

FEMA and US Treasury decide to 'help' Puerto Rico by withholding a billion-dollar emergency loan

by Kelly Macias

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People in Puerto Rico are dying and still without water and power. But that's perfectly acceptable to the US government.

How many times can the U.S. government fail Puerto Rico? Oh, let us count the ways. As if nearly 120 years of colonial rule and denial of the right of full citizenship to Puerto Ricans wasn't enough, we have plenty of examples in the last four months alone. Since Hurricane Maria devastated most of the island in September, the disaster recovery efforts have been abysmal. We all saw Donald Trump's pathetic visit to San Juan where he threw paper towels at residents and congratulated himself on the low death toll. This was preceded by attacking the mayor of San Juan and scolding Puerto Ricans for "wanting everything done for them."

Meanwhile, [FEMA](#) and local officials have been battling for months about the help that is required—with FEMA saying that the island isn't as cash poor or in debt as it claims. And, in yet another insulting move on Wednesday, federal officials decided

to [withhold](#) a loan to the island, essentially claiming that things aren't as bad as they seem.

A billion-dollar emergency loan approved by Congress to help [Puerto Rico deal with the effects of Hurricane Maria](#) has been temporarily withheld by federal officials who say the U.S. territory is not facing a cash shortage like it has repeatedly warned about in recent months.

Officials with the Federal Emergency Management Agency and the Treasury Department said in a letter to the director of the island's fiscal agency that Puerto Rico has had a central cash balance exceeding \$1.5 billion in the nearly four months since the Category 4 storm. Federal officials also noted the local government released documents in late December showing it had nearly \$7 billion available in cash. The letter was first published Wednesday by the newspaper [El Nuevo Dia](#).

It's unclear whether this is true or not. The Puerto Rican government (which has also made a complete mess of this disaster) has been in trouble for quite sometime. For the last several years it has claimed that the island is unable to pay its debt—which was largely [caused](#) by neglect in Washington and tax loopholes that privilege US businesses operating on the island while increasing poverty among residents. The US government has refused to forgive this debt and is now holding vital hurricane relief funds hostage which renders the island unable to cover money to pay companies for vital services like water and sewage.

Not only is the loan not being released, officials say they are creating a plan to monitor the island's finances and only release the money when they see that central cash balance has decreased to a certain level.

Puerto Rico Rep. Luis Vega Ramos called the decision by federal officials to withhold money a "rogue move." He said that while the lack of transparency and other issues within [Governor Ricardo Rossello's] administration has led to the situation, it remained unacceptable. [...]

"The administration of President Donald Trump, through FEMA, is extorting the people of Puerto Rico and our government so that it submits itself even further to the federal control board and new austerity measures," he said.

This sounds familiar, doesn't it? The US government abusing, exploiting and robbing a group of people of every vital resource and ounce of dignity. Then the powers that be put all kinds of harmful measures in place and refuse to help them—choosing instead to shame them and tell them to "pull themselves up by the bootstraps." As cruel as this all is, it's actually just another day in America.

So what happens next? Trump's government may think it's tough love (which is nothing short of a genocide) approach is going to save the federal government some cash but it's doing way more harm than good.

A study released Tuesday by economists including Nobel Prize winner Joseph Stiglitz found in part that prior to the hurricane, Puerto Rico needed to cancel 50 percent to 80 percent of its debt to regain economic stability.

"The debt restructuring will not be a sufficient but just a necessary condition for economic recovery," the study stated. "Puerto Rico needs more than just the restoration of debt sustainability: it needs a new economic growth strategy that replaces the old one that has clearly failed."

Instead of withholding funds and refusing to cancel Puerto Rico's debt, how about we actually help the island? Why is money so much more important than lives? Why is it that this country insists on marginalizing Puerto Ricans at every turn but especially during the time that they are suffering most? This is what happens when capitalism grows so out-of-control and people so greedy that nothing, including human beings, is more important than cash and profits.

Trump had the nerve to call Haiti, El Salvador and all the countries in Africa "shitholes." Here's a news flash for him: Here, in the so-called greatest country in the history of the world, people are dying unnecessarily from the ignorance, greed and cruel policies enacted by rich folks and billionaires. Puerto Ricans are suffering and dying because this government refuses to help them and is making their condition worse by the day. This is exactly what happens in the very places Trump maligned. Trump and his supporters would do well to turn attention inward instead of pointing fingers at supposed "shithole" countries. Because, the truth is that this country may not be all that far behind them.