

The Virgin Islands Consortium

Puerto Rico Protest Ends In Mayhem

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Puerto Ricans do not like the federal control board that has been installed in the commonwealth to oversee the bankrupt government's finances. The government sits in \$72 billion of debt caused by an 11-year recession that was exacerbated by Hurricane Maria. The board has been making unpopular choices it deems necessary because of the island's debt load, at times with little input from the general public.

So on Tuesday frustrations boiled over and into the streets, with thousands of Puerto Ricans taking to the capital in protest of increases in university tuition, additional school closings and potential cuts to pension and other benefits. With Hurricane Maria causing over 100,000 people to leave the island, protesters said on Tuesday they feared that the latest austerity measures being considered would further damage -- even altogether

destroy -- what was remaining of the island's economy.

Cost per credit university tuition in Puerto Rico is set to double to \$115 from \$56; and the island's Department of Education was set to close 280 of about 1,100 public schools this summer, citing low enrollment. That comes after 179 schools were shuttered last year by the Rosselló administration.

"We're overwhelmed," said Carlos Cofiño to The New York Times, a 20-year-old political science student, as he prepared to march. "We need to express our indignation and let the government know that there are people who are suffering."

The protesters, enveloped by high-rises in the island's main financial district, sang songs while Salsa music played, and shouted "They can't stop us!" as they continued their march.

But the protest turned violent after police clashed with a few dozen protesters, most of them young people donning black attire, holding wooden shields with their faces covered with bandannas. The brawl was scattered after police released tear gas. According to The Times, Puerto Rico's Public Safety Department said 13 people had been arrested and 15 officers were injured during the incident.

"This kind of violence damages the good name of Puerto Rico," Gov. Ricardo Rosselló said in a news conference late Tuesday. The governor said the protest, otherwise peaceful, was marred by a small group of protesters who he said had thrown "projectiles" at police officers.

Tuesday's protest was similar to one held on the same day last year -- called International Workers Day -- which also ended in violence and resulted in damaged property. This year, businesses had braced for the protest by covering their windows with plywood and hurricane shutters, and closing for the day.

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