of aid.<sup>42</sup> President Trump had initially seemed supportive of the needs of Puerto Ricans. On September 19, just hours before Maria struck the island, he tweeted, “Puerto Rico being hit hard by new monster Hurricane [sic]. Be careful, our hearts are with you—will be there to help!”<sup>43</sup> He maintained a positive tone when addressing Mayor Cruz on Tuesday, September 26, tweeting: “Thank you to Carmen Yulin Cruz, the Mayor of San Juan, for your kind words on FEMA etc. We are working hard. Much food and water there/on way.”<sup>44</sup>

But two days later, Trump’s Acting Secretary of Homeland Security, Elaine Duke, stunned many by praising the overall response. Speaking from the White House driveway on Thursday, September 28, Duke declared that she was “very satisfied” with the situation. “I know it’s a hard storm to recover from,” she continued, “[but . . .] it is really a good news story in terms of our ability to reach people and the limited number of deaths that have taken place in such a devastating hurricane.”<sup>45</sup>

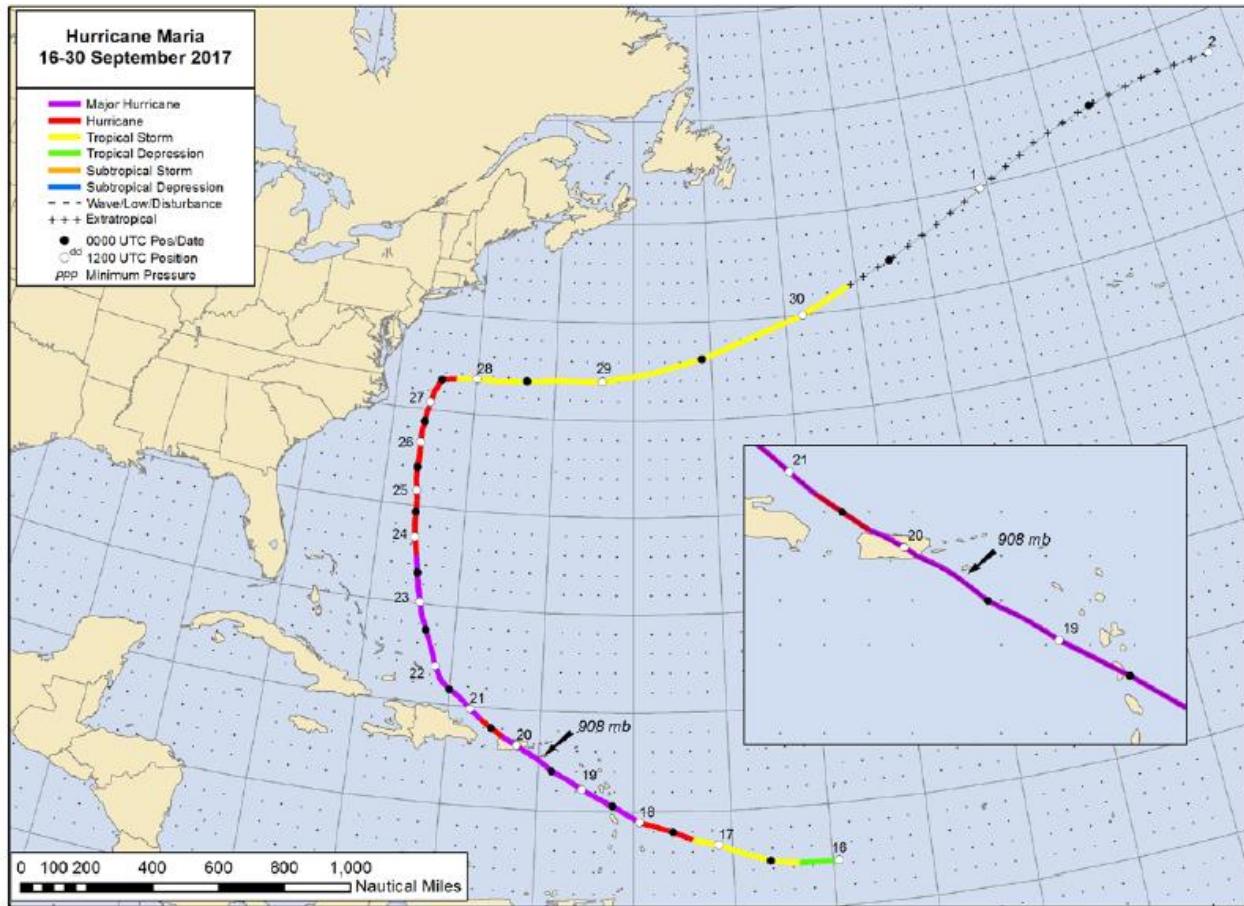
The following day, CNN played Duke’s comments back to Cruz when she appeared on the network’s flagship morning news program “New Day.” She was astounded, noting that it contrasted sharply with a call she had received from the White House just the day before, which had led her to believe the administration understood the need to accelerate relief efforts. Shocked, Cruz responded: “Well maybe from where she’s standing it’s a good news story. . . . When you’re drinking from a creek, it’s not a good news story. When you don’t have food for a baby, it’s not a good news story. When you have to pull people down from buildings. . . . Dammit, this is not a good news story. This is a ‘people are dying’ story.”<sup>46</sup>

As she thought more about Duke’s comments, Cruz realized that she faced a critical choice: She could continue to try to coordinate with federal partners through official channels—a strategy that she believed had paid far too few dividends—or she could fully embrace a publicly confrontational approach to underscore the disconnect between the reality on the ground and the picture the Trump administration was trying to paint.

Each option had its advantages. On one hand, playing nice might curry favor with the Trump administration and result in greater federal support. Indeed, this seemed to be the approach a number of elected officials in Puerto Rico, including the governor, had chosen to pursue. As Cruz put it, “Some politicians here thought, ‘If I stay quiet, it will be better, because I will get the help.’” On the other hand, speaking up would allow Cruz to share Puerto Rico’s plight with the rest of the world. But doing so also brought with it considerable political risk—and the distinct possibility that it might further complicate efforts to relieve her constituents’ suffering.

## Appendices

### Appendix 1 Best Track Positions for Hurricane Maria, September 16-30, 2017<sup>xiv</sup>



**Note:** Puerto Rico is marked on both the general map and in the enlarged image with the notation “20,” which signifies the date Maria made landfall on the island.

<sup>xiv</sup> Richard J. Pasch, Andrew B. Penny, and Robbie Berg, National Hurricane Center, “Tropical Cyclone Report: Hurricane Maria,” April 10, 2018, available at [https://www.nhc.noaa.gov/data/tcr/AL152017\\_Maria.pdf](https://www.nhc.noaa.gov/data/tcr/AL152017_Maria.pdf) [accessed November 11, 2018].

**Appendix 2** Comparison of the Paths of Hurricanes Irma and Maria<sup>xv</sup>

**Note:** The purple line (marked by “9/20”) depicts Hurricane Maria’s track across the Caribbean (inlay) and Puerto Rico, specifically (main map). The green line depicts Hurricane Irma’s track across the region approximately two weeks earlier. This map was developed by GAO based on data from the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration.

<sup>xv</sup> U.S. Government Accountability Office (GAO), “Puerto Rico Hurricanes: Status of FEMA Funding, Oversight, and Recovery Challenges,” GAO-19-256 (Washington, DC: GAO, March 2019).

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