

International Development Committee

Oral evidence: The UK's response to Hurricane Irma , HC 487

Tuesday 31 October 2017

Ordered by the House of Commons to be published on Tuesday 31 October 2017

[Watch the meeting](#)

Members present: Stephen Twigg (Chair); James Duddridge; Mr Nigel Evans; Mrs Pauline Latham; Chris Law; Mr Ivan Lewis; Lloyd Russell-Moyle; Mr Virendra Sharma; Henry Smith.

Questions 1 - 34

Witnesses

[I:](#) The hon. Dr Daniel Orlando Smith OBE, Premier of the British Virgin Islands; Blondel Cluff, Representative to the UK and EU, Government of Anguilla; Tracy Knight, UK Representative, Turks and Caicos Islands Government.

[II:](#) Deborah Haynes, Defence Editor, *The Times*; Catherine Philp, Diplomatic Correspondent, *The Times*.

[III:](#) The rt hon. Lord Bates, Minister of State, Department for International Development; Air Vice-Marshal Edward Stringer, Assistant Chief of the Defence Staff (Operations), Ministry of Defence; Richard Montgomery, Director, Asia, Caribbean and Overseas Territories Division, DFID; Christina Scott, Director, Hurricane Recovery Unit, Foreign and Commonwealth Office.

Examination of witnesses

Witnesses: the hon. Dr Daniel Orlando Smith OBE, Blondel Cluff and Tracy Knight.

Q1 Chair: Good morning, everyone, and welcome to this evidence session. Can I welcome in particular our first panel of witnesses? Premier Dr Smith, Mrs Cluff and Ms Knight, thank you very much indeed for being here with us today. We have about 40 minutes with this first panel, and a broad range of questions. I start by asking each of you to introduce yourselves and then to give us a brief picture of the direct impact of the hurricanes on your populations, infrastructure and assets. Premier, would you like to go first?

Dr Smith: Thank you. I am Dr Daniel Orlando Smith, Premier of the British Virgin Islands. Mr Chairman, I want to thank you for the opportunity to address the Committee on the impact of Hurricane Irma. It is important for us to recognise the original impact this hurricane has wrought on the Caribbean. I am flanked by neighbours from Anguilla and Turks and Caicos, but this weather system showed no regard for political borders, badly affecting Dutch and French territories as well, and of course the United States islands of Puerto Rico and US Virgin Islands.

I am here today to talk about BVI in particular, but this is a wake-up call for the whole of the Caribbean, which, as I have said before, is very much on the frontline in the battle against climate change. I also want to segment my comments in terms of the scope of the inquiry into three key areas: first, the impact on the BVI; secondly, the speed and effectiveness of the UK's initial response; and thirdly, the ongoing response.

First, on the impact, it is now 55 days since Irma made landfall in the BVI. She blasted BVI for some 12 hours on 6 September, with sustained wind speed in excess of 185 miles per hour, gusting to levels of 225 miles an hour. The most consequential impact was that five schools were lost, four as a result of Irma and one to Maria. Quite frankly, the people of the Virgin Islands were battered and shattered. There are many who have nothing left, and we are seeing many cases of significant hardship. It is estimated that almost 20% of the population—that is over 6,000 people—were temporarily displaced.

It is also estimated that almost 80% of buildings have been damaged, many of which are uninhabitable or beyond repair. Infrastructure and many vital services were severely impacted. Government buildings, including those of the police and fire service and the prison, suffered major structural damage. Every school sustained damage. A third of our primary schools suffered major damage, and most of the main high school campus was totally obliterated. Our modern hospital, which was built specifically to withstand a category 5 hurricane, stood very well, but many of the community clinics were badly damaged.



HOUSE OF COMMONS

The preliminary estimate of the cost of the damage ranges up to \$3.6 billion, almost 3.5 times BVI's pre-hurricane GDP. Insurance will cover some losses, particularly for the private sector, but coverage is far from universal, especially among homeowners. Our tourism sector, the single largest source of employment and biggest contributor to our GDP, has been severely hit. However, I am heartened by conversations I have had with representatives of this industry and their commitment to building back better in this area. The overall damage caused by the hurricane will inevitably have an impact on the GDP and BVI Government revenues.

Now moving on to the speed and effectiveness of the UK's initial response, the first support from the United Kingdom arrived two days after the hurricane hit, and HMS Ocean arrived two weeks later. The prison sustained major damage and consequently experienced a total breach. The UK military, along with the British Virgin Islands police force and other visiting police resources, have been instrumental in generally restoring and maintaining law and order in what could otherwise have been a very precarious security situation. We are grateful for the support of police forces from across the United Kingdom.

Finally, on the ongoing response, we are focused on supporting home repairs, getting the school and health services back to full strength, restoring power and ensuring that the police, prison and court provide security and confidence in the rule of law. The restoration of our tourism and financial services industries is critical to reviving our economy. We have a vision for the long-term economy.

Chair: I apologise for interrupting, but we are going to cover some of the longer-term issues in our questioning. I am conscious that if we have quite long opening responses to the first question, we will not have time to cover the other areas. If it is okay, thank you very much for the evidence so far, and we will come back to you on some of the other questions. Mrs Cluff.

Blondel Cluff: My name is Blondel Cluff and I am the representative of the Government of Anguilla to the United Kingdom and the EU, and also special adviser to the Chief Minister, Victor Banks. As Dr Smith has mentioned, Hurricane Irma struck us around 6 September. We were engulfed by the eye of the storm, which was some 23 miles in width, the island being a mere three and a half miles in width. As a consequence, we suffered one fatality, very sadly, and a great deal of injury, which was a huge strain on the 32-bed hospital, bearing in mind that our population is some 17,000 permanent people.

90% of the housing stock at the time was severely damaged, but the main focal point and the main danger for Anguilla is that just about all of our key infrastructure was annihilated. That is because we have been in a difficult position in terms of developing it in the run-up to the hurricane. The airport, passenger port, commercial port, all of the schools bar one



HOUSE OF COMMONS

and importantly the island's only secondary school were completely demolished by virtue of this.

The problem that we have, as I say, is that our economy is a very fragile one and we are not in a position to recover from that. Having said that, we did not declare a state of emergency. We were unique in that situation, in that the population got up within an hour or so of the hurricane passing and started immediately to do what they could to help themselves.

Within two hours of the hurricane the Foreign Secretary, Boris Johnson, was in contact with our Chief Minister, and I believe within a day Mounts Bay arrived with six tonnes of aid, in terms of water, food and sanitation, which was much needed. They helped to nail the roof back on to the very small hospital, which was flooding at this time, and to reconnect power to key services. The general impact of the hurricane was devastating for Anguilla.

What we have to bear in mind is that we have a direct border with the EU. We have a direct border with France, which is the neighbouring island of Saint Martin—something that has been overlooked thus far in terms of the Brexit negotiations. That is very important to us, because we are utterly and completely dependent on our EU neighbours for services. I mentioned the 32-bed hospital, but that hospital cannot comprehensively diagnose. Each night the border closes at 10.00 sharp, and this is something that is a pre-Irma situation and I believe continues now. If any of you were to collapse on the floor at 10.01, even before Irma, we could not diagnose you and we could not treat you. We can only pray that you live until the next day. You can imagine, with the impact of Irma and the level of devastation, that the whole situation has been exacerbated beyond all imaginable levels.

Our fall-back position was Puerto Rico in terms of access for tourism, bearing in mind that 90% of our tourists generally come through Saint Martin, whose international airport was more than severely damaged—almost wiped out. Our fall-back position is Puerto Rico and the third hurricane, Hurricane Maria, demolished the capabilities of Puerto Rico to support Anguilla. We have an isolated British Overseas Territory, the infrastructure and economy of which were fragile at best, and which has been effectively economically annihilated by Hurricane Irma.

