

Neither states nor nations, Puerto Rico and Virgin Islands face rocky storm recovery

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The US military delivers water and supplies to Barranquitas, Puerto Rico earlier this week. **AL DIAZ** adiaz@miamiherald.com

October 27, 2017 08:30 AM

UPDATED October 29, 2017 04:48 PM

After Hurricane Irma and then Maria tore through the [Caribbean islands](#), the United Nations swung into action with helicopters, food drops and multimillion-dollar recovery plans.

But even though both Puerto Rico and the U.S. Virgin Islands were decimated by the hurricanes, they couldn't call the U.N. — an expert in disaster relief — for help.

The islands are U.S. territories with their own governors but no voting representation in Congress, so they must [turn to the United States](#) in times of need, even if they aren't on many Americans' radar.

“The governor of Puerto Rico can certainly not call the U.N. for help. Puerto Rico's foreign relations are handled as if Puerto Rico were fully domestic, a state like any other,” said Christina Duffy Ponsa-Kraus, a Puerto Rico expert who teaches legal history at Columbia Law School.

Except they aren't states like any other.

“That is the awfulness of being a territory,” said José Fuentes, chairman of the Puerto Rico Statehood Council. “You have no political power within your own government and you don't have the ability to do anything internationally because everything has to go through the U.S. State Department.”

[*Damage assessment shows aeriels of Puerto Rico devastation after Hurricane Maria*](#)

New aerial footage from the National Weather Service shows the scale of the damage wrought by Hurricane Maria in Puerto Rico. The footage from eastern and central Puerto Rico shows the devastation the Category 4 hurricane caused to entire neighborhoods, solar farms, and forests when it made landfall in Puerto Rico on September 20. Puerto Rico is still recovering from the impact of the worst hurricane in a century to strike the Caribbean island. More than 80 percent of residents remain without power, and some schools only reopened on Tuesday, October 24, almost five weeks after the

hurricane struck.

NWS via Storyful

The United States might have been more willing to intervene more aggressively if the two-hurricane ravaged territories actually were foreign countries, Ponsa-Kraus said.

“The territories are marginal, they are invisible, and they have no voice in Washington because you need a vote to have a voice,” she said. “You’ve got these populations of American citizens living in these territories but most Americans don’t understand that they are American citizens.”

[A poll](#) conducted last month by Morning Consult, a media and polling firm, showed that only 54 percent of Americans surveyed knew that Puerto Ricans were fellow U.S. citizens.

The United States has five populated territories around the world plus a smattering of islands that are little more than unpopulated specks in the Pacific Ocean. Puerto Rico with a population of 3.4 million is by far the largest. The other populated territories are the U.S. Virgin Islands — which include St. Thomas, St. John and St. Croix and 50 smaller islands and cays — American Samoa, Guam and the Northern Mariana Islands.

Puerto Ricans and U.S. Virgin Islanders are American citizens — but they can’t vote for president unless they move to the mainland, and their representatives in the U.S. House can’t cast votes in Congress. U.S. dollars are the currency in the two territories, but they don’t receive proportional federal funding for programs such as Medicaid.

Not all the rules and regulations governing the two territories are the same, and they came by their territorial status through different routes. The Virgin

Islands were under Danish rule until 1917 when the [United States purchased them for \\$25 million](#) to shore up U.S. defenses in the Caribbean during World War I.

Puerto Rico, a former Spanish colony, came to the United States in 1898 after Spain lost the Spanish-American War. Puerto Ricans have long [wrangled over the island's status](#): whether it should be independent, a state or maintain its current status as a U.S. territory.

In the weeks since Hurricane Maria slammed Puerto Rico, the government estimates that 40,000 Puerto Ricans have migrated to the mainland, many to Florida. Residents of the U.S. Virgin Islands also have gone to the U.S mainland since the one-two punch of the hurricanes.

If Puerto Rico, where the hurricane death toll now stands at 51, suffers from an invisibility problem in the minds of many Americans, then multiply that many times over for the U.S. Virgin Islands, with its population of only about 110,000.

While the media is now focused on Puerto Rico's destroyed power grid and ongoing shortages of food and water, many U.S. Virgin Islands residents are facing similar deprivations but without the attention. Power has been restored to less than a third of St. Thomas residents, to 16 percent of St. Croix customers and to hardly anyone on St. John although the power authority hopes to re-electrify portions of Cruz Bay by the end of the week.

“Why are people who live in the U.S. Virgin Islands not as important as people who live in other places?” asked Stacey Plaskett, the USVI representative in Congress. “Our lives have been forever changed and we need support.”

Many schools are still too damaged to reopen. Others were destroyed or are

still in use as shelters. Limited curfews are still in effect. “We lost much of our economy. Many of our resorts are destroyed, and tourism accounts for about 50 percent of the GDP. Many resorts will be lost for this year and next year,” Plaskett said.

The islands already had an unemployment rate of about 12 percent before the hurricanes hit, she said.

So while they wait for more substantial help, Virgin Islanders are trying to start the recovery themselves. “Distance and remoteness is something the USVI has had to live with. At the end of the day, we have to help ourselves,” said Andrew Clutz, who works for the territory’s Economic Development Council.

