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## Puerto Rico: Human rights concerns mount in absence of adequate emergency response

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GENEVA (30 October 2017) - Puerto Rico remains without an effective emergency response more than a month after Hurricane Maria devastated the island, a group of UN human rights experts\* has warned.

"The hurricane has aggravated the island's existing dire situation caused by debt and austerity measures," the experts noted, saying the situation remained "alarming" for the island's 3.5 million residents in US territory.

"Thousands of people are displaced, with homes destroyed, and without any relief in sight. More than 80 per cent of the population, or close to 2.8 million people, continue to live without electricity. Few hospitals are functioning. There are allegations that the water available - for those who have access to it - may be contaminated."

"With winter approaching, we call for a speedy and well-resourced emergency response that prioritizes the most vulnerable and at risk - children, older people, people with disabilities, women and homeless people."

The UN's Independent Expert on foreign debt and human rights, Juan Pablo Bohoslavsky, added: "Even before Hurricane Maria struck, Puerto Rico's human rights were already being massively undermined by the economic and financial crisis and austerity policies, affecting the rights to health, food, education, housing, water and social security."

The experts pointed out that nearly half the population of Puerto Rico were already living below the poverty line before Hurricane Maria struck.

The Special Rapporteur on the right to housing, Leilani Farha, added: "We can't fail to note the dissimilar urgency and priority given to the emergency response in Puerto Rico, compared to the US states affected by hurricanes in recent months."

"After a natural disaster, with around 90 thousand homes totally destroyed, people are at their most vulnerable. It's the obligation of all levels of government to act to protect them, and to ensure that lives can return to some normality quickly. People need safe and adequate homes – temporary and long-term – with electricity, clean drinking water and sanitation facilities" she stressed.

The Special Rapporteur on the right to food, Hilal Elver, added: "Hurricane Maria wiped out most of the island's crops. Banana and coffee - the Island's most valuable exports - were the hardest hit. The population is facing immediate food shortages but also long-term consequences from the destruction of the entire agricultural infrastructure."

The experts said rebuilding should be of a high enough standard to withstand future disasters.

"We call on the United States and Puerto Rican authorities to remove regulatory and financial barriers to reconstruction and recovery," they said. "All reconstruction efforts should be guided by international

reconstruction and recovery,” they said. “All reconstruction efforts should be guided by international human rights standards, ensuring that people can rebuild where they have lived and close to their communities. Reconstruction should aim to increase the resilience of Puerto Rico’s infrastructure, housing and hospitals against future natural disasters.”

They also stressed the need for debt relief for the island, which filed for bankruptcy in May 2017 under the Puerto Rico Oversight, Management and Economic Stability Act (PROMESA). A federal court in San Juan has begun hearings over the biggest public debt restructuring in US history.

Several UN experts had expressed concern in September 2016 at the crippling public debt level and its impact on economic and social rights, but have not received any substantial response from Washington, San Juan or the Financial Oversight and Management Board to their questions and concerns.

ENDS

\*The UN experts: **Leilani Farha**, Special Rapporteur on adequate housing, **Juan Pablo Bohoslavsky**, Independent Expert on foreign debt and human rights; **Hilal Elver**, Special Rapporteur on food, **Dainius Pūras**, Special Rapporteur on health; **Léo Heller**, Special Rapporteur on water and sanitation. **Catalina Devandas Aguilar**, Special Rapporteur on rights of persons with disabilities, **Cecilia Jimenez-Damary** Special Rapporteur on internally displaced persons, **Dubravka Šimonović**, Special Rapporteur on violence against women, **Obiora C. Okafor**, Independent Expert on human rights and international solidarity; **Baskut Tuncak**, Special Rapporteur on human rights and hazardous substances and wastes; **Saad Alfarargi**, Special Rapporteur on Right to Development.

The Independent Experts are part of what is known as the [Special Procedures](#) of the Human Rights Council. Special Procedures, the largest body of independent experts in the UN Human Rights system, is the general name of the Council’s independent fact-finding and monitoring mechanisms that address either specific country situations or thematic issues in all parts of the world. Special Procedures’ experts work on a voluntary basis; they are not UN staff and do not receive a salary for their work. They are independent from any government or organization and serve in their individual capacity.

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