Chair: We will return to some of those issues in a moment. Thank you very much indeed. Ms Knight.

Tracy Knight: Good morning. My name is Tracy Knight. I am the UK representative for the Turks and Caicos Islands Government. Hurricane Irma was still a category 5 storm when it passed over the Turks and Caicos Islands on Thursday 7 and Friday 8 September. The storm affected the entire chain of islands. All of the eight inhabited islands sustained damage on differing scales. Hurricane Maria also affected the Islands on 21 and 22 September, and it compounded the damage that



HOUSE OF COMMONS

was caused by Hurricane Irma. Fortunately, there were no reports of deaths or serious injuries as a result of either storm.

The damage across the chain of islands was similar in nature and relates largely to roof damage or total destruction of homes. The Turks and Caicos Islands post-Irma CDEMA assessment report states that the islands received nearly 80% damage to their housing stock and critical buildings across the entire chain of islands. Approximately 400 homes were completely destroyed, and there was a need to shelter approximately 1,000 people before both Hurricane Irma and Hurricane Maria.

Telecommunication infrastructure was severely affected. 86% of schools and 90% of Government office buildings sustained significant damage. There was, however, minimal damage to roads and the drainage systems eliminated any severe flooding. Currently the ports on the island are up and running at 85% capacity. The administrative buildings of the ports received some minimal damage.

Post Hurricane Maria, Providenciales International Airport returned to full commercial operations within four hours, and post Irma it was open to commercial operations within two days. On the functional capacities of the airports currently, Providenciales, Salt Cay and South Caicos are now 100% open and Grand Turk is 85%. Most damage to the airport was to the perimeter fencing in Providenciales and Grand Turk, and the Grand Turk terminal suffered severe damage. There was also damage to primary health facilities in Providenciales and Grand Turk.

Chair: That will be fine for now. I am conscious that we have a lot of ground to cover in 40 minutes.

Q2 Mrs Latham: I wonder if you could each briefly tell us what the prospects are for recovery and rebuilding, and if you have the capacity to seize any opportunities that currently exist.

Dr Smith: Immediately after the impact of the hurricane, we started the process of cleaning up, rebuilding and getting the power lines up. That was one of our first challenges, because the restoration of power was important to the continuation of business in the country. That is ongoing.

We will continue in the restoration of the economy. The main sectors, for example in the tourism industry, were badly hit because a significant number of the larger hotels were basically destroyed. Two of the sectors of the tourism industry are cruises and yachting. The discussions with those two sectors have indicated their commitment to coming back and restarting their operations. We are hoping and expecting that the cruise visitors will begin early in the coming year, and we have indications from the operators in the yachting industry that they will be beginning operations in the next month—within the month of November. In fact, they have already begun to rebuild their fleet. When they begin the operations, they will not be to the strength that they were before the



HOUSE OF COMMONS

hurricane. It will take some time to build that up. We will continue to work with our tourism partners to be able to see that industry get back to normal as soon as possible.

The other major sector of our economy is financial services, and because of the resilience that was built into the system, that service continues to function, though not quite to the same level because of the lack of housing and accommodation. Many people were displaced, and some have had to travel to other countries, like the Cayman Islands and Puerto Rico, but still could operate from there using BVI structures. The courts, which are important to that system, have also been affected, and so we have a temporary court set up in St Lucia. We are hoping that we have that repatriated as soon as possible. We are working very hard to build with the industry that we do have.

The extent of the damage—about \$3.6 billion—makes it beyond our ability to cover everything, and so we need whatever assistance we can get, in terms of loans and other types of financing that may be offered.

Chair: Thank you very much. I am going to come to Ms Knight next, and then I am going to come to Virendra, who has a specific question about Anguilla that relates to this.

Tracy Knight: In terms of rebuilding, the repairs to our schools started immediately. The last of the Government schools opened yesterday, on Monday, so they have either been temporarily rehoused or buildings have been repaired sufficiently for the schools to reopen.

That has also been the case in terms of Government infrastructure. A number of the Government buildings opened probably about three or four weeks ago on reduced hours. Government Departments were rehoused in temporary accommodation to allow vital services to reopen, and at the beginning of this week all the Government Departments resumed normal working hours. That said, there are still difficulties with communication, particularly on the island of Grand Turk, which is the capital island. Although the Government offices are open, there are still problems with the computer systems, the internet and just general telephone communication, but the offices are now all open to assist the public.

Q3 **Mrs Latham:** What about raw materials to do the repairs? You are islands. Do you have extra raw materials ready to do that, or are they being shipped in?

Tracy Knight: They have to come in, normally from Miami. For us this was a particular problem between Hurricane Irma and Hurricane Maria, because with Hurricane Irma, there was a lot of wind damage to roofs and a lot of debris, but because of the passage of Hurricane Irma—and then we also had Hurricane Jose and then Maria—there was a real difficulty in securing building supplies to do vital repairs to buildings, so that with the passage of Hurricane Maria there was no greater damage. That was really where we found there was a real difficulty in securing



building supplies. Building supplies are now arriving on the island. People are beginning to repair their homes and the Government are making repairs to vital infrastructure, so that we can try to return to normalcy as quickly as possible.

- Q4 **Mr Sharma:** The Anguillan Government have produced a very trenchant White Paper on life after Irma. This document indicates that looking at the road ahead, you feel somewhat abandoned by the UK. Would that be a fair summary?

Blondel Cluff: Yes, definitely. If you remember your fairy tales, we are very much the Cinderella of the Overseas Territories. We have been overlooked time and time again during the past 367 years, predominantly because we have not been commercially attractive. That is why we are where we are, sadly.

- Q5 **Lloyd Russell-Moyle:** I want to ask a question to all of you, though I notice, Premier Dr Smith, that you mentioned loans and the best way you think the resources could be mobilised to help with the recovery process. I am interested in everyone, but I noticed that you did mention loans earlier on.

Dr Smith: Immediately after the hurricane, we had three catastrophic events. We had the severe flooding, such as we have never had before, there was Hurricane Irma and then there was Hurricane Maria, so that was basically three events. Immediately after the events, as we started the clean-up and recovery, there was assistance from many individuals—those who live in the BVI, and friends from neighbouring islands in the Caribbean, like Puerto Rico, Saint Vincent, Jamaica, Cayman Islands and so on.

There was assistance from international organisations, who came in and assisted in terms of providing food supplies and providing tarpaulin so that people could have some shelter over their heads. That was the immediate response, and we were very grateful for that. The response from the United Kingdom was to bring in supplies, as well as officers, who helped to restore law and order. Again, we are very grateful for that assistance.

Now we have to look at the long term, and because of the extent of the damage, we are not able to do that within our budget, so we will have to seek assistance in terms of loans and any other forms of financing we can. We would like to have assistance in grants or even concessionary funding, but these are subject to what the United Kingdom and other countries are able to give us.

- Q6 **Lloyd Russell-Moyle:** The BVI has a higher GDP per capita than Britain. Are there ideas of creating some sort of sovereign wealth fund for resilience against climate change and other disasters in the future? Is that something that is on the agenda for you?



HOUSE OF COMMONS

Dr Smith: Yes, we are looking at that. Even though we had a relatively high GDP before, right now our GDP is—if we do not get the kind of assistance that is needed to rebuild the economy, we will become a dependency on the United Kingdom, and that is something that we do not want and you do not want. It is something that we are not accustomed to. We have always been able to take care of the needs of the territory. This is something that we never expected, so we have to deal with it and we need assistance to deal with it.

