

Five weeks after Maria most of Puerto Rico remains an island in the dark

SAN JUAN, Puerto Rico — They're still in the dark. Lady Lee Andrews doesn't know how much longer she can keep her Poet's Passage souvenir shop afloat without electricity — or tourists.

Sonia Rodriguez relies on a generator to power the elevator in her five-story assisted living center so residents can get down for their outdoor meals and some relief from the lack of air conditioning.

More than a month after Hurricane Maria ravaged this island with 155-mph winds, three-quarters of the residents are still without power, lining up at banks for cash and gathering at shopping malls, hotels or government buildings just to charge their cellphones.

Police are directing traffic at major intersections without working traffic lights. Water plants are still out of commission, forcing people to gather water from roadside streams and then boil it to be safe from bacteria. Those without home generators are living without refrigeration, air conditioning and anything but natural light. Those with generators need to pay for gasoline or diesel fuel, and haul those volatile liquids in their cars, along with water and daily groceries.

"Nowadays businesses run with the rising sun and close as soon as whatever they have runs out, or they don't open at all," said Andrews, 45, as she sat in a dark hall of her shop in Old San Juan. "Now a business of my caliber, which depends on tourism, is completely affected. It's on total shutdown."

Even Gov. Ricardo Rosselló admits that his pledge to restore 95% of power by mid-December is "aggressive."

The task is daunting as the Puerto Rico faces challenges not seen on the U.S. mainland after other recent storms devastated Texas and Florida.

- The entire island lost power after the Sept. 20 Category 5 storm damaged power plants and 80% of the island's electrical grid, which includes 2,400 miles of

transmission lines and 30,000 miles of distribution lines, according to the Army Corps of Engineers.

- Getting help to the island is cumbersome. Supplies and people to fix the power problems have to travel through ports and airports that are overwhelmed by aid deliveries, building materials, bucket trucks, helicopters, and every other necessity, slowing the delivery of supplies where needed.

- Puerto Rico's power grid, saddled with years of financial mismanagement, was already weakened because preventive maintenance and upgrades were deferred to save money.

Col. Jeff Lloyd of the Army Corps of Engineers in Puerto Rico, which the federal government is relying on to help the U.S. territory restore power, would not commit to Rosselló's mid-December timeline. The Corps has ordered \$130 million worth of supplies, including 62,000 telephone poles from the U.S. mainland.

"The governor said that's an aggressive estimate," Lloyd said. "We're going to do everything we can to make it possible. ... What's going to be most challenging is the rugged terrain in restoring the grid."

The power restoration project is focused on three tracks, giving priority to critical life-saving, health and public safety facilities.

The Federal Emergency Management Agency, working with the governor's office, has identified 537 sites for emergency power generators that are still being delivered and installed across the island.

Most generators are delivered by trucks, which are sometimes delayed by landslides, missing road signs and cellular service that would help GPS-aided navigation, said Lisa Hunter, a Army Corps spokeswoman. A recent rain storm delayed sending a generator by Chinook helicopter to a government-funded health clinic on the island of Culebra.



Residents of the five-story Égida Señora Perpetuo Socorro assisted living home wait for a meal in an outdoor patio sheltered from the sun and away from the sweltering heat in doors. The facility has generator power between 6:30 and 11 a.m. and between 6 p.m. and 10 p.m. During those times, they have running water and an elevator, but still no air conditioning. Administrator Sonia Rodriguez said

Puerto Rico's tax office adopted the facility, but Rodriguez still doesn't always have enough money to buy enough diesel for the generator. "Sadly, if there comes a time all our resources end, those with nowhere to go would have to be relocated to a shelter," she said. But so far they have managed. "While there's diesel there is hope. (Photo: Atabey Nuñez, for USA TODAY)

In the Égida Señora Perpetuo Socorro assisted living center, the 67 residents have power from a generator for about four hours in the morning and four hours at night. That's when they have running water and an elevator, but still no air conditioning.

They have their meals on an outdoor patio sheltered from the sun. But administrator Rodriguez points out she doesn't always have enough money to buy diesel for the generator.

"Sadly, if there comes a time all our resources end, those with nowhere to go would have to be relocated to a shelter," she said. But so far they have managed. "While there's diesel there is hope."

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