

10-06-1985 Puerto Rico – Francisco Diaz-Melendez – LEO Bridge Collapse Storm Flood



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<https://www.odmp.org/officer/4067-sergeant-francisco-diaz-melendez>



Bio & Incident Details

Age: 39

Tour: Not available

Badge # Not available

Cause: Automobile crash

Sergeant

Francisco Diaz-Melendez

Puerto Rico Police Department, Puerto Rico

End of Watch: Sunday, October 6, 1985

Policeman Homero Ortiz-Martinez, Policeman Herminio Lopez-Pilar, and Sergeant Francisco Diaz-Melendez, drowned when their patrol car fell through a broken bridge into a swollen river during Tropical Storm Isabel.

The officers were responding to a distress call while driving along PR-52 Luis A. Ferre Expressway. When they arrived at marker 78.1 they did not realize the bridge had collapsed completely, and their vehicle fell into the Coamo River along with other vehicles. It was concluded that heavy rains caused the bridge to collapse and poor visibility obscured the missing portion of the bridge.

Policeman Pedro Burgos-Lacourt drowned the following day while working on efforts to recover the patrol car from the river.

An avalanche of mud swept away a hillside community...

<http://www.upi.com/Archives/1985/10/07/An-avalanche-of-mud-swept-away-a-hillside-community/3209497505600/>

Oct. 7, 1985 By LUIS PENCHI

PONCE, Puerto Rico -- An avalanche of mud swept away a hillside community before dawn Monday in southern Puerto Rico, burying at least 150 people as they slept, authorities said. Most were feared dead in their crushed houses.

Police said 275 houses were crushed in the landslide on a hill in the Mameyes Portones area, but it was not known how many residents were able to escape.

Rescue workers found 24 bodies and rescued an unknown number of injured.

Gov. Rafael Hernandez Colon, speaking at the disaster site in the city of Ponce, said between 150 and 200 people were trapped beneath the tons of loosened mud and rubble that collapsed at 3 a.m. Monday.

'The possibilities of rescuing people alive from the houses buried in Mameyes are extremely unlikely,' Hernandez Colon said Monday night. 'That type of soil does not allow air pockets like those that occur when concrete collapses.'

At least 36 other people were killed around the island late Sunday and early Monday by landslides and floods set off by heavy rains that began Saturday. Others were feared swept off washed out bridges and highways in their cars.

Most of the deaths occurred in or near Ponce, about 45 miles southwest of San Juan.

The Red Cross said 4,000 people were in temporary shelters around the island of 3.2 million people. Hernandez Colon declared a state of emergency and mobilized 300 National Guardsmen to work through the night.

If the death toll of 200 in Mameyes is confirmed, the flooding would be the worst disaster to hit Puerto Rico since Hurricane San Cipriano in September 1932, which killed 225 people.

National Guard members rescued two children ages 7 and 9 at 6:30 p.m. A third person was heard calling for help but rescue workers were prevented from reaching him by the darkness and continuing rains.

'Many people were buried as they slept, judging by the way they were dressed,' police agent Jose Luis Sanchez said. 'But others apparently realized what was happening and tried to escape.'

Relief workers said the children were in stable condition although they had been completely buried by mud and rubble.

'There are dead people who we can't take out because there is too much water,' National Guard Sgt. Fernando Romagosa said.

Hernandez Colon told reporters at the site, 'It is almost impossible that anybody is alive' under the mudslide. 'Despite the difficulty, the National Guard units will continue to try to rescue the 150-200 believed to be buried.'

Several major highways and bridges were washed out, hampering communications and isolating some towns.

National Guard Col. Gilberto Moreno described the rains, which began Saturday, as the worst since 1970.

Dozens of people died Sunday night and early Monday when their cars were swept away or plunged down embankments where bridges or highways had been washed out.

Among the dead in Mamayas were four brothers. An unknown number of injured were transported to hospitals.

Besides the Mameyes victims, three children, a baby, and their mother, were crushed when a wall in their house in Ponce collapsed under the heavy rains. The bodies of three police officers were found inside their crushed car beneath a collapsed bridge over the Coamo River.

In the southern town of Santa Isabel, at least nine others drowned or were crushed. One person drowned when his car fell into a river and a second person was missing from the car, police said.

Other bodies were found in the towns of Aibonito, Toro Negro, and Cidra. In Toa Baja, a town outside San Juan, dozens of families were evacuated early Monday when the Plata River overflowed. 'It's the worst flooding we've ever had,' Mayor Victor Soto said.

In the west, Mayaguez Mayor Benjamin Coleaguez ordered the town's sports arena converted into a shelter for hundreds of families forced to flee their homes.

Police Superintendent Andres Garcias Arache ordered all police to report to the nearest accessible headquarters.

Hernandez Colon gave government employees the day off, except for those who could help with the emergency. Education Secretary Awilda Aponte Roque ordered public schools closed so they could be used as shelters for evacuees. Many private schools also closed.