Q7 Lloyd Russell-Moyle: When natural disasters or human disasters hit, we have to step in, just like in 1993, when the City of London was bombed by the IRA; we stepped in. Since then, the City of London has paid, through its tax base, back the UK Exchequer many times. With BVI there is a lot of discussion about transparency of tax and openness of shell companies. Is that something that needs to be harnessed to make sure that money is used for the right purpose in the long term, so we know it is paid back?

Dr Smith: BVI is part of the international monetary system, and it works very well in terms of cross-border transactions, provides employment all around the world and is absolutely well regulated. It meets all the standards set by all the standard-setting bodies. We have an industry that is very supportive and works well with the industry in the United Kingdom.

Q8 Lloyd Russell-Moyle: I am asking more about how you leverage in the future, in the long term—because in the short term we have a duty to support the islands—so that these funds can be put aside for resilience and climate change, and how you are thinking about that. That is what I am trying to explore: the long-term plans for resilience-building.

Dr Smith: Certainly. We are already looking at it. In fact, about seven years ago we started having a reserve fund towards exactly this kind of purpose. That is why we have at this moment over \$60 million in that reserve fund. The financial service area will contribute to that fund, and we will continue to develop that, because we realise we need that kind of back-up in case of this kind of disaster.

Q9 James Duddridge: Prevention is better than cure. I am reassured to hear that the hospital survived. More generally, what help have the British Government given prior to these three hurricanes hitting, in terms of identifying risks and contingency plans? What lessons can be learned, not only for repairing what has been damaged but preparing for what is inevitable—another hurricane?

Tracy Knight: As I mentioned before, we experienced a category 4 hurricane in 2008, Hurricane Ike. That provided valuable lessons to the Government for hurricane preparedness. Following Hurricane Ike, our building codes were strengthened and many of the new buildings were built to withstand category 5 hurricanes. To a large degree that is why, although we received nearly 80% damage to homes and infrastructure, a



HOUSE OF COMMONS

lot of that damage was, on the CDEMA scale, category 1—minor roof damage, etc. We did learn a lot of lessons from Ike nearly 10 years ago.

We also had very updated disaster risk plans and carried out assessments on a regular basis. In terms of preparedness, certainly the Turks and Caicos Islands Government felt that they were as prepared as they could have been in the situation.

There is always room for improvement, and, following the experience we have had now with the category 5, there will be a review to see where we can improve, what we need to stockpile and how we can better access the islands and rebuild stronger infrastructure, again looking at building codes. We learned a lot of lessons after Ike, and we will learn a lot of lessons now after Irma and Maria. It is a learning process, particularly as the storms become stronger and more frequent, as is predicted.

Blondel Cluff: The word “hurricane” is a Carib word. We are very familiar with hurricanes in the Caribbean as such. We learned a great deal from Hurricane Donna, which again flattened Anguilla. If you were to look at a photograph of Anguilla from the air, you would see many walls still standing. We resorted more to concrete buildings, but having said that, 90% of the housing stock was severely damaged, with roofs lost and the like. The issue was that our infrastructure was just allowed to remain in a state that meant that a gust of wind, in many instances, would have challenged it, so with 200-miles-an-hour winds, it had no chance whatsoever.

The other thing to bear in mind is that, come March 2019, we are on the brink of a new relationship with an island that keeps us viable. What we hope to come out of the consequences is more self-sufficiency. You, Mr Duddridge, are very familiar, having been our Minister in the past, with the fact that a short extension to our airport would mean that we could have evacuated some people. We only have one island. We have 23 smaller islands and cays, but only one inhabited island, so our evacuation would have had to be to other places and other countries. We have shallow waters around Anguilla, which is why we do not have cruise ships, so that short extension, which I believe during your time you considered favourably, is something that we do need to look at going forward.

On resilience and preparedness, within hours we were out there cleaning up, so we are a resilient people. Our motto is “Unity, strength and endurance”, and that is very much what we are about. Our culture is slightly different. I do not know if any of you are familiar with the north of Scotland. I have lived in Sutherland myself. At the end of the day, Anguillans, even during the times of slavery, were given land, and we owned that land. As a result, 97% of the population of Anguilla are indigenous Anguillans, which is quite unusual among the Overseas Territories. We were not just clearing up for the sake of clearing up. We were clearing up for our own—our own property, as it were.



HOUSE OF COMMONS

We are resilient because we have been left to our own devices, as I have explained to Mr Sharma, for century after century. We know how to survive, but we cannot cross this threshold with all of our infrastructure having been downed. We need your help this time, and I ask that you help us.

Q10 Chris Law: I just want to know how effective the UK's response was to the hurricane, in terms of its speed, cost and scale. To give you an example, HMS Ocean took more than two weeks to arrive to meet your need, and I wanted to know what your thoughts were in terms of comparison to the French and US efforts that were made.

Dr Smith: We were very grateful for the assistance received from the United Kingdom Government. It was very important, especially the security forces, because that meant we were able, with their assistance, to restore law and order very quickly to the community, and their continued presence helped to maintain that law and order. They also provided assistance in terms of expertise—engineering, for example, and helping with looking at our electrical grid and other aspects of the reconstruction of BVI.

One of the things that was very important is that during the storm and immediately after, the communication between the four major islands was completely cut off, so we had no idea what was happening on Virgin Gorda or Anegada. With the arrival of Mounts Bay, we were able to go to that island and see what was happening, and restore the communication and assistance to those islands.

Tracy Knight: The Government have expressed the view that the assistance that was received from the UK Government was adequate and they are very grateful for the same. Ideally, assistance could have been provided more swiftly, but considering the situation on the ground at that time, with two of our sister OTs having been also severely impacted by Hurricane Irma, and in the region, the Government are satisfied that the response was adequate. The response we received helped to prepare us for Hurricane Maria following Irma. Also, we were assisted with repairs to schools, Government buildings, debris clearance, aid distribution and essential logistical support.

The Turks and Caicos Islands also received support from the Canadian Government and from our fellow Overseas Territories—from the Cayman Islands Government and from the Bermuda Government, who sent a regiment. The Cayman Islands Government were the first Government to provide outside assistance, and they provided us with a helicopter, which was vital in being able to do an initial assessment of damage on our sister islands because, like the BVI, there was no communication, so as soon as Hurricane Irma had passed, we needed to be able to get out and do an initial assessment of how the other islands, other than Providenciales Island, had been impacted. We did not have a helicopter to do that; that was provided by the Cayman Islands Government. We received assistance from others as well.



HOUSE OF COMMONS

Blondel Cluff: As Ms Knight has mentioned, we have lessons to learn from the Cayman Islands as an OT that was equipped to help other Overseas Territories in the region. Anguilla is a flat coral island, and indeed we are the closest in location to the United Kingdom and Europe. We feel that in terms of helping us to rebuild and to enhance our infrastructure, we could be looked at as a solution to a problem, in terms of deployment of aid—as you mention, two weeks for HMS Ocean to reach the region—and indeed setting up hubs within Curacao and Barbados, as opposed to perhaps building on the abilities among the Overseas Territories to help themselves and each other.

We are very grateful for the assistance given. It was swift and strategic, bearing in mind that there were hurricanes in quick succession. You got to us within a very short period of time and then you had to fall back, because of Hurricane Jose coming along and ultimately Maria. I would just reiterate lessons to be learned from the Caymans. Anguilla is in pole position to become a hub that could help DFID in its pursuit of creating and supplying bigger, faster and more rapid responses in the region. I believe that was stipulated in their recent paper, issued in September. We feel that we could be a solution to that problem.

