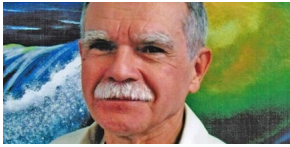


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One month after Hurricane Maria devastated Puerto Rico, we hear from longtime Puerto Rican independence activist Oscar López Rivera, who was released in May and is now in San Juan to visit with community members affected by Hurricane Maria. Until earlier this year, Rivera had been in federal prison for 35 years—much of the time in solitary confinement—after he was convicted on federal charges of opposing U.S. authority over the island by force. President Obama commuted his sentence in January.

JUAN GONZÁLEZ: We continue our coverage of Puerto Rico, one month after Hurricane Maria, as we turn to longtime Puerto Rican independence activist Oscar López Rivera, speaking last week in Puerto Rico. Until earlier this year, he had been in federal prison for 35 years—much of the time in solitary confinement—after he was convicted on federal charges of opposing U.S. authority over the island by force. President Obama commuted his sentence in January, and he was finally released in May.

AMY GOODMAN: This is Oscar López Rivera in the neighborhood of Las Monjas in San Juan. He was busy visiting with community members affected by Hurricane Maria. He spoke with reporter Nicole Salazar while riding in the back of a van.

OSCAR LÓPEZ RIVERA: The overwhelming majority of Puerto Rico is completely, completely alienated from the political structure. Colonialism is really, really strong and alive in Puerto Rico. And the politicians have taken full advantage of that. We have a debt of \$74 billion, caused primarily by the system and the political structure that exists in Puerto Rico.

So, for me, it has been very—a very devastating experience, primarily because one of the first things that I noticed was gentrification. We can anticipate that a lot of communities, including this one here, will be displaced once it is beautified, embellished, in the end, and probably gentrified. And this is very close to the ocean. It's a community with a lot of potential. And once they can wipe out the residents, then they can do whatever they feel like doing here. But we can

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see it in Ponce de León with Ciudadela, where we can see the buildings, where we can see the condominiums, we can see by Ocean Park, we can see every part of Puerto Rico. Every part of Puerto Rico along the ocean, we can see gentrification taking place. And Vieques and Culebra are probably the biggest targets right now.

So, gentrification means the displacement of Puerto Rico, the displacement of the working class in Puerto Rico, and, at the same time, foreigners coming into Puerto Rico, especially because the foreigners who invest in Puerto Rico are having access to incentives that we don't have access to. So if I buy a house tomorrow, I will have to pay taxes on my house. But if a multimillionaire buys a condominium for \$1.5 million or \$2 million, he will not have to pay any taxes for 25 or 30 years. So, that's the difference in terms of advantages and disadvantages. And that's the Puerto Rico that I have found, a Puerto Rico with a very, very high unemployment rate and a Puerto Rico that seems to be in a desperate state, especially after the hurricane.

NICOLE SALAZAR: In a moment of crisis like this, a lot of times you see the financial sector moving in, people taking advantage. What are your sort of main concerns right now, given the sort of desperate situation Puerto Rico is in?

OSCAR LÓPEZ RIVERA: Well, the financial institutions are going to move in. You know, they will invest. They will buy out, because the property is real cheap right now. A lot of Puerto Ricans are moving out. I am surprised at the number of Puerto Ricans that are moving out of Puerto Rico still. I thought that, by now, the immigration of Puerto Ricans had decreased a little bit. But, no, with a hurricane, it has increased even more. So, I see the financial institutions, especially the hedge funds, moving into Puerto Rico with all the—with all the force, knowing that their investments towards the future are going to be multiplied or probably elevated to quantities beyond any notion of how capital works.

NICOLE SALAZAR: Can you respond to Donald Trump and the U.S. sort of response to the island, the political response?

OSCAR LÓPEZ RIVERA: I think that it's reflective of the colonizer and how the colonizer treats the colonized. He has no sense of respect for Puerto Rico. He has demonstrated it clearly already by doing what he's done. It is shameful for me to see a president tossing things to people who are suffering so much as Puerto Ricans are.

Besides that, the way that they came in with FEMA and Homeland Security really reflects—really reflects what colonialism is to Puerto Ricans. We can see—we can see how FEMA can come into Puerto Rico and dictate to Puerto Ricans, "Hey, this is what you have to do, this is what you have to do," and be totally disrespectful. The same with Homeland Security. Homeland Security comes in, and they're bearing arms. It's almost incredible how they treat people, how they have been dealing with our situation in Puerto Rico. Rather than being sensitive and respectful of the people, they have been totally disrespectful of the people. They're treating us not like citizens, but they're treating us like animals.

And I think—I think that once we see the results, because we have not seen the results from the medical side of Puerto Rico—once we see the results, we see that we are being killed—we

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are being killed by neglect. So, I think that it reflects the response of Donald Trump and the U.S. government to the crisis in Puerto Rico.

NICOLE SALAZAR: Right now, a majority of the Puerto Rican population, according to polls, prefers statehood. What do you sort of see as the political trajectory that Puerto Rico is on and where you'd like it to go?

OSCAR LÓPEZ RIVERA: Well, I believe, as a Puerto Rican, that the majority of Puerto Ricans want to be Puerto Ricans. Once we become annexed to the United States or by the United States, that we will lose our national identity. I can look at Hawaii as an example of people who lose, the Natives who lose their identity. I can look into the Native American reservations and see people who lose their national identity, their culture, their language, their land. And that's what's going to happen to Puerto Ricans here.

I think that there are times—there are times when people think, “Well, oh, we are blessed with the relationship with the United States.” But that is not the—the end result will not be that, we can see. I guarantee you—I can guarantee you this much. If Puerto Rico becomes similar to Hawaii—well, the Hawaiian Native population is about 9 percent. And if we go to the prisons, the overwhelming majority of the prisoners are the Natives. The same thing with Alaska. So I can anticipate that Puerto Ricans will not be better off by the annexation of the United States of Puerto Rico. I also know for a fact that once any nation or any people lose their identity, their culture, their language, their way of life, their lifestyles, that they are a little dehumanized. So, you know, this is the reality that we are facing as Puerto Ricans. I see a big, big, big problem if Puerto Rico is to be annexed.

But I believe—I believe that the overwhelming majority of Puerto Rico wants to be Puerto Ricans. I have been in five different states in the United States, and I have found young Puerto Ricans in the states who really love Puerto Rico, who really want to do something for Puerto Rico. And for me, Puerto Rico has to be the promised land of all Puerto Ricans, whether we are in the United States or wherever we are at. But this has to be the promised land. Annexation will never be the answer.

AMY GOODMAN: That's longtime Puerto Rican independent activist Oscar López Rivera speaking last week in Puerto Rico. Until earlier this year, he had been in federal prison in the U.S. for 35 years, much of that time in solitary confinement, after convicted on federal charges of opposing U.S. authority over the island by force. President Obama commuted his sentence in January, finally released in May. Special thanks to reporter Nicole Salazar of Divided Films and Ed Mariota, who recorded that footage while filming in Puerto Rico for their series, *America Uprising*, which is airing on Refinery29.