

Hurricane Maria slams into Puerto Rico with 155-mph winds, sending thousands to shelters

Hurricane Maria arrives in San Juan, Puerto Rico.

Thousands of people are staying in shelters across the country.

By **Molly Hennessy-Fiske***Contact Reporter*

Hurricane Maria made landfall in Puerto Rico early Wednesday, barreling north across the center of the island with powerful winds and flooding that were expected to destroy homes and leave thousands without power.



Maria arrived with winds of 155 mph, just 2 mph short of Category 5 status, near the southern city of Yabucoa, according to the National Hurricane Center.

First responders were not expected to help right away: officials had said they planned to head indoors when winds reached 50 mph. In Old San Juan, the

wind howled, shaking high-rise buildings as it drove white sheets of rain down empty streets.

In San Juan, some shelters were already suffering storm damage Wednesday morning. Some of the more than 500 people sheltering at Roberto Clemente Coliseum posted video on Twitter showing doors snapping open even as guards tried to hold them closed and evacuees moving cots due to leaks in the roof.

Maria became the first Category 4 hurricane in nearly 80 years to hit the U.S. territory, home to 3.4 million people. Authorities had urged residents to leave their homes for 500 emergency shelters, and thousands of listened.

"As of 5 a.m. we count 11,229 refugees and 580 pets," the island's governor, Ricardo Rosselló, tweeted. "Communications systems will be interrupted at any time. Keep calm. Be prudent during the impact."

Migdalia Caratini, a lawyer who lives east of San Juan, rented a room at the Sheraton in Old San Juan to weather the storm. Staff barricaded doors with lumber and sandbags, activated a generator to keep electricity running on the main floor once it went out in the rest of the nine-story building and played hurricane coverage on a big-screen television as owners walked evacuated dogs.

"The big thing is not the wind and the rain — it's the aftermath," said Caratini, whose house is near the beach.

She worried about those living in the center of the country, where many homes are wood with metal, zinc roofs that were likely to be ripped apart by the hurricane.

The country has been struggling economically, and leaders had planned to reduce public workers' hours, shifting money from local to federal coffers,

Caratini said. She hopes those changes get suspended, at least immediately after the storm.

“They’re going to have to restructure. Puerto Rico isn’t going to be the same. It’s going to be before Maria and after Maria,” she said.

Others at the hotel had evacuated from other Caribbean islands where they had already survived Hurricane Irma earlier this month.

“This is better than the last one,” said Ken Wild, 63, an archaeologist with the National Parks Service who hid in his hillside basement on the Virgin Island of St. John during Irma only to see the windows blow out. He survived, along with his Doberman, Anabell, and so did his boat.

But he didn’t think the boat would survive Maria, which pummeled the Virgin Islands on Tuesday night.

In Puerto Rico, conditions were expected to worsen Wednesday morning, when the storm's eye wall arrived with its strongest winds on the island's east coast. Storm surges of 6 to 9 feet were expected. That could lead to flash flooding, which Rosselló has said often is the top cause of death following such a storm.

The Puerto Rico Convention Center in San Juan — which was still housing Hurricane Irma evacuees from other Caribbean islands — was preparing to accept thousands more after Maria.

Marek Tipton, who works for an Indiana-based orthopedic manufacturing company, had traveled to San Juan on business when the storm struck. His hotel room had two balconies and once the storm arrived early Wednesday, it flooded. He spent the early morning sleeping in a downstairs lobby, worried about Puerto Rican colleagues sheltering in their homes. He hoped they could reach the company's plant in the city of Guaynabo, about 10 miles south of San Juan, which likely still had power and an Internet connection.

"One woman in Guaynabo was pinging me throughout the night and said the house was holding, but I just lost contact," said Tipton, 54, after he moved to an interior room on a lower floor Tuesday.

Kathy Teague evacuated to San Juan Monday with their dog, Bella. Teague's husband works for the National Parks Service in St. John and stayed to work. She worried about him Wednesday as winds howled outside the hotel in San Juan. She had lost her phone during Hurricane Irma, and didn't have a way to check on him.

"He said if it got too bad there they'd ship him here. But now we're getting hit," Teague said.

She was hoping to make it to the U.S. after the storm, to join relatives. Her children live in Kentucky and Michigan, her sister in coastal Virginia, which she was hoping to avoid: "I don't want to experience Maria a second time.

UPDATES:

8:45 a.m. Some shelters in San Juan sustaining storm damage because the storm is so strong.

This article was originally published at 6:15 p.m.