Power outage throws entire island of Puerto Rico into the dark

San Juan, April 19 (RHC)-- An island-wide blackout hit Puerto Rico on Wednesday as the U.S. colony struggles to repair an increasingly unstable power grid nearly seven months after Hurricane Maria. Officials said it could take up to 36 hours to fully restore power to more than 1.4 million customers as outrage grew across the island about the state of Puerto Rico's Electric Power Authority. It is the second major outage in less than a week, with the previous one affecting some 840,000 customers.

Several large power outages have hit Puerto Rico in recent months, but Wednesday was the first time since the Category 4 storm struck on September 20th that the U.S. territory has experienced a full island-wide blackout. It snarled traffic across the island, interrupted classes and work and forced dozens of businesses to temporarily close, including the island's largest mall and popular tourist attractions like a 16th-century fort in the historic part of Puerto Rico's capital.

Backup generators roared to life at the island's largest public hospital and at its main international airport, where officials reported no cancellations or delays. Meanwhile, the power company said its own customer service center was out of service and asked people to go online or use the phone.

Power company spokeswoman Yohari Molina told The Associated Press that crews were investigating what caused the blackout, saying she had no other details. Officials said restoring power to hospitals,

airports, banking centers and water pumping systems was their priority. Following that would be businesses and then homes.

Angel Figueroa, president of a union that represents power company workers in Puerto Rico, told reporters that it appears a failure caused the entire electrical grid to shut down to protect itself. He said the union is investigating why a breaker at a main power station in the island's southern region did not function when the outage occurred. He noted it was the same problem that caused a 2016 power outage that affected the entire island.

The new blackout occurred as Puerto Rico legislators debate a bill that would privatize the island's power company, which is $14 billion in debt and relies on infrastructure nearly three times older than the industry average.

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