International Medical Corps

SITUATION UPDATE

Puerto Rico Floods
Situation Report #3
May 23, 2024

Rural communities in low-lying areas along riverbeds experenced unexpected and devastating flash floods.

FAST FACTS

- International Medical Corps' team visited six municipalities in response to severe flooding that inundated north, west and central regions of Puerto Rico on May 10.
- In the municipality of San Sebastian, residents experienced four feet of flooding in their homes—worse than they experienced during Hurricane Maria.
- The National Weather Service predicts above-average rainfall in Puerto Rico over the next two weeks, and has urged residents to review their flood plans and prepare for the rain.
- Persistently high rates of poverty, food insecurity, and chronic illnesses have been exacerbated by flooding in remote, rural regions of the island.

On May 10, mostly rural mountainous communities in the north, west and central regions of Puerto Rico were inundated by torrential rain that caused severe flash flooding and landslides, and prompted the governor to declare of a state of emergency in approximately one-third of the island's 78 municipalities. Emergency response and preparedness actions are urgently needed, with predictions of above-normal rainfall over the next two weeks. The National Weather Service and has advised that, due to the recent flooding, "everyone should be reviewing their wet period or flooding plans and take any precautions before the rains arrive."[1]

From May 15–20, International Medical Corps' team visited the rural flood-impacted areas in the north, central and western municipalities of Camuy, Ciales, Lares Naranjito, Mayaguez, Morovis, Orocovis, San Sebastian, Toa Baja and Yauco to assess immediate needs, distribute emergency supplies, and coordinate with local health center partners. Rapid assessments have shown that health centers and communities across all affected regions are facing common persistent challenges, particularly in the face of high rates of poverty. Challenges include overwhelmed and interrupted water-distribution systems, lack of potable water, lack of supplies and resources to support patient managing their chronic illnesses at home, exacerbated food insecurity and increased risks for the spread of communicable diseases. Health centers shared serious concerns about the potential rise in cases of dengue, leptospirosis and other water-borne diseases, indicating that there is a need for community-based training for residents on how to promote hygiene and prevent infection during and after flooding events. In rural Lares, health centers reported that they were already dealing with interrupted water access prior to the floods—problems that are now exacerbated, as facilities in the mountains rely on water pumps that are easily disrupted by power outages that take them offline for extended periods of time. Interruptions in potable water distribution is also impeding residents from cleaning their flood-soaked homes.

In many communities in low-lying areas along riverbeds that are prone to flooding, residents shared stories of how the water rapidly rushed into their homes without warning and rose as high as four feet—higher than the flooding experienced during the devastation of Hurricane Maria more than six years ago. Some residents had to climb onto their roofs to await rescue, and one resident stated that he was alive after the floods only because his neighbors helped him escape when water pressure from the floods sealed his front door shut. Unfortunately, not everyone was as lucky in San Sebastian, where a man died after being swept away by a surging river when homes were inundated by flash flooding.

The residents of San Sebastian described the mental health toll from experiencing the flash floods and living in a flood-prone area. Some community members said that because flash floods happen so suddenly and without warning, they feel unable to properly prepare for them, causing significant stress and anxiety. Residents indicated that they wanted to move out of their homes after the flooding, because they felt that they didn't have the resources to respond and recover from a future flooding event. Health center staff said that though they have emergency preparedness training at the facility level,

[1] https://stthomassource.com/content/2024/05/16/unsettled-weather-possible-across-usvi-and-puerto-rico-beginning-next-week/

there is a significant gap in emergency preparedness knowledge and resources at the community level, which causes residents to feel panic and helplessness when disasters strike.

One health facility in Lares is located in a remote region that lacks cell and internet services, serves a catchment population with the highest illiteracy rate in Puerto Rico and has a significant number of patients with vision impairments. For those reasons, the facility depends on a radio communication system. The recent flooding demonstrated a need to strengthen communication between staff and patients, upgrade eight-year-old equipment that is now unreliable and/or damaged, and improve emergency management plans so the facility can remain connected with its community in future emergencies.

International Medical Corps Response

While performing assessments, International Medical Corps met with key health center partners to learn about urgent needs and distribute emergency response supplies that will helps them support vulnerable community members within their catchment areas.

We have distributed 80 personal-use water filtration and purification supplies, 75 12x16 tarpaulins, 35 large first-aid kits and 140 $50 food vouchers to six health center organizations.

Based on information gathered from the assessment, International Medical is working with these organizations to procure and distribute emergency supplies that meet their immediate needs. This will include individual hygiene kits, wound care kits, foldable beds for health center staff to sleep overnight in their facilities, solar lamps, emergency medical bags, diapers and wipes for infants, small ice coolers and ice packs for diabetes patients to store their insulin at home, and mosquito repellent to prevent further spread of dengue.

In collaboration with health center partners, we have identified other critical supply needs and opportunities for high-impact program interventions. With additional resources, International Medical Corps would be able to expand its work to support recovery efforts that are directly linked to strengthening communities' resiliency for the increased rainfall expected, as well as what is being anticipated to be one of the worst hurricane seasons on record.

International Medical Corps staff members distribute first-aid kits and other supplies to health centers in western Puerto Rico.

We would equip health centers operating in areas without cell or internet service with working radios and/or satellite phones; resupply facilities with needed medical supplies and equipment (including portable respiratory therapy machines); support their improvement of back-up water and sanitation systems; support efforts to leverage solar-generated backup power options; ensure that facilities have cots, pillows, blankets, and other items that support staff staying overnight in facilities to ensure continuity of operations in the even of an emergency; and donate more food vouchers for the elderly and chronically ill patients facing deteriorating food insecurities.

International Medical Corps will work closely with health partners to design and implement programming that teaches community members to be more prepared for emergencies at a household level, including utilizing a train-the-trainer approach to ensure that local community members and health center staff can sustainably carry on this effort in the future. We will implement skills-based health center emergency management training for health workers to strengthen the resilience of local healthcare in the face of increased frequency and intensity of destructive weather events so they can remain operational, meet urgent health needs and help keep their communities healthy as they recover.