55 IN PUERTO RICO DIE IN LANDSLIDES AND FLASH FLOODS

<http://www.nytimes.com/1985/10/08/world/55-in-puerto-rico-die-in-landslides-and-flash-floods.html?mcubz=2>
October 8, 1985 By The Associated Press

PONCE, P.R., Oct. 7— A mud slide buried dozens of people in a hillside shantytown and flash floods surged through another community of shacks as heavy rains pounded the island today. The police said that at least 55 people were killed. By nightfall, there were 47 bodies at the regional morgue. The police said other bodies would be kept in refrigerated vans until roads were cleared.

Dozens of bridges were washed out, most major highways were flooded, hundreds of people were left homeless and telephone service was disrupted throughout much of the island. Rain was expected to continue through Tuesday in the west. #200 Homes Are Buried Luis Martinez, a spokesman for the police in this southern industrial city of 190,000 people, said 30 people died beneath mud and debris in the Mameyes neighborhood, one of several hillside communities of wood-and-tin shacks. He said about 200 homes in Mameyes were buried by the predawn landslide.

The spokesman initially said that as many as 100 people were feared dead at Mameyes, but municipal officials said most of the estimated 2,000 residents of the impoverished neighborhood had fled before the landslide occurred. [However, Gov. Rafael Hernandez Colon, speaking at the disaster site in the city of Ponce Monday night, estimated that 150 to 200 people were trapped beneath the loosened mud and rubble, United Press International reported. [In addition to the 30 killed in Mameyes, at least 46 persons were reported dead elsewhere on the island and scores of others were reported missing, Reuters reported.

A National Guard general, Alfredo Jose Mora, estimated that the death toll island-wide could go as high as 270, which would surpass the toll of 225 who were lost in a hurricane in September 1932, the news service reported.] #12 Die in Shantytown Twelve people drowned in a shantytown between Tuque Beach on the Caribbean Sea and the Jewel River, which flooded in the early morning, said Edgardo Delgado, southern region district attorney.

Civil defense and government officials said that because many areas could not be reached by telephone, they were unable to estimate the damage or the number of people left homeless.

Governor Hernandez Colon, saying, "It is necessary to protect life and property in this time of extreme concern," declared a state of emergency late today and activated the National Guard across the island. The National Weather Service said a tropical front that began moving slowly across the 100-mile-long island on Friday dumped as much as seven inches of rain in a single 10-hour period early today in some southern and central areas. Dennis Henize of the Weather Service office in Coral Gables, Fla., said the system might well develop into a tropical depression or tropical storm.

At 6:30 this evening the storm was generating gale-force winds of 39 miles an hour. It was northeast of Hispaniola, the island shared by Haiti and the Dominican Republic, about 600 miles east-southeast of Miami. The system was moving west-northwest at 10 miles an hour and was expected to drench South Florida with rain, possibly by Wednesday, if it continued on that track. [The Red Cross was quoted by the U.P.I. as saying that 4,000 people were being cared for in temporary shelters on the island.] "It was horrible," Jose Santiago, a boy in his teens, said of the shantytown flooding near the Jewel River. "The water came through and it took my father, my mother, my four brothers and my niece."

Belen Collazo said he had tried to carry his three small children from the waters that churned through their tiny home.

"I dropped one of them and he disappeared," Mr. Collazo said, adding that his 7-year-old son, Julio Angel, had drowned.

A mother and her three children died in a landslide in the Ferran section of Ponce, the police said. They identified them as Margarita Cruz and her children, Mario Javier Santiago, 7; Juan Carlos, 6, and Omar Antonio, 2. Rescue workers revived a 9-month-old boy, Julio Cesar, who was hospitalized. #3 Police Officers Drowned Mr. Delgado said three people died in a landslide in the Marrueno area of Ponce. A 6-year-old boy, Luis Martinez Garcia, drowned in the Matilde neighborhood.

There were two drowning victims in the southwestern city of Santa Isabel and three police officers perished when their car plunged into a flooded ditch near the southern city of Coamo, the authorities said.

Officials also speculated that the rains were behind the death of a 26-year-old motorist who lost control of his car and smashed into a tree in the southern town of Patillas.

The authorities said at least 12 people were reported missing in other cities, including three in Caguas, 17 miles south of San Juan.

Coast Guard Rescue Missions

The Coast Guard called in off-duty personnel and began flying rescue missions at 2 A.M. with its two Puerto Rico-based helicopters, a Coast Guard spokesman, Steve Eddy, reported. He said they participated in at least nine rescues, including lifting 16 people off a bluff on the island's western tip just before it was flooded.

Dario Hernandez Torres, the Director of Transportation, said 36 highways and at least six bridges were closed by flooding or damage. Most flooding was in the southeastern section, but highways were also closed in Humacao on the east coast and Arecibo on the northwest coast.

Caguas, about 20 miles south of San Juan, was also flooded.

Miguel D. Lausell, the president of the Puerto Rico Telephone Company, said flooding caused an estimated \$500,000 damage to telephone equipment.

In Juana Dias, a town of about 30,000 people near the southeast coast, Mayor Angel Leon Martinez said most homes were without water or power.

Police Lieut. Gustavo Machado said farms and rural communities north of Juana Dias had neither communications nor usable roads. He said damage to livestock and crops in the area would probably be at least \$1 million.