



Photos by HEATHER HADDON/Herald News

For 16 flood survivors, a battered avocado tree at right served as life support as they clung to its branches while the water rose above the hamlet's roofs. The remote region still lacks running water and electrical service.

Dominicans hit hard by Hurricane Noel depend on lifeline with links to Paterson

ABOUT THE SERIES

Dominicans living in New Jersey have mounted an impressive effort to raise money and donations for the thousands displaced by Hurricane Noel, for whom makeshift shelters and desperation are daily realities. Herald News reporter Heather Haddon this week is reporting from the Dominican Republic on the damage from the storm and the relief efforts originating in North Jersey.

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By HEATHER HADDON
Herald News

PIEDRA BLANCA, DOMINICAN REPUBLIC — The water from Rio Maimon had risen to Severino Eusebio Mateo's chest before he could escape his bedroom.

The 51-year-old scrambled up to his roof. As the water rose, he clung to the branches of a nearby avocado tree to keep from being swept away.

For four hours, 15 others clung there with him. Maria Altagracia Nuñez, 80, held onto a branch of a nearby coconut tree until it gave way, and she was lost to the waters engulfed by the downpour of Hurricane Noel. Rescue officials found her body four kilometers downstream.

The floodwaters of Hurricane Noel that

swept people out of their homes three weeks ago have receded in Piedra Blanca, one of the Dominican towns most ravaged by the storm.

But nearly 700 residents remain refugees, forced to bounce between other people's homes and makeshift accommodations cobbled together on the local basketball court. Construction on replacement housing won't start for months, local authorities say. Running water has not returned, nor have the hundreds of cows or acres of vegetables that people in this lush agricultural sector depended on.

"It was unbelievable," said Freddy Almanzar, a Paterson doctor originally from Piedra Blanca who returned to deliver aid to

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Relief: Helping residents recover

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his hometown last weekend. "It's just terrible."

Piedra Blanca, a town of 23,500 wedged between two mountain chains, has few resources to spare. Aside from a cooperative bank and some informal shops, the local livelihood revolves around mining and agriculture. Both sectors are vulnerable to storms.

Late last month, Hurricane Noel hit the Dominican Republic, Haiti, Cuba and the Bahamas, causing millions of dollars in damage across the region. In the Dominican Republic, at least 85 people died as a result of flooding and structural collapses triggered by the storm. Hurricanes often hit this time of year, but the arrival of Noel at night took many by surprise.

"I was sleeping when I heard some bumps on the door," said Charo Vidal, a 32-year-old cashier and mother of three, who fled in her pajamas when the nearby river poured into her bedroom. "I've never been so scared in my life."

Ezequiel Nufiez, whose mother was one of 12 people here killed in the storm, choked back tears as she remembered the woman who loved to cook rice and beans and attend church.

"My mother was everything to me," she said.

After her own house was destroyed, Nufiez took up shelter in one of the small, subdivided cubicles thrown up in a municipal basketball court, where she now lives indefinitely with 45 other families.

Local officials say they are doing their best to respond to one of the worst disasters in years. Every day, local businesses, health officials and aid organizations arrive with drinking water and bleach to tackle the mud that fills people's homes and threatens to spread contagious diseases.

But with a third of the annual \$21 million municipal budget soaked up in a month of relief work, the local government says it

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JOSE JULIO PENA,
businessman in Piedra Blanca

can use all the help possible.

"We're starting at zero," said Dr. Carmen Garcia, the mayor of Piedra Blanca, while sitting in her sparse office on Tuesday. "This destroyed everything."

About 50 families dwell in *arriba*, or "up there," as people now call the semi-permanent complex.

"We hope to move soon," said Pasquela Gomez, 39, who shares the room with her eight children, one of whom who is blind and severely disabled.

Jose Julio Peña, a local businessman in Piedra Blanca with close ties to Dominicans in Paterson, helped collect boxes of clothes, underwear and other supplies for displaced residents. Last Wednesday, he arranged for all the men and boys to get haircuts.

"To have a shirt, to have food, it is important for these people," said Peña, estimating that the average monthly salary could barely cover the cost of a simple propane-powered stove.

By Friday, a container of goods collected by Almanzar, the Paterson doctor, should arrive in Piedra Blanca. Peña and other volunteers will distribute a sack of supplies to each person's house.

Vidal, the woman who fled in her pajamas, lost every piece of furniture and baby photo she owned. She tries to stay positive to calm her young children.

"I need to be there for them," said Vidal, wearing a pink blouse donated by one of her co-workers. "They depend on me."

— Heather Haddon's series on storm relief efforts continues on Saturday.



Since Hurricane Noel destroyed her home three weeks ago, Pasquela Gomez is staying in a municipal basketball court. Her youngest son, lying on a bed.

Anguish hits home

Hurricane Noel was the worst storm to strike the Dominican Republic in nearly a decade. In the town of Piedra Blanca, 12 people were killed and more than 700 homes were destroyed by the storm and the floodwaters that followed.



WENDI SEBASTIAN/Herald News