

# Maria lashes US Virgin Islands as Puerto Rico prepares for impact

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Puerto Rico is already experiencing strong wind and rain as Hurricane Maria approaches

Hurricane Maria slammed into the US Virgin Islands Tuesday, lashing the archipelago with rain as Puerto Rico braced for the Category Five storm's expected landfall on Wednesday.

On St John Island, which was also battered by Hurricane Irma two weeks

ago, locals reported seeing trees dramatically swaying in swirling winds, with rain pouring "sideways."

Judi Buckley, former senator for St Croix Island, traveled to St John from her South Carolina home to help with the Irma relief effort—only to get caught up in Maria.

"Rain is coming through sideways and the trees are swaying," she told AFP.

"We have become the Irma relief hub and our brothers and sisters across the pond can't afford for us to be crippled," she said, referring to those on St Croix.

Maria's 160 mile (255 kilometer) per hour winds had already roared into the eastern Caribbean island of Dominica Tuesday, with official communications to the island completely cut off in the wake of the storm.

"We have lost all what money can buy and replace," Dominica's premier Roosevelt Skerrit posted on Facebook.

But amateur radio operators on the island, home to 72,000 people, have been able to get word out about Maria's impact—with some reporting downed trees and roofs of homes blown off.

Both a team of Trinidadian authorities and a Caribbean Disaster Emergency Management Agency team had to abort rescue and rehabilitation operations to Dominica due to continued intense winds. Both teams hoped to fly out Wednesday instead.

The US National Hurricane Center warned of a "potentially catastrophic" impact as Maria churned northwest towards the Virgin

Islands and Puerto Rico Tuesday—with Puerto Rico's Governor Ricardo Rossello describing it as "the worst storm of the last century."

US President Donald Trump vowed "help" to the island's residents on Twitter, writing "Puerto Rico being hit hard by new monster Hurricane. Be careful, our hearts are with you- will be there to help!"

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