

Administration of Donald J. Trump, 2018

Remarks at a Briefing by Secretary of Homeland Security Kirstjen M. Nielsen and Federal Emergency Management Agency Administrator W. Brock Long on Hurricane Michael and an Exchange With Reporters

October 10, 2018

The President. So they're reporting that this is one of the most powerful hurricanes ever to hit our country. Is that actually a fact?

Administrator Long. Well, you know, so in this area, this would be the most intense hurricane that's struck this area since 1851, if I remember correctly. So this would be——

The President. A long time.

Secretary Nielsen. This is a big storm.

Administrator Long. Yes. Intense. Very intense. But——

The President. And this one is going to be heavy rain? Or is it going to be the winds that are going to be the problem?

Administrator Long. Storm surge and winds. And then, for Georgia, they're going to see high inland winds, so you may see sustained category 1, category 2 winds with higher gusts that are associated. So we're expecting a lot of damage inland as well. But we have leaned forward with Governor Scott and his staff and Director Wes Maul down in Florida. They've been leaning forward as well.

And right now there's no identified shortfalls when it comes to prepositioning. So we have teams, equipment, personnel not only with and embedded with State of Florida staff and some of the local county emergency managers. But we have equipment teams staged in Maxwell, to Atlanta, to Orlando ready to move in once we can—once the elements subside and push through, and then we can move in and attack the areas hardest hit.

Secretary Nielsen. We're working really closely with the private sector. So we've got 14 States—different utilities from 14 States are already ready to——

The President. Yes, we're very well lined up.

Secretary Nielsen. ——are ready to help with any energy outages.

The President. Electric companies are from all over the country, actually. They're all lined up. As soon as it goes by, they're going to be working. And we've got food supplies, food chains. We're working with all of the States.

And let me ask you: This started out very innocently a week ago. This was a small storm in an area they never thought. They said it grew into a monster.

Administrator Long. Right. So the first initial indications from the National Hurricane Center started coming in around Saturday. And they picked it up and started raising the flag that, "Hey, this system is going to go from a wave to a depression, and it could potentially rapidly intensify." And unfortunately, that's typical of the Gulf Coast.

And when they do this, citizens have less time to prepare or heed the warnings. We are concerned that many citizens chose not to heed those warnings, but we're prepared with search-and-rescue teams to try to go in and do what we can.

The President. Any questions for us?

Q. Yes. Are you concerned that folks in Florida and Georgia in the storm's path weren't prepared enough and that there aren't enough evacuations? To follow up on that point—
[inaudible].

Administrator Long. Yesterday we were concerned that we were not—we did not like the level of evacuation activity that we were seeing. And, you know, Governor Scott—kudos to him—he leaned forward, used the new wireless emergency alert capabilities that we have, and sent out a text—you know, text messaging last night. Leaned forward and said, "Hey, get out of there."

And so we were trying to get people to really take the storm seriously. A lot of people did heed the warning, but then there are those who chose to stay behind. And unfortunately, first responders may not be able to go in and rescue those who dial 9-1-1 at this point.

Hurricane Michael Preparedness Efforts

Q. Mr. President, can you give us a sense of the officials you've been in contact with? Have you spoken to the Governor?

The President. I have. I have. And the other Governors, depending on what happens here—but they are all either contacted or are in the process. I had a long talk with Rick Scott, Governor Scott of Florida. Very well coordinated with all of the States.

And you know, one of the things that must be said is it's not so easy for some of these people to leave. Some of the areas are very poor. It's not easy for a person without the necessary money to leave. So what we've done is, we've sent buses. We've sent a lot of different—we're doing a lot of different things to try and remove people from the area. But a lot of people are very poor in certain of those areas, and it's very tough for them to leave. That's one of the problems you're finding, I guess, huh?

Administrator Long. Yes. In some cases, you know, what we asked to do on blue sky days is ask people, who may not have the means or the mechanisms to get out of town, to register with their local emergency management agencies—and Florida has been pretty robust in doing that—so that we have some idea of how to preplan for that.

And then, we do what we can to be able to support the movement of people. When it comes to Georgia, you know, we're not evacuating for storm surge in Georgia. This is going to be high winds. So we're asking people to get within a facility that can withstand the winds and try to shelter in place or seek out public shelters that may be open in Southwest Georgia.

The President. But if you look at the size—how long it is. Take a look at that. And the red area basically is the area where it's going to hit pretty heavily. And that's a lot of shore. That's a lot of land.