Like many Virgin Island companies, most of Cane Bay Partner’s 33 employees are now scattered across the U.S. mainland trying to work remotely. The St. Croix financial services consulting and analytics firm’s Christiansted offices are unusable, still damp and filled with mold after Maria peeled off the roof.

“We have Americans in this territory, no power, limited access to food and water, leaking roofs, no real hospital facilities and it will be like this for some time,” said David Johnson, a co-founder of Cane Bay Partners. “Because we’re such a small community, we don’t get the attention. But it does frustrate us.”

Johnson and his partner, Kirk Chewning, started their own relief effort, [Cane Bay Cares](#), an effort to raise \$1 million to help the firm’s employees and other St. Croix residents. “It’s our own response in the private sector to step up,” said Chewning. “The focus is on, how do we rebuild?” They contributed their own funds and are asking others to donate as well.

Chewning and the company have been working to help since the first hurricane, Irma, hit St. John and St. Thomas but largely spared St. Croix, 40

miles south. Johnson deployed his 40-foot fishing boat, Turn and Burn, to ferry relief supplies and medicine to the two sister islands and carry people to safety.

When Maria approached, the partners chartered a 737 to evacuate about two-thirds of their employees to Miami. After the hurricane passed, they arranged for a second plane to evacuate the remaining employees, plus people with health issues and employees' pets, including a hedge hog. The plane also brought in 36 generators that were distributed to schools, churches and nonprofits, and pallets of water from Tennessee.

“Because we're so small, doing a little creates a lot,” said Chewning.

More private relief is coming from the Illinois-based Stephenson Family Foundation, headed by Richard JStephenson. The foundation recently announced a \$5 million pledge — \$2 million immediately and \$3 million in [matching grants](#). Stephenson is a longtime Virgin Islands resident and the founder of companies including the Cancer Treatment Centers of America and International Capital & Management Co., which is based in Charlotte Amalie.

“We're trying to help provide hope. We need to assure people we have their back,” said Stephenson. “It's helping one family after another, one family after another.”

Cane Bay Cares, the Stephenson Family Foundation and several USVI companies have partnered with the Community Foundation of the Virgin Islands, a nonprofit that has worked in the territory for the past 27 years. Dee Baecher-Brown, president of the CFVI, called the response “amazingly generous.”

On Tuesday, more than a month after Maria struck, Congress approved a

\$36.5 billion disaster aid package for the hurricanes and floods that battered Florida and Texas and the wildfires that hit Western States. It included \$1.27 billion in food assistance for Puerto Rico, and the governors of Puerto Rico and the U.S. Virgin Islands will be able to request aid from the \$18.7 billion allocated for the Federal Emergency Management Agency's disaster relief fund.

But that doesn't take away weeks of suffering for islanders. Some, like Fuentes, the Puerto Rico statehood advocate, say FEMA and the military might have pre-positioned more resources on the island before the hurricane if Puerto Rico were a state.

Though he thinks the federal government is doing the best it can handling multiple natural disasters, he says Puerto Rico's dilapidated infrastructure — its roads, bridges and electrical grid — likely would have withstood the hurricane better with the kind of maintenance that's routine for states.

"The infrastructure of Puerto Rico would be a lot better if it were a state. Puerto Rico is trying to provide U.S. citizens with a level of quality of life equal to that of the states with [far fewer federal resources than states] and that makes it very hard," he said.

Still, Clifford Graham, the U.S. Virgin Islands' port director and head of the governor appointed post-hurricane task force, said he is pleased with the response the territory is getting given the circumstances. "We are seeing a tremendous recovery effort now. We are seeing utility workers, we are seeing the Army Corps of Engineers, we are seeing guys out here putting up the tarps," he said.

Ponsa-Kraus, however, thinks the response to the destruction has been less than robust in Puerto Rico, which she traces back to the island's status as a territory.

“I think the response to the hurricane has more than anything else, been informed by the psychology around these territories [that they are apart from the United States],” she said. “There is no question that this psychology affects the amount of assistance given to Puerto Rico.”

And President Donald Trump’s own Twitter messages haven’t help quell that perception. In an Oct. 12 tweet, Trump seemed to indicate impatience with Puerto Rico’s difficult recovery. “We cannot keep FEMA, the Military & the First Responders, who have been amazing (under the most difficult circumstances) in P.R. forever,” he tweeted.

Business and government officials from the two territories have been urgently lobbying in Washington for continued assistance. Plaskett, the USVI non-voting congressional representative, was on the phone Wednesday with Secretary of Housing and Urban Development Ben Carson about a problem with hurricane-hit Section 8 housing. When the power is out, properties are considered uninhabitable even though people may still be living in them, so there’s the possibility landlords won’t be paid by the federal government in November.

“Are we at fault for not having electricity because FEMA hasn’t given us the massive aid that was needed to restore power?” Plaskett asked. “I’m concerned we are not going to have sufficient funding to recover.”

Nadine Coyle picks her best female vocalist of all-time