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A few things

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here you go.

PIEDRA BLANCA, Dominican Republic — The waters that swept people out of their homes and forced them hang by tree limbs to survive have finally receded in Piedra Blanca, one of the Dominican municipalities most raged by Hurricane Noel three weeks ago. But the desperate need for help continues.

Nearly 700 people have become refugees, forced to bounce between other people's homes and makeshift accommodations in a municipal basketball court. Construction on replacement houses won't start for months, according to local authorities. 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 from delivering aid to his home town on Monday. "It's just terrible."

Local officials say they are doing their best to respond one of the worst disasters in years for the centrally-located province. Everyday, health officials 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 municipal budget of \$21 million snapped up in a month of relief work, the local government says they 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."

Late last month, Hurricane Noel hit the Dominican Republic, Haiti, Cuba and the Bahamas, causing millions of dollars of damage across the region. In the Dominican Republic, at least 85 people died from flooding and structural collapses resulting from the Category 5 storm. Hurricanes often hit this time of year, but the arrival of Noel by night took people by surprise.

"I was sleeping when I heard some bumps on the door," said Charo Vidal, 32, who fled in her pajamas when the nearby river poured into her bedroom. "I've never been so scared in my life."

The water had risen to Severino Eusebio Mateo's chest before finally found the key to his bedroom door. The 31-year-old father of seven scrambled up to his roof, but as the water rose further, he had to cling to the branches of a nearby avocado tree to survive. For four hours, 15 other people hung with him.

María Altagracia Nuñez, 80, held onto a branch at a nearby coconut tree — until it gave way and she was lost to the engorged rivers.

Rescue officials found her body around four kilometers downstream.

"My mother was everything to me," said Ezeguiel Nuñez, chocking back tears as she remembered the 80-year-old woman, who loved to cook and attend church.

After her house was destroyed, Nuñez took up shelter in one of the

small, subdivided rooms thrown up in a municipal basketball court. About 50 families now 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 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 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 keeps going by thinking of her children's future.

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

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