Q11 **Mr Lewis:** Good morning. Just on the response again, how did you feel the response was co-ordinated with your Governments and with other donors and relevant agencies? It is about the co-ordination. Are you satisfied that that was done in as effective way as it could have been?

Dr Smith: I think so. Immediately after the hurricane, myself, as Premier, and the Governor worked very closely together. The Governor was in constant contact with the United Kingdom to provide the kind of assistance that we received. That assistance, as well as assistance from other international donors and CARICOM and OECS partners, helped us to be able to get to where we were. We started rebuilding immediately, started the clean-up, and started putting power lines down. As my colleague from Anguilla said, those from BVI are also a very resilient people. We always get well very quickly. We have a history of hurricanes in the region, and we have all our disaster plans, so we get to work immediately to do the clear-up and start the reconstruction.

As I said earlier in my statement, it is important that we get the assistance. I mentioned earlier law and order. Our police station headquarters, our prisons and our court system were all damaged quite severely. That is the kind of thing where we see that we can get the kind of assistance on the ground to help us restore that, because law and order is one of the most significant things if we are to maintain a society and be prosperous.

Tracy Knight: As Dr Smith said, it is my understanding that the Premier of the Turks and Caicos Islands Government and the Governor worked hand in hand, both prior to Hurricane Irma and post-storm. Prior to Irma, they issued joint press statements, and the Government supported the declaration of mandatory evacuation orders for two of the islands,



HOUSE OF COMMONS

Salt Cay and Middle Caicos. Post-storms, the Government and the Governor continued to work in close co-operation. They carried out assessments together and issued joint press statements, and continued to work very closely together. The communication, certainly on the ground between the Governor's office and the office of the Premier, was very strong.

- Q12 **Henry Smith:** Premier, representatives, thank you very much for your evidence today. The relationship that the French, the Dutch and the United States have with their Overseas Territories is very different from the relationship the UK has with its overseas territories. I would be interested to find out your assessment of the different responses of those sponsor countries compared with the response from the British.

Blondel Cluff: I am peering into Saint Martin's situation. We are looking at the equivalent of Berkshire on the Caribbean Sea for them. The presence of military and the like there on location is to be expected. There was a boundary dispute ongoing between the Dutch and French Saint Martin at the time the hurricane hit. Notwithstanding the fact that there was a strong presence on the ground, social disorder, civil unrest and armed looting and the like kicked in. That did not prevent that situation arising, whereas in Anguilla there was no lawlessness at all, even though we lost the roof of our prison. I believe our prisoners sat tight and waited for it to be put back on. Nonetheless, the presence of all of this in Saint Martin did not propel them further than we found ourselves in Anguilla.

Dr Smith: The response of the United Kingdom was good compared to those of the other territories, including the United States Virgin Islands, which was also damaged. Remember just before Hurricane Irma we had severe flooding, and there was a vessel in the BVI and then it stood off, so that vessel was in the area to go towards the one that was hit first. In this case, Anguilla was first affected, so the vessel went there and then came back to the BVI as soon as possible. The response was relatively good.

- Q13 **Henry Smith:** Coming back to particularly the Cayman Islands support that you mentioned, and other Overseas Territories' support for their colleagues on other islands, do you feel that there is room for developing that potential resilience, co-ordinating not only with the UK Government but among a network of the British Overseas Territories in the West Indies?

Tracy Knight: Definitely. As I mentioned, we received the helicopter support from the Cayman Islands and we also received relief. The Cayman Islands sent a plane of relief aid to Turks and Caicos Islands. The Government of Gibraltar donated 10 vehicles to the three overseas territories affected. We received military personnel from Bermuda and we received a financial donation from the Falkland Islands Government. Certainly, within the region there is a lot of solidarity because we understand the devastating effects that hurricanes can have, what is



HOUSE OF COMMONS

needed and what assistance is required. Certainly there is scope for us to work more closely together.

Dr Smith: One important structure in the Caribbean is our ability to work together in terms of disaster preparedness. There is a body called CDEMA, which consists of all the Caribbean territories, which helps all the territories to develop disaster preparedness plans, so that we can be prepared and respond quickly. CDEMA is very important and has done a good job and continues to do a good job, and because of that organisation in the Caribbean, the BVI has in fact a very good disaster response plan.

In addition to that, the natural response of the territories is to support one another. We do have these other organisations, CARICOM and OECS, where we meet on a regular basis. Those other countries—Saint Vincent, etc—sent assistance as soon as possible. One of the things about the BVI is that although we have 30,000 people, about 60% of the population comes largely from the other islands, and so it is a very good mix and the working relationship is excellent.

Blondel Cluff: I would say that to develop this capability among the Overseas Territories in the Caribbean is something I would recommend that we look at. CARICOM does exist, but sadly we are only associate members of CARICOM. We have no voice. It is also an extremely expensive organisation, very much like the equivalent of the EU in the region, and perhaps you would get more value for money if you were to go directly to the Overseas Territories and if you were to see that we were impacted.

Having said that, the flipside of the coin is that a place like Anguilla is in the Caribbean's equivalent of Europe. Our neighbours are French and Dutch. Our families live on those islands. If they are hit, particularly at the moment without infrastructure, we are hit. If they do not recover, we cannot recover at the moment, unless we build self-sufficiency. We really have to look at this, and it has been mentioned in our White Paper. We have to look at the situation there. Sadly, over and over again, the Overseas Territories do not have voices of their own. For some reason, we are denied a voice in this day and age, and it is important that somehow we are heard more clearly and more directly.

Chair: Thank you very much indeed. That is a perfect note on which to end this evidence session. I thank all three of you for joining us. We have had a short period of time to cover quite a lot of issues. Please feel free to join the public gallery, if you wish, for the other two panels. Thank you very much indeed.

Examination of Witnesses

Witnesses: Deborah Haynes and Catherine Philp.



Q14 **Chair:** This is our second panel in our evidence session today. Can I welcome Deborah Haynes, Defence Editor, and Catherine Philp, Diplomatic Correspondent, from *The Times*? If I can start, Catherine, with you, I understand from contact we have had over this period that you became something of a conduit for views and commentary from communities and individuals directly involved in the unfolding events around Hurricane Irma. Can you tell us a little bit about how that came about?

Catherine Philp: Yes. I was contacted by a former representative of Anguilla, who put me in touch with some people. Communications were very difficult with Anguilla at the time, so there were a handful of people who I was able to speak to. They wanted to express that they had felt angry at seeing images of French and Dutch assistance to neighbouring territories under French and Dutch purview, and they felt neglected by the UK. They first got in touch to tell me about those feelings—that they had not received any help—and then as help started to get to the island, they told me about some of the issues that had happened with the delivery of that aid, which seemed to jar with the account that was being given by the Government here.

Q15 **Chair:** Can you elaborate a little on how that jarred?

Catherine Philp: Yes. I received a message about the arrival of the RFA Mounts Bay. That was the ship that was in the area at the time. There was a craft called a Mexeflote. That was sent to Anguilla. The ferry terminal had been damaged—90% destroyed. It was sent to carry heavy equipment and vehicles that were supposed to help clear roads where telegraph poles had fallen across roads and there was a lot of debris that needed moving.

I got a message saying that it had been unable to land on Anguilla, and that some marines had been landed on the island, but had only stayed for a matter of hours and had not performed all the tasks that they were then represented to have performed. This was on a Friday, and I think on the Sunday the Defence Secretary was on *The Andrew Marr Show* saying that they had restored power to the island, which was not the case. They had restored it, I believe, to the hospital. They had done some repairs at the hospital, but they were off the island that same day. I was told that they did not clear the airport, and that that was done by local Anguillans.

