



AMY GORDON FOR THE WASHINGTON POST

The hurricane toppled trees and damaged or destroyed many of the buildings on Vieques, an island community of about 9,000 people off the eastern coast of Puerto Rico.

Maria leaves island of Vieques cut off

Puerto Rican community has no power, little food or fuel — and needs help

BY AMY GORDON

VIEQUES, PUERTO RICO — The power went out on this small island hours before Hurricane Maria really made its presence known. It was dark when the bands of wind and rain started to whip through. It was 3 a.m. Wednesday when it got almost supernaturally loud.

The wind was loud. The debris was loud. The container house blowing off its foundation and slamming to the ground was loud. Then, the wind stopped. The sun rose.

Then, silence.

This island community of about 9,000 people off the eastern coast of Puerto Rico was hit hard, and it has been in a near-complete blackout since before Maria roared through. Like many isolated areas of Puerto Rico, it remains without power, phones or any way to connect with the mainland — nearly a week after the hurricane. Gas is scarce, food is scarce, there is no drinking water, and information is almost nonexistent.

Almost any structure made of wood here was damaged or destroyed. The whole front of one home was ripped off, exposing a room with only a baby's crib. A campground full of wooden cabins was almost completely wiped away, save for the concrete buildings. The walkway with concrete pillars in Malecon was toppled and tossed.

It is the definition of austerity.

In an information vacuum, the only way anyone on the island could learn anything was a daily meeting in the town plaza at 2 p.m. Roughly 40 to 60 people would show up to hear from town government officials and get updates — a frustrating exercise because there weren't often updates to give. One day, a resident hosted an open poetry event after the town meeting, just to bring people together.

The island also resurrected its sound truck, a vehicle that drove around the island with bullhorns, delivering news, alerts, updates on the curfew, which now is 7 p.m. to 5 a.m.

"The people of Vieques are in great need and they are becoming desperate," ViequesLove, an organization aiming to help the island, said in a statement. "Food and water scarcity is a major issue, and there are reports of looting and violence, which is only expected to get worse. Fuel is

unavailable and drastically hampering the ability to mount search and rescue operations in the barrios, where major damage occurred. People are not able to easily get off the island, and getting relief access to the island is being hampered by difficulties with the state of mainland Puerto Rico. A terrible situation is quickly turning catastrophic, as each day passes and relief cannot be provided to the island."

Vieques is very much about community, so people have been trying to pull together. Neighbors have been joining forces to make meals, fix homes and collect rainwater to drink. One person had cellphone service for about a day after the storm and went to a restaurant that had a generator and let everyone use his phone until he lost service.

The supermarkets were almost picked bare before Maria — people had stocked up for the possibility of problems during Irma, and power went out for days then — leaving almost no fresh food. Three supermarket trucks arrived Sunday, but no one can keep food cold in their homes without power.

Amazingly, there are no reports of deaths here, and people have been keeping calm.

But Vieques remains isolated, dark and silent.

national@washpost.com