

Observations on the Federal Response to Maria in Puerto Rico

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Background:

Five days after Maria came ashore in Puerto Rico I was contacted (via a 3rd party) by a Fortune 500 company which operates a chemical plant in the area of Sabana Grande Puerto Rico. At that time, they had NO contact with their plant or it's nearly 200 employees. During my discussion with the corporate chief of security, it became clear the company had not anticipated the potential for and impact of a total loss of communications from Puerto Rico, which is what had occurred.

In 2005 I was serving in the Army and assigned to US First Army as the Executive Officer to LTG Russel Honore as we tracked Katrina's path across Florida and to it's the second landfall at the mouth of Mississippi River. As LTG Honore and the Forward Operating Command from what would become Joint Task Force Katrina made their way south from Atlanta to Camp Shelby Mississippi LTG Honore called via SAT phone and reported no communications for power south of south of Route 10 in Mississippi. Redundant communications had been the number 1 lesson Learned from Katrina and the first of many Katrina Lessons Learned which I saw had not been adopted for the response to Maria.

My observations are based on my over 20 years' experience and a lift time of observations in storm response and military support to civil authorities. I am a native of the Eastern Shore of Virginia and veteran of life under the threat of coastal storms. For my work as a key leader and part of the Command Group of JOINT TASK FORCE KATRINA, I received 4 decoration, assisted in compiling and contributed to the JTF-K lessons learned, The Commanders Testimony to Congress and the GAO. In his book **Survival: How a Culture of Preparedness Can Save You and Your Family from Disasters** – May 5, 2009, by [Lt. Gen. Russel Honoré \(U.S. Army Ret\)](#) (Author), [Ron Martz](#) (Author) LTG Honore (now retired) sites me as knowing more about the Katrina response than anyone alive. In my opinion and based on my experience and observations what I experienced in Puerto Rico was the antithesis of the lessons learned, regulations and doctrine developed after Katrina at such a huge cost in treasure and lives to the United States.

I arrived in San Juan Airport in the lead of a 3 person team from Atlanta's Hartfield Jackson Airport on Sept 30th, 2017. We departed Puerto Rico via corporate jet on Oct 10. My team included an Operations/Security Expert who is a certified IT professional, an EMT/Drone Operator and myself. Critical Observations from Maria. From San Juan, the team drove west for 120 miles to Mayaguez before seeing a working traffic light. The next day we drove south-east to Ponce via Sabana Grande. We eventually departed Puerto Rico from Aguadilla. I submit the following key points that must be addressed before the next CAT 3 or above storm strikes.

Key Observations:

1. Leadership/ Command and Control: On September 30th I observed almost no Federal Government support or semblance to an Incident Command Structure from San Juan to Mayaguez where I met with the FEMA incident director for "COE Mayaguez". The Director "Paul" was struggling to get information on his assigned in an environment where electronic communications were practically nonexistent. When I met him, he was picking up additional America Corps. Volunteers (I am not sure of their official status) and my understanding was these volunteers were assisting in the response effort usually by providing area assessments.

Assisting my client in interacting with Incident Command Structure was part of my charter. In the area of Sabana Grande, there was no ICS other than the local mayor and his team who were isolated, frustrated and had little tangible assistance. Sabana Grande fell under COE Mayaguez for support. I had spoken with and shared information the FEMA lead for COE Mayaguez and he struggled to get information from the locals. Citizens of Sabana Grande expressed to me repeatedly their feeling of abandonment by the "Government. There was no DOD presence other than then hospitals which were rumored to be full of bodies which the government was hiding and the occasional escort of fuel. (The hospital rumors seemed to stem from the DOD presence at the hospitals and the security protocols there which were preventing people from entering the building unescorted or to see family members.) There was no power or communications across most of the Island, long lines for fuel and the early and dwindling supplies of bottled water while rumors abounded that the municipal water was contaminated. They saw little happening. I did not see a military vehicle outside of San Juan until driving by the National Guard and FEMA compound in Mayaguez named "COE Mayaguez". The National Guard was not opening or operating Points of Distribution as they have traditionally done. The people of PR saw little outside support or efforts to come to their relief and what they did see did not seem to benefit them.

Local authorities were simply overwhelmed. On October 10th, there were still dead animal carcasses on major roads and debris filled the drainage systems. This became critical as flash floods continued around Mayaguez and there was nowhere for the water to drain. The carcasses and debris were contributing to the contamination of the water supplies which were running on generator power.

On or around October 4th, I met with the Mayor of Sabana Grande. The rumors of the water contamination were expanding and no bottled water was available in stores.

The Mayor handed myself and my local representative a list which he had copies made to distribute to local businesses. The list was of types of generators he needed to keep the water purification plant operating. I asked if he provided it to FEMA and received a scowl in response. He explained to me that the purification plant was operating, but could not keep up due to the reduced capacity as a result of generator power and the strain from increased contamination of the water supplies. The only other water coming into the city of 30,000 was a military pallet of

bottled water which was transported by him and armed escorts daily from Aguadilla. On at least one occasion there was an attempt to steal the pickup and its water. He was also requesting assistance to off load palletized water when and if a regular flow started from FEMA or the gvernemtn, since the city did not have an off road fork lift. We were able to come up with a plan using a local private business until another capability could be found.

4 days later the generators at the water plant failed. I attempted to assist the mayor in how to request assistance via the FEMA and DOD but the system just didn't seem to be in place.

