

Observations while visiting Puerto Rico San Juan and Environs

Andrew C. Kadak

January 14-21, 2018

Where to begin? In the US, the media portrayal of Puerto Rico is that of a devastated backward part of the United States largely ignored by the US government. Politicians and media pundits pontificate about our not caring about citizens of Puerto Rico who are also citizens of the US. Cries of racism and anti-Hispanic accusations abound by politicians and largely ignorant commentators who have not been here.

Having spent only one week here and talking to many locals and US mainland workers struggling to restore basic services, the situation is quite different than that being reported to the detriment of the Puerto Ricans who need tourists to help their economy. Fortunately, the cruise ships are back in San Juan. I counted six the other day which is a blessing for the country. Regular tourism still suffers since many of the hotels in the area are still closed or are housing the restoration workers paid for by FEMA. The time share hotel that I am staying is filled with US workers from electric utility, communications and TV dish technicians trying to restore services.

The devastation was massive as correctly reported in the media. Essentially all leaves from the trees were blown off. Fortunately, mother nature does not rely on the government to regrow leaves and vegetation since it likely would still be brown and not as beautifully green as it is now. The electricity situation is still bad especially in the rural areas that we drove through along the coast. Local news accounts claim that 60 % of the power is restored in the country, much of it in the higher population cities and towns to assist in the tourism business. San Juan appeared to be fully functional with the annual San Sebastian festival being held this week in Old San Juan. The same cannot be said about the small villages and towns off the main highways where broken poles and wires are still on the ground.

The recovery for these homes will be a house to house restoration project which will take time as it does in the US when we lose power in a snow storm or hurricane.

The task in Puerto Rico is different and massive – it means essentially building new high and medium transmission lines to substations and from there rebuilding the local distribution system on a street by street, house by house basis. One cannot do this overnight. It requires rebuilding the entire electric utility system.



So why is it not getting done faster? The first reason is geography. All the line trucks needed for this massive reconstruction project have to come by ship or barge. Traveling around the island I saw many of these trucks from Florida, Illinois and many other states. With them must come crews who have the skills needed to do this work as well as poles and supplies including wire, isolators and transformers. Workers are not easy to find for such a long duration project given that they must also come from the US where they are also needed to



support the US mainland grid. Why not the army you ask? They don't have the equipment or skill set for such a massive effort. Bottom line, the job is being done but without an appreciation of what is required, commentary on US lack of support is simply baseless.

Complicating the restoration process is the corruption that exists in the electric utility system. While I was there the FBI was investigating why a warehouse full of poles and other equipment was not being used. I also saw about 50 CAT diesel generators siting at the dock – not being used in San Juan. Not sure why not since parts of the island still have no power.



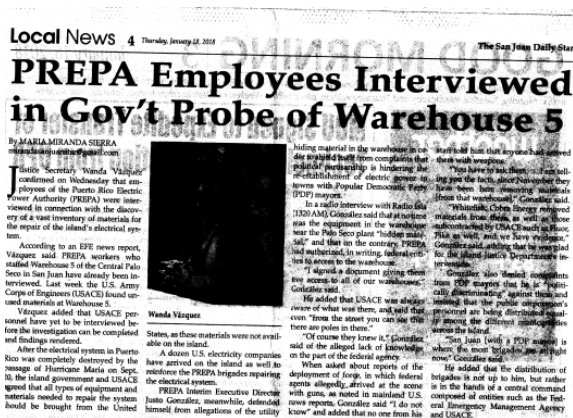
Diesel generators
Fuel Trucks

The second reason is the management of the Puerto Rican Power Authority that is not skilled enough or competent enough to manage such an undertaking. The evidence is that even before the hurricanes, the electrical system was a mess, not being maintained, and corrupt. Local news reports and talking to locals confirm this.

How can a small utility that has a record of poor management be asked to rebuild their entire grid and distribution system? Answer - they can't. So why was not management assistance provided and a takeover ordered? I understand management assistance was provided but a federal takeover could not be ordered by the federal government but only requested by the state. The corruption is so rampant that the FBI, when not investigating Russian collusion, is investigating the local utility management and mayors of 23 of the 78 municipalities for misuse of funds and materials.



So where are we with electrical restoration? Workers I talked to say years for every house to have power. Some say June for most the country which seems possible. Progress is being made – neighborhood by neighborhood, house by house.



How are people coping? My observation is that the people that I talked to are coping well. If they don't have a generator, they are simply adapting to living on a light schedule of sunlight. They go to work, if they have a job, where they can charge their cell phones. The frustration still exists but relatives and friends help each other making it tolerable. The emphasis of power restoration was on hospitals, schools and places of employment and the tourism industry. Some people have only recently returned to work using their savings to make it through the tough times.

FEMA also provides housing assistance. The hotel/time share I stayed at still houses 15 families (survivors) at government expense until they can get their homes restored to livable conditions. The FEMA story is mixed. Out of a deep concern for fraud, they are very slow in providing reconstruction loans which is causing more frustration than needed. The entire FEMA response needs to be carefully investigated to see if the bureaucracy is part of the problem. Also I have heard about long wait times for getting FEMA to inspect sites and provide fair funds for short and long term recovery.

There appears to be a lead US government person in charge of all US assistance for recovery. It is not clear how effective he is in coordinating the assistance needed. Again the question of how effective the Washington bureaucracy is in dealing with such a massive effort which warrants much closer scrutiny.

Crime is another major problem here which was a major problem in getting to remote areas to provide assistance. Routinely fuel, water and other vehicles were hijacked requiring military escorts for safety and finding drivers willing to risk their lives to deliver needed equipment and goods to the people. An article in the local paper stated that the homicide rate for Puerto Rico was 20/100,000 people. In the US the rate is 3.7/100,000. Crime is still a major problem with break-ins reported even in the poor neighborhoods. To make matters worse, the police department went on strike over the Christmas holiday only recently returning back to work.

Areas for inquiry:

1. Effectiveness FEMA response in all areas. Who is in charge and is there a plan and schedule?
2. The Electric utility and its management to handle the massive restoration project – coordination, planning, corruption, etc.
3. Resources being provided for all basic services (from where and how they are being distributed).
4. Role of local governments – mayors –are they part of the solution or the problem (graft).
5. Role the language barrier – Puerto Ricans who are not in the tourist industry have limited English speaking abilities as we witnessed.