I am going to hand over to Deborah in a second because she spoke to the Ministry of Defence about some of these issues, including the photograph. One of the things she will talk about is that they said the heavy equipment was not needed and that is why it was not landed. My information from the island was that it was needed and they had failed to land it. They had tried and failed to land it, and it was needed because of



the amount of debris there was, including 40-foot telegraph poles lying across the main routes across the island.

Deborah Haynes: We were made aware of this. There was a quite iconic photograph that Downing Street chose to put up on their Twitter feed to illustrate the aid coming to Anguilla, and it was of this Mexeflote loaded with vehicles that appeared to be coming up on to the shore. The MoD, when I went to them, were honest about the fact that you have to realise that it is a crisis response, so things do not always go smoothly in a crisis, and they were doing the very best they could. Mounts Bay was pre-positioned there in order to respond to a hurricane, and a hurricane happened and they were responding.

They had had problems. The beach itself had obviously been affected by the storm, so it was very uneven and it is quite a difficult task to get these vehicles off a moving platform. Unfortunately, it did not come off. It was more of a case of maybe a bit of lack of coherence in the communication strategy, as opposed to some malicious intent to put out this false image. They were honest that the vehicles did not come off. They did say when I spoke to them that it was decided that the vehicles were not needed, but you think, "Why were they trying to put them onshore if they were not needed?". That did not really make much sense.

They then transported aid by helicopter. Like Catherine said, they gave one narrative about the effect of their aid and the Anguillans were giving another. What did come across is you have a bunch of marines and soldiers in a difficult situation doing the very best they could.

Q16 **Mr Lewis:** You have already touched on this to an extent, in terms of how people felt about the response. It occurs to me from what you have said that the majority of people were not initially satisfied with the response. I suppose the question is whether that changed. I am talking about ordinary people now, not officials or politicians. Is that always based on a feeling that they are neglected to start with? Do the majority of people feel let down, even not in the context of this response?

Catherine Philp: I did not get that impression. It was not something we really dwelt on. In the first instance it was this lag time—how long it took, even for Mounts Bay to get there. The French and the Dutch have a different situation, where they have troops based in the area. For the British military it was an amphibious way of approaching the issue. There was an issue of contrast. One person used the phrase, "We feel like third-class citizens", because of seeing that contrast with the French and the Dutch. That feeling did persist.

It took a week for the first aid plane to land and that was the one the Foreign Secretary went on. That brought more military personnel, but not much more aid, I understand. The power was out for a long time, much longer than it was represented to be, so that was a source of anguish, and communications were very difficult.



HOUSE OF COMMONS

Deborah Haynes: One of our journalists was sent out because the MoD did an embed. They invited a group of four or five journalists to come out. One of them sent me a little note when she knew that we were appearing here today. The idea to go was to go and see British aid being delivered. They went out to the Caribbean on 15 September, and they went to Turks and Caicos Islands first and then they went to BVI. The nature of embeds is that you are restricted. You are in the military system, so you do not get the access that you might want. They only had 20 minutes on the ground in Turks and Caicos to speak to people and they only had 40 minutes on the ground in BVI to speak to people—when they are allowed to speak to people.

She wrote a summary that said, “From the few conversations that I was able to have with local people, it appeared that while shifting boxes of aid from the backs of trucks and planes made good pictures for PR purposes, they were not the resources required at the time. The main issue faced by islanders was the lack of power, communications and transport. The boxes of aid were regarded as a drop in the ocean”. She said, “All in all, it seems that the most positive thing to come out of British efforts in the region was to have a presence on the streets. In the eyes of the islanders, this appeared to be the bulk of the British contribution”. That was in reference to the fact that BVI had the issue with the prison, so they were very much welcoming of the British presence to deal with that situation.

Q17 **Mrs Latham:** You spoke to quite a lot of people. Were any of them able to comment on whether different sponsoring countries were delivering to the different islands very differently from each other?

Catherine Philp: I mostly spoke to people on Anguilla and Saint Martin, the neighbouring island. One of the things that rankled was that they could see the lights on in Saint Martin very quickly, when they were still in darkness. It was mostly the speed of the response that they commented on, simply because they had people pre-positioned. I could not comment much further than that.

Deborah Haynes: HMS Ocean did then deploy. It was one of the biggest military deployments in recent times. It was about 2,000 military personnel in total. I am sure the MoD will give you their side of things. In terms of the circumstances, they did manage to mobilise an awful lot of troops out there, especially Royal Marines, to at least wave the British flag and be seen to be doing something.

Catherine Philp: Most of the complaints focused on the speed rather than the totality of the response. When it got going it was—

Mrs Latham: When it got going, it worked.

Catherine Philp: Yes, exactly.

Q18 **James Duddridge:** Has there been any evidence on the longer-term prospects for recovery? Are some citizens on the island thinking of



moving on, given the likelihood of other natural disasters in the future?

Catherine Philp: I have not heard of any planning to move on. I communicated with some people yesterday who said they were anxious about the long-term rehabilitation. They did not feel they had had much information about what was going to happen, in terms of spending from London.

Q19 **Mr Evans:** Was there any sense at all that, if it was termed inadequate, the inadequate response of the United Kingdom in relief was due to the fact that the rules were such that we could not spend the money that was needed?

Catherine Philp: There was a lot of money spent, and it came from elsewhere or has to be found from elsewhere. That was certainly something the islanders were aware of. There is some bitterness about that in general. Taking Anguilla as an example, because it is the one I know best, it is quite a poor population, but the GDP is distorted by the presence of some rich individuals. There is a frustration over that: that somehow it is not fairly judged on the population.

Mr Evans: That is fascinating. Thank you.

Q20 **Chris Law:** Following on from Nigel's question, you were talking about some bitterness felt. Was it partly because Saint Martin was up so readily and French services came quickly to assist? How is the feeling today? Do you still get reports from Anguilla? What is the ongoing situation?

Catherine Philp: The situation is much improved, but the bitterness remains. There is a lack of certainty about the future and about the rehabilitation. It is barely connected, but it came up in my discussions with them that there is incredible anxiety about the effect that Brexit will have on these territories. That is because of their proximity to the EU border and the interdependence of all of these islands. There is anxiety about how that will be affected by a hard border.

Chair: Thank you both very much indeed. We have had a short period of time with you, but your evidence has been incredibly important. We are really grateful to both of you for coming today. Please feel free to stay in the seated area when we take the third panel. Thank you very much indeed.

Deborah Haynes: Could I make one last point?

Chair: Of course.

Deborah Haynes: In relation to the military side of things, HMS Ocean provided a really important asset. Questions need to be asked about what will provide that asset going forward, given that that ship is being taken out of service next year. There are question marks about HMS Bulwark and Albion, two amphibious assault ships. The Ministry of



Defence needs to have sufficient ships to be able to conduct this kind of important work.

Chair: Thank you very much indeed, Deborah. Thank you both.

Examination of witnesses

Witnesses: the rt hon. Lord Bates, Air Vice-Marshal Edward Stringer, Richard Montgomery and Christina Scott.

Q21 **Chair:** Welcome. Thank you to the four of you for joining us. Our usual custom and practice is we go straight into the questions, but please feel free to introduce yourself when you first answer a question. Minister, welcome back to the Committee. Let me start by asking you, Minister, about this issue of the DAC rules. We had the Secretary of State before us last week. There are meetings going on as we speak in Paris regarding OECD-DAC. Is the UK proposing any specific changes that might enable the OTs we have heard from today to qualify for ODA, if only temporarily?

