

Sheet roofs: Puerto Rico reels 2 years after Hurricane Maria

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Two years after Hurricane Maria hit Puerto Rico, many roofs are still patched up with emergency blue sheeting

Sixto Marrero shivers every time the skies open in Puerto Rico.

The [roof](#) of his house was ripped off exactly two years ago by Hurricane Maria, and a tarpaulin sheet remains his only protection from the elements.

His home in the center of the capital San Juan is one of 30,000 that still have "blue roofs" as the awnings provided by US emergency aid agency FEMA are known.

Hurricane Maria—a category 4 storm—slammed in Puerto Rico, a US territory, on September 20, 2017, leaving much of the island flattened.

The death toll has been much disputed, with Washington rejecting the local official figure of 3,000 fatalities as too high.

But such arguments are of little interest to locals such as 71-year-old Marrero.

"I have depression," he told AFP. "There have been times when I have thought that it is not worth being alive. Two years on, I am still suffering from the hurricane."

Marrero's wooden two-story house had a zinc sheet roof that was almost entirely destroyed by the hurricane, and his living quarters are damp with water seepage.

"Every time it rains, the water enters, because there is no roof up there. We have to use buckets to collect the water. The electricity in the house was also damaged," said Marrero, who said he did not qualify for FEMA's aid program.



Sixto Marrero sits on the porch of his home in Puerto Rico, two years after its roof was ripped off by Hurricane Maria

'Maria left me marked'

About 13 kilometers (eight miles) away, in the coastal municipality of Catano, about 400 residences have blue sheets for roofs.

Mefhivoceth Santiago, who served in the US Army reserve, lost everything in the cyclone.

He received \$2,000 in aid assistance from FEMA, which he used to buy a stove, a refrigerator, a [washing machine](#) and other [household items](#).

"It is not easy, but thank God the raindrops do not fall on the bed," he said, adding that leaks affect other parts of the house.

"When they announced the hurricane (Dorian, which hit the Bahamas in early September) I felt very afraid.

"Now there is another one out there (Hurricane Jerry), I hope it doesn't come. Maria left me marked, and every time it rains, it reminds one of Maria," Santiago said, sitting in a hammock on the porch of his home.



Blue tarps given out by FEMA cover several roofs two years after Hurricane Maria hit Puerto Rico.

Meant to be used for just 30 days, 125,000 blue roof awnings were distributed by FEMA to the Puerto Rico government, which distributed them to residents who had to erect them themselves.

About 60,000 other sheet roofs were installed by the US army's engineer corps.

Government failure

For Marrero—who survives on a meagre pension—and many others, life under tarpaulin now looks permanent.

Many of the homes demolished by Hurricane Maria are in the poorest neighborhoods and in flood areas—making them exempt from help from official agencies.

Residents who rent or do not have proper property deeds to their homes also do not qualify.

The US National Hurricane Center described Maria as the third costliest hurricane in US history, and as the most destructive hurricane to hit Puerto Rico in modern times by far.



The blue tarp that was used to protect the roof damaged by Hurricane Maria two years ago is showing wear and tear in Catano, Puerto Rico

Packing winds of 155 miles (250 kilometers) per hour, it was just below category 5 strength when it hit, tracking diagonally across the island for several hours and causing huge storm surges, torrential rain and flooding.

Power was completely knocked out and took several months to restore.

Fernando Gil Ensenat, Puerto Rico's housing secretary, admits that the government's response to the destruction has been inadequate, and he pledges to improve the situation through further US aid programs.

However, in the middle of the current [hurricane](#) season, which continues

until the end of November, Gil admits that he can only offer some public shelters and "a lot of prayers that no other disaster of this kind happens."

"Honestly, to cover this up would be to hide the truth—it could be a disaster of great proportions regardless of whether the phenomenon is as big as Maria," he told AFP.

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