



**FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE**

**Statement of Ranking Member Bennie G. Thompson (D-MS)**

*Preparedness, Response, and Rebuilding: Lessons on the 2017 Disasters*

**March 15, 2018**

We were originally scheduled to have FEMA Administrator Brock Long before this Committee in November of last year. Unfortunately, you abruptly canceled the hearing after the Democrats invited the Mayor of San Juan, Puerto Rico to testify about the effects of Hurricane Maria on her community. That troubling turn of events occurred shortly after Administrator Long publicly stated that he had “filtered out the Mayor a long time ago.” I am not sure when it became acceptable to be dismissive of an official representing an American city devastated by a natural disaster.

Next week marks six months since Hurricane Maria made landfall on Puerto Rico, sending the island into darkness and changing life for nearly 3.3 million Americans. Still today, thousands of Puerto Ricans, or 10 percent of the population, have yet to have their power restored. The Puerto Rican economy continues to struggle as a result of the devastation to infrastructure, homes, and businesses. Hundreds of thousands of Puerto Ricans have moved to the mainland in the wake of the storm, perhaps never to return.

So, while I am pleased the Committee is finally holding this important hearing, to say it is long overdue would be an understatement. The 2017 Atlantic hurricane season was among the most active on record, with 17 named storms. Three major storms caused destruction in Texas, Florida, the U.S. Virgin Islands, and Puerto Rico. The response to those storms by the Trump Administration was a study in contrasts.

After Harvey, President Trump tweeted, “Texas: We are with you today, we are with you tomorrow, and we will be with you EVERY SINGLE DAY AFTER, to restore, recover, and REBUILD.” President Trump visited the affected area just four days later. This is what Americans expect from the President and their Federal government in the wake of disaster. Similarly, after Hurricane Irma struck Florida, President Trump tweeted, “Just like TX, WE are w/you today, we are w/you tomorrow, & we will be w/you EVERY SINGLE DAY AFTER, to RESTORE, RECOVER, and REBUILD.” Again, the President visited four days later, as it should be.

But after Hurricane Maria devastated Puerto Rico and part of the U.S. Virgin Islands, President Trump’s words and actions were decidedly different. He tweeted, “We cannot keep FEMA, the Military & the First Responders, who have been amazing (under the most difficult circumstances) in P.R. forever!”

The President also said the government of Puerto Rico wanted “everything to be done for them” and accused officials of “poor leadership.” And when he finally showed up in Puerto Rico two weeks after the storm made landfall, he chucked rolls of paper towels at survivors. President Trump did not even bother to visit the U.S. Virgin Islands. For an American president to behave in such a way is beyond the pale.

In keeping with the President’s actions, the Federal government’s response was decidedly different after each storm. FEMA had supplies and personnel pre-positioned before Hurricane Harvey made landfall on August 25 and, shortly thereafter, the Federal government had more than 31,000 of Federal employees on the ground in support of the response. FEMA also provided 3 million meals and 3 million liters of water for Harvey survivors. Likewise, for Irma, there were more than 40,000 federal personnel, including 2,650 FEMA staff, on the ground just days after the storm struck on September 10. FEMA also provided 6.6 million meals and 4.7 million liters of water to the region in the days just after Irma made landfall.

The Trump Administration’s response to Maria was far slower and smaller. Even weeks after the storm, there were only a fraction of the Federal personnel on the ground in Puerto Rico and the U.S. Virgin Islands as had been deployed to Texas and Florida. Food and water were in short supply, and Federal contracts to provide essentials like tarps and meals were botched, further slowing the response.

Electrical outages to critical facilities like hospitals required doctors in Puerto Rico to perform lifesaving surgery using the light of their cell phones. Doctors in the U.S. Virgin Islands saw the only hospital on St. Thomas badly damaged, rendering its medical floor and cancer treatment facility unusable.

Despite the devastation, it took 43 DAYS for President Trump to approve Public Assistance Program disaster aid to Puerto Rico, quadruple the amount of time it took to approve such assistance to Texas and Florida. I understand the delay was due to the Trump Administration imposing conditions on this aid never before required of any other community, a deal some have called the “Puerto Rico special.”

Meanwhile, the President found the time to spend several days at his Trump properties golfing, hold multiple fundraisers, fight with NFL players about taking a knee during games, and tweet about everything from “fake news” to the “Russia hoax.” That is not the kind of leadership the people of Puerto Rico, or any Americans affected by disasters, expect or deserve.

Today, I hope to hear from our first panel of witnesses about how the Federal government is using funding approved by Congress to support response and recovery in communities hit by hurricanes, wildfires, and other recent disasters. I am particularly interested in hearing from Administrator Long about the lessons learned from these disasters and how FEMA can be better prepared to respond in the future. For the witnesses on our second panel, I hope to hear your perspectives on the Federal response and what we can do to support your recovery going forward.

FEMA’s mission is supposed to be “helping people before, during, and after disasters.” It is our job to conduct the oversight necessary to ensure the agency fulfills that mission, so I look forward to our discussion today.

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