Lord Bates: Good morning. It is good to be here. I am privileged to be joined by three colleagues, who have all had direct responsibility in terms of the cross-Government response on this: Air Vice-Marshal Stringer, in terms of the response from the MoD; Richard Montgomery, in terms of the response from DFID; and Christina Scott, in terms of the response and recovery from the FCO, and who was also immediately previously the Governor of Anguilla. Hopefully that will be helpful in us being able to answer your questions going forward.

The straight answer to your question is that we do believe that there is a strong case for believing that the DAC rules should be reformed to allow the response in respect of BVI, Turks and Caicos and Anguilla, which hitherto would not be eligible to be categorised as aid under the current DAC rules, to be so. Our case, which the Secretary of State is making in Paris as we speak, is as follows. When small-island vulnerable states are hit by a catastrophe of this scale, these are extraordinary times that, as you have already heard this morning, can wipe out an entire GDP in terms of the situation. Because of the small nature of the islands and the populations involved, it is very difficult for them to be able to recover themselves. Therefore, we believe that it does fit within the general meaning of alleviating poverty, being mainly focused on development, and of course it is absolutely humanitarian.

We believe that would make a difference. We are making two proposals. One is that there should be a waiver of the rules for a period of 36 months to allow aid to go in and to allow the reconstruction to happen. Also, at the moment there is a weakness exposed in the current writing of the rules. There is no facility or ability for a country that has



graduated from eligibility for aid to be re-categorised, reassessed and re-entered onto the list. There are two elements here that are worth making the case for and that we believe would help in our response.

- Q22 **Chair:** Thank you. That is very clear. Let me just explore the first of those—the waiver for 36 months. Is it the proposal that that would apply only to small island states, or could it potentially apply if there were some sort of comparable natural disaster affecting another part of the world? Is this solely for small island states?

Lord Bates: It is specifically in the context of the letter that the Secretary of State wrote on 14 September, and then the second letter to the chair of the DAC on 26 September. It was specifically in relation to the three islands. Clearly, if there was a rule change in this respect agreed by colleagues on the DAC, then that is something that could be argued, should similar circumstances occur in the future.

- Q23 **James Duddridge:** Is the waiver retrospective?

Lord Bates: No, it would have to be forward-looking as a waiver. The rules are as they are now, so we have been operating as we are now. It is important to stress the point that the fact that these islands are not eligible has not impacted on the response so far.

Chair: Good. That was my next question.

Lord Bates: Our response has been general and full, and will continue to be. If the rules change, then of course that will allow us to change going forward, but we operate under the rules as they are.

- Q24 **Mr Evans:** You heard the evidence from the previous occupants of your chairs about the bitterness that was felt by some people, because of high-wealth individuals living on an island that has relatively few people living there. All of a sudden, you get dragged into a category that quite frankly 98% of the population are not in. There is a lot of poverty in some of these Caribbean islands, which exists alongside massive wealth. Is that not an argument in itself, as well, to say there should be exemptions where these catastrophes hit?

Lord Bates: It is a good point that you raise. In a quick follow up to Mr Duddridge's point, that was the reason for the argument for the three-year period. Going forward, that will allow the reconstruction, which I am sure we will be coming on to, which is a huge piece of building resilience, and learning the lessons from this, to be scored against ODA in respect of those territories.

In the case of the situation in terms of disparities, that is absolutely right. You are dealing with small populations. In BVI, for example, you have four main islands. You have a population of 28,000. One billionaire in a population, scored across, can actually change the average GNI per capita quite dramatically in these areas, so there is a reason to look again.



When the Secretary of State visited, she was quite struck that some of the islands were extraordinarily poor and seemed to have very little. I think it was Jost Van Dyke that she visited. The disparity between some of the wealthy images that you see and the reality on the ground is there.

There is another element to this. We have had a team out there. We very much understand the points that are being made that where countries are capable of recovering themselves, or where insurance can be brought in to cover losses, that should be the first call. We have many pressures on our budget at the present time. We have had a team out there between 9 and 16 October. They have been doing a needs assessment of what is required in terms of the recovery. That is going to be a critical piece of having what are going to be, let us face it, pretty tough encounters between us, in terms of resolving what we are prepared to use that aid for.

Q25 Chair: We are going to come on to some of those issues. Let me just ask one other question on the rules. Obviously, the rules are as they stand. In terms of a country like Anguilla, they could be in a position where they do qualify soon for ODA anyway, under the current rules, because of the economic effects of the hurricane. Could you tell us a bit about how this works? How quickly could the system be recalibrated so they might qualify? What are the implication of that for our support for their recovery and reconstruction?

Lord Bates: Let me bring in Richard Montgomery at this point to deal with that specifically.

Richard Montgomery: Starting with a technical answer to your question, given the size of the economy and the GDP estimates that we have, it is quite unlikely that these hurricanes would shock them back to a level of GDP that is below the ODA threshold. You are right to say Anguilla is the closest, because it is the poorest. Christina can tell us more; she was Governor there for several years. That is by far the poorest island, and it was very badly hit.

This plays to Lord Bates's comments about how we need to look at long-term recovery, because the degree of devastation was different. It was awful everywhere for those affected, of course, but, if you look at the big picture, then Turks and Caicos was perhaps less badly affected than Anguilla and BVI, in terms of numbers of people. Between Anguilla and BVI, you have different capabilities to respond. BVI has quite a lot of reserves. It has an ability to borrow more easily. Anguilla does not, and therefore deserves more attention in terms of the package that needs to be considered.

Q26 Chris Law: I wanted to ask questions about what we are doing in advance of these hurricanes. We heard today already from our witnesses that there were some delays in the aid arriving and the support. I want to know whether we are doing enough to analyse emerging weather threats, and warn those in the predicted paths to be able to prepare to



take action proactively.

Lord Bates: Could I lead off on that? In terms of the preparedness, we have been through this before. You were hearing before that hurricanes were a fact of life in that region, although people would rightly be outraged if we were not preparing for that. As a former Governor, Christina Scott can mention how there is a very well entrenched disaster preparedness report, activities and even exercises that have to go on. We have a Foreign Office disaster adviser, based in Miami, in the region, who is overseeing this and reporting back to the FCO crisis centre.

I will just pull out two elements. The first one is about what we were doing in peacetime before the hurricanes struck, and what the Government's response was to that. There are some long-term things. DFID was a key core funder in terms of the initial setting up of CDEMA—the Caribbean Disaster Emergency Management Agency—which is based in Barbados. We had a very important part in co-ordinating the CARICOM country responses there.

The second thing is that we have established the UK Caribbean Infrastructure Fund. One of its objectives is to build resilience within critical infrastructure in the Caribbean. We were also a founder of the Caribbean Catastrophe Risk Insurance Facility, which has been a great success. It has paid out \$55 million already in claims into some of these islands. The immediacy of insurance and the ability of insurance to reach very speedily and give assistance is part of the way for the future. We were a key mover and founder in that area.

There are strong links between the UK and Met Office in the region, where we send out hurricane and humanitarian alerts. As Mr Law will appreciate, weather systems that are developing, normally off the west coast of Africa, and then moving across can be tracked. It is possible to see them in advance.

On the second part and final part, if you just bear with me for a few seconds, I am going to read out the first week of what happened. This is worth putting on the record, if you will allow it. On 30 August, we detected the first signs of the weather system 1 before it was named as a hurricane in the eastern Atlantic. On 1 September, weather system 1 was upgraded to tropical storm Irma. On that same day, the first disaster management oversight committee meeting took place. We put an emergency response team on standby. There was £500,000 of Conflict, Stability and Security Fund bid monies submitted to assist non-ODA-eligible countries.

