



The first obstacle Cuban specialists had to overcome was unloading the trucks at Roseau port.



Cuban specialists are working on a primary line linking the capital with the hydroelectric plant in Trafalgar, eight kilometers away.

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 Special correspondent (Text & photos)

• ROSEAU.—Dominica has been without power since September 18. Hurricane Maria brought down thousands of electricity poles, destroyed kilometers of power lines and left the majority of transmission infrastructure practically inoperable.

So far, Dominica Electricity Services (Domlec) has been working to reestablish power across vital facilities, such as hospitals, banks and government offices.

But six weeks after the storm, electricity has only been restored to a few areas across main cities, while the rest of the country is still without power.

There are barely 30 electricity specialists on the island, which also lacks the technical means to undertake such an enormous task.

According to estimates from Domlec, 90% of the 8,000 poles from the primary system and 19,000 from the secondary, which supply homes, suffered some sort of damage.

Neighboring countries like Jamaica and Barbados have sent reinforcements from their own power companies, but reports on the ground estimate that it will be several months before power is fully restored.

CUBA'S CONTRIBUTION

As part of Cuba's efforts to help and support Dominica, the country sent a ship carrying 300 tons of vital resources, ten forestry specialists, a group of young diplomats and two brigades composed of five linemen each, from Pinar del Río and Sancti Spíritus, to the island on October 20.

Meanwhile, three electricians responsible for evaluating the situation in the country

and supervising work on the ground, as well as four support workers, a mechanic, power plant specialist and two cooks, also travelled to the island.

Each brigade brought with it a multi-purpose vehicle featuring a crane mechanism for work on electricity lines and digging tool to set new posts, to add to the only three other such vehicles in the country.

But before they could get to work on the streets of the island, Cuban specialists had to overcome an initial obstacle: the trucks were too heavy for the crane at Roseau port to unload from the ship.

So, technicians decided to disassemble them onboard and unload them piece by piece; starting with the operating booth and then the rest of the vehicle, including wheels and other heavy parts.

Once unloaded, they were quickly reassembled, in an operation which at one point seemed impossible, but was completed in just three hours.

FIRST STEPS

According to specialists, the priority in a situation like that affecting Dominica is to restore the power system and primary lines in order to supply consumers with electricity.

As such, for the past week the Cubans have been working to reestablish a primary network between Roseau and the hydroelectric plant in Trafalgar, some eight kilometers away and which was cut off after the hurricane.

"When it's up and running, and we've connected the capital's diesel plant to the hydroelectric facility located close by, we'll have more power," stated Edelfín Falcón Guerra, head of the Electrical Union of Cuba brigade in Dominica,

speaking to **Granma**.

Falcón, who works as technical director of the entity in Artemisa, added that the power supply should be further stabilized after the substation located in the Padu hydroelectric plant, close to Trafalgar, is hooked up.

As well as the state of the network, the topography of the area has complicated the work. The line stretches from the city over several neighboring hills and then descends down an over 300 foot gorge. The final part of the line, before it reaches the hydroelectric plant, is built along a river which winds through mountains, measuring over 1,500 feet.

The tropical climate doesn't help either, with heavy downpours interrupting work.

Ramiro Frías Leiva, one of the linemen and operator of the multi-purpose vehicles, described the risks and difficulties of installing new posts in the rocky terrain along the river.

"The chain can break and even the drill itself," he noted, adding: "We have to work bit by bit."

Frías, who has been operating these vehicles for over 30 years, also had to quickly adapt to driving on the left-hand side of the road, as they do in Dominica.

Lisbanet Rodríguez Hernández, head of the Sancti Spíritus brigade, stated that his specialists have had to deal with similarly difficult jobs on the Topes de Collantes hills, in the municipality of Trinidad.

"Nonetheless we were given training to explain the conditions on the ground and characteristics of the country," he stated, adding that "we hold daily meetings to review the work and risks we could face."

THE GOLDEN RULES OF SAFETY

The number of damaged posts, broken

cables, fallen trees and unstable ground around power lines, represent an added danger for the Cuban brigades.

Diego La Rosa, head of the Electrical Union's Health and Safety team, was one of the first specialists to arrive in Dominica, three days after Hurricane Maria hit.

According to La Rosa, risks increase with time, noting that many people have already started to set up their own generators which, if installed incorrectly, could affect the networks the linemen are currently working on.

"As long as you obey the five golden rules, there shouldn't be any problems," explained Rosa, reciting them from memory: "disconnect the power; ensure that all other possible connections are blocked; check that there is absolutely no power circulating; connect the lines to the ground; and in short-circuits, connect lines to each other; and lastly, signpost the work area."

He also highlighted the importance of using protective gear and complying with the correct procedures when working on power lines and with cranes.

"The risks are more or less the same when working up posts anywhere," according to Dachel Jiménez Bernal, a lineman from group 8, trained to work on live lines.

The most important thing, he noted, is to check that the posts aren't broken.

Working at a height of 48 feet to restore the connection between Trafalgar and the capital, Jiménez noted that this is lower than the 110Kv lines they are used to in Cuba.

"Cuban electricians have developed great skill in dealing with adverse weather events over the years," stated Edelfín Falcón. "Now, we are sharing our experiences with the sister nation of Dominica." •