In my opinion, the decision to not follow U.S. Army Doctrine for Civil Support Operations as outlined in Army Field Manual FM 3-28 (published in June 2010) was a critical failure. This JTF, in support of the Lead Federal Agency, would have had a Commander and provided a leadership presence to the people of Puerto Rico as well as provided qualified personnel to assess the potential critical infrastructure issues which swept Puerto Rico as demonstrated by the water plant in Sabana Grande. The US DOD could have easily provided the necessary generator support to maintain the water purification systems as well as water purification experts to assist in keeping potable water flowing.

A JTF Commander would have also provided the local and Federal authorities a mentor and problem solver to assist in identifying potential problems and solutions. During Maria, my experience was that local authorities were not getting assistance in identifying available capabilities and coaching in what to ask for in order to keep the situation from worsening. These people were still in shock 2 weeks later and needed help that the government did not provide.

2. Communications: Communications was the single largest response failure. When you can't communicate it's a crisis and there were almost no communications on Puerto Rico two weeks after the storm. Temporary communications networks would have assisted in assessing this issue and provided information to the people as well as enabled problem solving and collaboration. Following Katrina, the private sector companies were installed temporary cell towers which I thought were part of the response package for contemporary disasters. We did not see any of these in PR. If they had been deployed it would have likely allowed the sharing of information such as the Ponce Airport, which was believed closed by everyone CONUS was open and had been since 2 days after the storm. The mayor of Ponce even sent out a Press Release trying to inform authorities that the airport was open. This occurred on October 5th.
3. Diesel Fuel and Cash Economy: During my meeting with FEMA on October 1st, I learned that "there was no diesel fuel" and they were struggling to keep the hospital generators running. However 2 days later I witnessed a delivery of 10,000 gallons of diesel to a private company. When I asked a local manager where the fuel came from, I learned that the fuel distributors were delivering to their paying customers (likely cash since cash was now the only currency accepted on PR) and that they knew the local government would not pay them. Gasoline lines persisted, but I found diesel to be readily available if you could pay or had good credit which the government of PR has neither. FEMA failed to understand the issue and could have easily purchased fuel without the threat seizing it and further alienating the local businesses. The

environment called for flexibility in purchasing and cash. Credit cards were of no use on the island because of the loss of connectivity.

4. National Guard Hotel Survey Team: On October 9th I flagged down a National Guard vehicle near our hotel in Lejas. This was the first National Guard vehicle I had seen in the area away from the main highway or urban areas. I suspected they were conducting health and welfare assessments. The Sergeant First Class in charge informed me that they were assessing hotel capacity for housing FEMA and other government personnel. He also shared with me his disappointment that the National Guard was not being used in its traditional roles of establishing distribution points or assessing local conditions. He described a “FOB Mentality” working directly for FEMA. He stated this was different than all of his other storm response experiences on Puerto Rico. I gave him recommendations for POD sites in and around Sabana Grande and the surrounding areas and shared out observations including contact info for the local mayor’s assistants. He stated that they were hoping to establish POD’s soon.
5. FEMA Delays Deploying Personnel: FEMA personnel I spoke with upon my arrival in Puerto Rico informed me that they were waiting weeks to fly from Atlanta to Puerto Rico. One FEMA leader had managed to be manifested on an air force aircraft carrying equipment out of Dobbins ARB, in Atlanta after waiting a week for a flight. I heard repeated reports of FEMA’s inability to get people into Puerto Rico.

I had booked my teams tickets 4 days before travelling on Delta Airlines for \$1,800 and the flight was just over half full. All FEMA staff were going in to San Juan to await assignment or transportation for days and some said up to a week.

6. The Ponce Airport: Ponce is the major city on the south side of Puerto Rico. Initially following Maria’s landfall access to Ponce was blocked across the interior of the island. The status of the major airport in Ponce was a mystery with reports of extensive damage. My contacts at Delta airlines were not sure of the status of the airport in Ponce as late as September 28th.

After my meeting with the mayor of Sabana Grande around October 4th, it was clear that water was becoming the new top commodity in Puerto Rico. My client asked me via satellite phone what humanitarian relief supplies they could send down via the corporate jet for their employees. My answer was water. We planned to send in as much bottled water as possible with the corporate jet and attempt to utilize the Ponce airport. The aircrew was not sure if they could land at Ponce until hours before the flight because of the lack of information and reports in Florida that the Ponce airport was not operational.

Around the 5th of October, my team and I with a local guide drove to Ponce to meet the aircraft. Storm damage was readily visible, including the loss of historic ancient trees. Traffic lights were out and police were directing traffic where ever possible. However, we found a very operational airport including a U.S. Marine Air Traffic Control and USAF Logistics Team, but very little air traffic. I asked for the airport manager who was attempting to communicate with 2 young women who didn’t speak Spanish. They were with FEMA and supporting the Mayor of Ponce

who had asked them to come to the airport to find out the status and what type of aircraft could be supported. The Mayor was drafting a letter or fax on the status in an effort to tell the outside world that the airport was open. The airport manager said the airport had been fully operational except for the radar 2 days after the storm but all aircraft were being controlled via San Juan. I assisted the 2 young ladies, who were not being taken very seriously in my opinion in getting the information for the mayor. The 2 FEMA representatives had no background and little understanding of aircraft or airport operations. The airport could receive military aircraft up to C 17 I believe and civilian aircraft up to 747. There were no aircraft there that I recall with the although a military flight had dropped supplies earlier in the day.