On 4 September, Irma becomes category 4. On 5 September, it becomes category 5. On 5 September, we deployed three humanitarian advisers to Jamaica. At that point, where we had been responding, France pre-positioned regionally based assets. We already had RFA Mounts Bay in the region. On 6 September, Irma hits Anguilla and passes over Barbuda. The first of our regular cross-Government meetings to



HOUSE OF COMMONS

co-ordinate a response to Irma took place. We opened an emergency operations room in Whitehall and deployed a team to Barbados. That is significant, because that is where the Caribbean Development Bank and CDEMA are, so we could ensure the situation was co-ordinated properly.

On 7 September, Irma makes landfall in Turks and Caicos. FCO crisis structures were activated. Mounts Bay was pre-positioned near Martinique. DFID deployed a logistician to Barbados. On 8 September, Mounts Bay arrived in Anguilla to deliver aid and stop a fuel leak in the main fuel storage. An Overseas Territories procurement and logistics team were deployed to Barbados. The first of 12 COBRA meetings took place. This one was chaired by the Defence Minister, but the Prime Minister chaired some at other stages. We announced a £32 million immediate pledge and £2 million of ODA support to deploy military assets. That was within 24 hours. Again, on 8 September, the first aircraft, the C-17, departed RAF Brize Norton.

I say all that to show that immediate trigger into action when we first detected it. It is important to get it on the record. It also places it in the context of what we had been doing in peacetime to ensure there was better co-ordination and preparation, which was very important. With your permission, can I bring in Air Vice-Marshal Stringer? He can add to some of the preparedness activities that were taking place at that time. We were using predominantly military facilities.

Air Vice-Marshal Stringer: It is important to point out that Mounts Bay is there for a reason. Previously we had a frigate doing the Atlantic Patrol Tasking North, as we call it. We changed that a couple of years ago to a very large specialist ship out there. I have got some handouts here if people want to look. There was some quite lazy journalism around the time that suggested, "The French have got two. We have only got one". You only have to look at the type, the quality, and the size of the ships to see that it is a totally false comparison.

Q27 **James Duddridge:** Can we have some detail?

Air Vice-Marshal Stringer: Yes, of course. Mounts Bay is a 16,000-tonne floating workshop and dock. As you heard from Deborah Haynes, it can float out this thing called a Mexeflote, which is a huge great ramp that can then take heavy plant ashore. It has got a very large helideck that can take the biggest helicopters. It has a workshop. It has a plant producing water. As I say, a floating workshop is the best way to think about it. For those of a certain age, it is Thunderbird 2.

In comparison, the French have a different posture, as you have heard from previous folk. They have what could be called small constabulary vessels there to do local presence year-round. They are 2,000-tonne-class corvettes. Those are not ships that can carry stores, people, heavy plant or do too much. They can carry a light helicopter for doing reconnaissance.



As you have heard already, Mounts Bay conducts a series of exercises to prepare the overseas territories for the inevitable hurricanes. She is doing good work even before hurricanes hit. Much has been said already about the different French and Dutch structure. Those are parts of France, so they are garrisoned. The stores they have there are in the way of the hurricane. Their troops and stores are as much a victim of the category 5 hurricane as the rest of the population. A fair amount of those stores were destroyed.

I am afraid I cannot comment on the state of the power supplies. When you hear the anecdotal evidence that lights seemed to be turned back on, I cannot comment on that. I can comment on the civil disturbance, because we were worried about that. As you have heard, there was a lot of civil disturbance in the French and Dutch territories, despite having the garrisons there already.

Q28 Chair: Sorry to interrupt, but can any of the other witnesses comment on the power-supply evidence that we were given by the journalists? Can anyone from either the FCO or DFID comment on that?

Richard Montgomery: I can dig through the file and see.

Chair: Write to us. Thank you. Sorry to interrupt. Carry on.

Air Vice-Marshal Stringer: Our policy is to have Mounts Bay, which can move out of the path of the storm and get in behind. Mounts Bay was providing relief to Anguilla while the storm system was still affecting all the other islands. If I could just now nail the talk about, "They were not there for very long", the reason they were not there for very long is because they were sorting Anguilla out as best as possible between Hurricanes Irma and Jose, then getting out of the way of Jose and going to the British Virgin Islands. Were I to carry on, as Lord Bates has done, I could show you how Mounts Bay was diving from place to place as the need was becoming apparent.

The policy then is that we move quite quickly. As the Minister has outlined, we had the military moving ahead of the COBRA meetings, based on our own appreciation of the situation as it was unfolding. Even though our forces were at 48 hours' notice to move, in fact the marines were at RAF Brize Norton within eight hours on the first night. You mentioned the first aircraft, but three left on that Friday. They all moved within around 24 hours of the COBRA sitting, against the 48-hour timeline. That is the speed with which we responded.

If you wanted me to stay on comparing that response to those of other nations, I wondered whether I could read this out. This is a routine report that came in at the back end of September—the monthly report from the UK liaison officer to the US Southern Command. For those who are aware of the US military structure, that is the command that was running the response in the Caribbean. This is what he told us: "The Op Ruman deployment"—Op Ruman being the UK military contribution—"has



HOUSE OF COMMONS

reinforced the UK's role as a key player in the region, as a useful ally with strong historical links, and as a trusted partner. The UK force was considerably larger than that deployed by Southern Command, but it was not the scale which gave the UK respect. Instead, it was the ease with which we deployed and sustained the force with only minimal support requests. The US received numerous requests for support from other nations deploying forces to the Caribbean region, and this consumed considerable staff effort and resource".

Given we have heard from the press already, this is quite instructive: "The US watched with interest the UK media reaction to our initial response to Irma". That is the UK. "Their"—the US—"view was that we"—the UK—"were faster to respond than the USA and France, but lost the early PR battle. They"—the US—"remained fearful of similar media criticism throughout".

Chair: Thank you very much indeed. A number of the pieces of evidence you have just given us anticipate some of the planned questions.

Q29 Chris Law: Some of the information that you have given us with regards to the speed and effectiveness is really helpful and informative. In hindsight, are there things you would like to have done better, in particular in terms of communicating what you were doing on the ground? Would that be one of the key areas?

Lord Bates: I will lead off on that one, and Richard will want to add to it as well. As we do through every major humanitarian operation, we are now engaged in a process of lesson-learning. That is a structured process being led by Sir Simon McDonald. He is reporting into the National Security Adviser, Mark Sedwill. That is a process that all departments, all of us here, are having to go through, being very critical about what we did and see how we could do better.

One area is communication. One can understand that, when these events are happening, emotions are running very high. People are scared, people are frightened and there is a cry for help. We do not want to get to having to respond to everyone, as it were. We need to understand that people are hurting. These are really traumatic and difficult times. We must make allowance for that, whilst at the same time having absolute confidence that we know what we are doing and respond in the same way.

I could offer my own anecdote from being at the Foreign Affairs development council on 11 September in Tallinn. I met with my counterparts from France and Holland to co-ordinate our response, because we were working very closely together in response to Irma at that point. I was making some comment about how we were being criticised and they said all the criticism, in France in particular, was, "Why is the response not as fast as the British?" That was especially because, in the case of some of the islands involved, they are actually part of



HOUSE OF COMMONS

French territory, as opposed to being Overseas Territories and independent in other cases.

