

Heavy rains

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Page : 35

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It rained and rained and rained as if it would never stop. Last week Sunday, a tropical depression passed over Puerto Rico. Flash floods took six lives; hundreds had to seek refuge in school shelters, while thousands of families lost personal belongings—some lost everything—as the waters invaded their homes. Guayama, Patillas, Salinas, Santa Isabel, Ponce, Maunabo and Yabucoa were the municipalities most affected by the rains. Others were added later to the governor's petition to the U.S. president for a disaster-zone declaration to receive federal assistance.

Nelsa, my wife, and I were at a birthday party in Jájome for former Chief Justice José Antonio Andreu García when the rains started that Sunday. Jájome is a barrio high in the mountains between Cayey and Guayama. At nightfall, fog had set in so, when we left the party, I told Nelsa that to avoid driving in the fog, I wouldn't head back to Ponce by coming down from Jájome to Cayey and getting on the *autopista* (toll road) in Cayey.

The Cayey area is most prone to fog in that part of Puerto Rico. I spent a lot of time in Jájome while I was governor because the governor's country home is there, so I know the area well. Jájome was a good place for me to write important speeches and to have difficult and protracted meetings with government officials. Gov. Colton, one of the earlier American governors, had established the country home in a *casilla de camineros*, a brick house built by the Spanish government for the road mender in charge of maintaining the section of the road in which the house was built. Luis Muñoz Marín, our first governor of the Commonwealth, also spent lots of time in Jájome. He liked Jájome so much that after retiring from the governorship, he bought a house and spent his weekends there.

When the fog set in at the birthday party that Nelsa and I were attending, I remembered a story Coronel Astol Calero, who was in charge of Muñoz's security, had told me about the fog. Muñoz was a very strong-willed person and, when he was determined to return from Jájome to Fortaleza, no matter the hour of the night, weather conditions or fog, Calero had to take him back even against his better judgment as Muñoz's security. So, when dense and extended fog set in between Jájome and Cayey, Calero had two police officers holding a white sheet walk in front of Muñoz's vehicle so the driver could follow them and thus avoid driving off the narrow road and into the deep cliffs that surround it.

Remembering all this and facing very dense fog, I decided to get away from the fog by driving to Ponce by going down from Jájome to Guayama. It was raining, but there was no fog when we passed the governor's country home. Although the night was quite dark, the old *casilla de camineros* stood out handsomely with flowerpots stretched out in front of it.

As we passed by, my memories went to the heart-wrenching experiences I had as governor dealing with the effects of floods and hurricanes in Puerto Rico. I remembered Mameyes in Ponce. Heavy rains had caused a mudslide and taken the lives of an entire community while they slept at night. I recalled my efforts to liberate survivors from the rubble, the Pachín Vicéns Coliseum in Ponce full of corpses with families grieving around them, the ominous sound I heard while I was sleeping that night in Ponce while rain poured all over the island. I remembered the toll taken by Hugo and Eloísa, pulling bodies from the rivers, and so many stories told to me like that of an old lady in Arecibo who showed me into her modest frame house telling me with resignation: “Hernández Colón, I lost everything.” The most excruciating experiences I had as governor have been connected with the effects of floods and hurricanes.

As we twisted and turned down the mountains to Guayama, I felt glad I had taken the old road built by the Spanish government in the 19th century because, although there was heavy rain, there was no fog. However, the road was pitch-black, there were no cars in sight, and the families in the homes along the road had turned in. But it is a long way from Jájome to Guayama, with deep cliffs alternating on the sides of the road as it curves down the mountains.

Nelsa, who didn’t know the road as well as I did, was quite concerned we might end up down one of the precipices on account of the heavy rain and the slippery narrow road. To make matters worse, there was no signal on her cellphone—I don’t have one—so, if something happened, there was no way we could communicate with anyone to come and help us out.

As we finally approached the end of our descent, I told her: “In five minutes, we will be down from this mountain.”

I spoke too soon. All of a sudden, the mountainside began to gush, at frequent intervals, currents of water, dirt and stones onto the road. We went on for about half a mile under these difficult conditions until the water swelled up about 10 inches high with larger stones interspersed throughout the road. At a particularly large landslide, I decided to stop and walk down the road to see if the situation cleared up further down. It didn’t. The road had become a muddy river. Soaking wet, I got back into the car and told Nelsa we had to turn around.

As soon as we started back toward Jájome, we found the road blocked by a huge boulder that had fallen from the mountain. We had passed this spot a few minutes earlier. Had we passed a bit later, the boulder would have fallen on our car, possibly crushing us to death. I managed to get around the boulder by swerving to the edge of the road and continued up the mountain.

Now, Nelsa was really upset and asked what I intended to do. I told her, many years ago, I had traveled on a road that connected to the road we were on to Salinas, and I would try to find it so we didn’t have to go back to Jájome. I found what I thought was the road and turned onto it. Shortly after, we spotted a man getting into a car in front of a house and we stopped to ask whether this was the road to Salinas.

“Yes,” he answered, “but you had better not go that way because the Plena River swells up dangerously and you won’t see a soul for miles to come.”

So, we turned back to the Guayama road and started the ascent to Jájome. When we finally reached Jájome, Nelsa’s phone was working and we received a call from my son Juan Eugenio—Sen. Hernández Mayoral—who was riding back to San Juan from Yauco. Juan knew we were to go to the party in Jájome and was warning us not to use the *autopista* back to Ponce because it was raining so hard there was almost no visibility. I decided to go on but with utmost care. So, I drove at about 30 miles per hour, with my eyes wide open, remembering that in the night in Mameyes one of the bridges in the *autopista* had collapsed and numerous cars unaware fell into the precipice.

Nelsa and I finally got to Ponce four hours after we had left the birthday party, our faith in God rekindled by the experiences we had just lived through that night.