There are lessons to learn from that. Probably there are lessons to learn about general security. We were hearing about that earlier from the Premier in terms of public order in BVI and the prison breakout, etc. There are always lessons to learn, and we are very eager to learn them.

Richard Montgomery: May I start by putting on record the answer to your question, Mr Chair, about Anguilla? 90% of electricity cables were brought down by Irma, so the energy situation was awful in the aftermath. Mounts Bay, charter flights and further military flights to Anguilla, which has a population of 15,000 people, have delivered 18 generators, and there have been over 2,300 litres of fuel delivered. This was a place that we put a lot of solar lanterns into—1,600 solar lanterns. The energy supply situation was critical. I think—Ed will correct me if I am wrong—that the Royal Marines did reinstall the electricity supply to the hospital in the first days afterwards, which was the critical infrastructure at the time, given injuries.

Going back to the lessons, a key lesson is that we lost the media war. I think we are concluding this from the process of preparing for this hearing. We have objective indicators, such as the military assessment there from the US and the amount of aid, in terms of tonnage and money, spent by other partners in neighbouring islands. Looking at those, the UK response far exceeds what other countries have done. Clearly, people are in great distress and it takes time to move ships and planes across vast distances to reach these places.

We can show we learned a lot of lessons from Ebola. One of the lessons from Ebola was having to surge staff across Whitehall. In the FCO-led crisis centre there were over 400 FCO staff and 200 DFID staff that did some sort of shift work. We brought those people in very quickly. We had set up the DFID humanitarian operations room before Irma had hit, because they were beginning to source and call down all the contracts for charter flights, as well as liaising with PJHQ and MoD.

There were a lot of lessons from Ebola¹ that we built on. Quickly setting up the joint taskforce, headed by a civilian working with Brigadier John Ridge in theatre, was an innovation that was suggested first by MoD, not by DFID. We had learned and applied a lot of lessons. As the regional director responsible for this, the first thing I did was ring up the people who had worked on Ebola to find out what lessons we had to draw on.

There are other lessons that will come out of our lesson-learning. They will be partly about the management of staff and managing a 24/7 shift system. There are lessons on consular support. There were over 3,500 consular calls from British nationals in these three territories. There are lessons to learn on the media side, on how we manage the staffing issue,

¹ Correction made on 03/11/17



and how we manage parallel crises, because of course the Burma crisis was unfolding at the same time. DFID is also involved in crises in Yemen, Syria, the DRC and Ethiopia, so that bandwidth needs to be managed.

DFID can show that we pulled down on our humanitarian roster, the people out there who are on our call-down system. We drew on the Stabilisation Unit, because we were under stretch. That is another surge mechanism across Whitehall. There are some positive lessons, but clearly there will be other lessons that we want to pull out.

Q30 Mrs Latham: Talking of the ships, what are we going to do next time if we are reducing the number of ships we have? Should we have a permanent presence in the Caribbean ready for just such a disaster?

Lord Bates: I want to dodge that particular question, because I understand the comments that have been made, particularly about amphibious landing craft, are part of a review and no decision has yet been made on that. I wondered if there were any comments that the Air Vice-Marshal could make on the naval capability.

Air Vice-Marshal Stringer: I think we have got the posture about right. We keep Mounts Bay there deliberately through the hurricane season. We then often put a smaller ship in outside the hurricane season, which can get into some of the smaller harbours, help with some of the consular effort and just fly the flag around some of the smaller islands. The smaller vessel then gets pulled out and Mounts gets put back in when the next hurricane season comes round. You have to work out how much risk you wish to buy out. After all, Mounts Bay has been adequate on most occasions.

There was the question about the other ships. As I say, I have got the graphic here. Ocean is a very capable platform. It is 20,000 tonnes against 16,000 tonnes of Mounts Bay. They are very comparable, and we are bringing in a whole range of new ships—the Tide-class, etc. You should not read too much into what is going on in the MoD at the moment as it looks at its force plan and its budget. We do have the ships that can cope with this. There are no plans at the moment to remove Mounts Bay from fulfilling the remit that she or another Bay-class does in the Caribbean.

Q31 Mrs Latham: Minister, of the £57 million allocated to the disaster relief of the Overseas Territories, how much was translated into material or funds delivered on the ground in each territory? How much was spent on physically shipping the kit and personnel across the globe? Does that include the cost of maintaining and dispatching the naval and military assets?

Lord Bates: In relation to that, the breakdown of the £62 million that we have—

Mrs Latham: Oh, it is £62 million.



HOUSE OF COMMONS

Lord Bates: £62 million was made up of allocations from different budgets. 33%—total £21 million—was allocated to DFID to be used for emergency relief and building supplies, contract of staff on the ground and contributions to the cost of local relief organisations. 58% of the total was allocated to cover MoD costs in respect of this. These were estimated according to the standard marginal costs calculators. The remaining 9% of the fund, which was £5 million, was allocated to the FCO, Home Office, Ministry of Justice and Department of Health, mainly for staff deployment costs in the immediate response.

In terms of the materials, a lot of the supplies that were being drawn on and being placed upon the C-17, other facilities and HMS Ocean were pre-purchased stock of supplies that we actually have. In the full accounting process, once that has worked its way through the system, that will come into the total as well, but that is how the £62 million is broken down at the present time.

Q32 **Mrs Latham:** How much was being taken as kit and personnel, and how long did it take? How long did it take for that physical building material to get there, with the personnel to do the jobs?

Lord Bates: Let me bring in the point of building materials. As a point of principle, a lot of the building materials are coming from Miami. They are coming from the United States. Also, where possible, they are being found within the region, particularly with timber. Sadly, with so much of the tree coverage being lost, there is a lot of fallen timber that needs to be used as well.

Richard Montgomery: We have a breakdown of all the timber, lumber and tools delivered on the different islands from different sources. In relation to rebuilding materials, most of it came on a major chartered boat, which was not that much smaller than HMS Ocean, and was dragged by tugs. I cannot remember where it came from.

Mrs Latham: Could you let us have the breakdown?

Chair: It would be useful to have a letter with the breakdown

Richard Montgomery: I am very happy to.

Q33 **Mrs Latham:** Minister, you say lots trees came down. You cannot use those trees straight away; they have to be cut, treated and dried. That is not going to be instant. When you said, "Loads of trees have come down so we need to use those", you cannot.

Lord Bates: That is a very fair point. The only point I was trying to make was that we want to utilise resources. We do not automatically want to ship everything to the region. We want to utilise what is already there.

Mrs Latham: They are islands, and they have to rely on a lot of stuff being imported all the time.



Q34 **Mr Lewis:** The 2012 White Paper on the Overseas Territories was very specific. It said UK and Overseas Territory Governments work together to reduce the risk of disasters and to build disaster management capacity. It referred very distinctly to Governors' special training and annual FCO hurricane seminars. Now is the time to ask whether those preparations were adequate and appropriate.

Christina Scott: The Foreign Office does provide training, not just for Governors and other officials heading out to post. There is a special course run at the Bournemouth University that we are all required to go on in advance of our postings. More particularly, we use the disaster management expert, who we fund and who is located in Miami, to provide training across the Caribbean Overseas Territories. We work jointly with the MoD on their ship visits to make sure that we practice the capabilities and bringing aid onto the island outside.

As mentioned, there is a lessons process going on. We will have to reflect on whether we put everything in place that we needed to. Territories themselves, who have their own disaster response teams, will be doing their own assessments of the lessons they have learned. We will need to put those things together to look again at whether our focus for the spending that we are already doing on disaster management is in the right place.

Chair: Thank you very much indeed for your evidence today. It has been very helpful. We have covered a lot of territory with you, as well as with the two previous panels.