Secretary Nielsen. Yes, sir. There will be 4 feet of storm surge all the way down to Tampa Bay, which, as you know, is very low lying and floods very easily. But to give you that idea of the breadth of its path, it is quite large.

The President. It's almost the entire size of the Gulf. When you look at it topically, it's almost the entire size of the Gulf. And they haven't seen that. Maybe they haven't seen that at all. Nobody has seen that before.

Administrator Long. The eye diameter is pretty wide, which unfortunately is not good news as it makes landfall. So some people may say it's similar to an EF3 tornado making landfall in areas that are close to the eye. So it's—

Q. Did last year's hurricane in the area impair the infrastructure or weaken it in any way that they would struggle to deal with this year's hurricane?

Administrator Long. Not in this area. Irma did not really heavily impact the Florida Panhandle. Most of the hits to Irma—from Irma was in the southwest portion of Florida and then moved up through and created some issues in the Jacksonville area and the northeastern portion.

But this area has been a long time since it's been hit, so the vegetation hasn't been stressed. And we're going to see a lot of damage and devastation, unfortunately. And we have to set the citizens' expectations that the power is going to be out for a while. And what FEMA's role in that is, as the Secretary was saying, our partnership with the private sector is that we work with the Florida Power and Lights, the Gulf Powers, the Southern Companies, the Georgia Powers, to be able to help them facilitate their mutual aid to come in.

And they've got power crews coming in from multiple states across the country that are already prestaged. And when we're hit, we work with them to do what's called "first push debris" to get the roadways open and so that we can get them down the roadways to start fixing the power. But that's going to take some time.

The President's Travel to Erie, PA

Q. Mr. President, do you plan on changing any of your travel schedule—[inaudible]?

The President. Well, we don't know. I know we're—I was going to Pennsylvania. It looks like there are thousands of people already lined up, and probably, we'll do that tonight. And we're going to go down here as soon as we can. We don't want to interfere with anybody, but we want to go as soon as possible.

You have—you know, right nearby, we have thousands of people going tonight, and they've already—many are there already.

What time are we—were you going to be there? What time are we planning on that?

Q. The rally tonight is scheduled for 7 o'clock.

The President. Yes, it's about 7.

Q. Are you going to go ahead?

The President. Well, I don't know what to do, because you have so many people already there, and it's sort of unfair to them. So it's a mix. I'll be totally focused on this. But we'll make a determination over the next little while. But you have people that——

Hurricane Michael Preparedness Efforts

Q. Does it make it for difficult for you to pay attention to the storms if you're doing the rallies?

The President. No, because I have great people, including these two. But I have great people. And it wouldn't make any difference in that sense. But I would like to be seeing what's going on. We want to get down there as soon as possible.

At the same time, I don't want to go down where we're interfering with the people: first responders, the FEMA people. I want them to focus on the storm, not me. So we'll probably look to Sunday or Monday to go down and meet with the Governors, meet with everybody, and do what we have to do, like we did in North Carolina, South Carolina, where that worked out really well.

Now, they're going to get hit also.

Secretary Nielsen. Yes, sir.

The President. I mean, North Carolina and South Carolina are going to get a lot of water. Nothing like they had 2 weeks ago. But they're going to get a lot of water also, and that water is still draining out. So this is a pretty big problem. I really worry a little bit about South Carolina and North Carolina, from the standpoint they're already saturated, and they're going to get a reasonable hit. Right?

Administrator Long. Right, yes. They will. So you're going to see as much as 8—you know, possibly 8 inches in isolated areas through South Carolina and North Carolina. And as I said, it's all about the rivers being able to process the water from Florence. And some of them haven't had the time to do that, so this doesn't help.

Imprisoned Saudi Journalist Raif Badawi

Q. President Trump, should Saudi Arabia release the journalist Raif Badawi?

The President. I will have to take a look at it exactly. When you say release the journalist, who are you talking about?

Q. They have imprisoned a journalist named Raif Badawi, and they—[inaudible].

The President. That I'd have to look into. I'm not familiar with it.

Disappearance of Saudi Journalist Jamal Khashoggi

Q. Can I ask you about Jamal Khashoggi?

The President. Yes.

Q. Are you concerned that he's dead? And do you hold the Saudi Government responsible?

The President. I would be certainly concerned. In fact, we have a call in to his wife.

Q. Do you think he's dead, Mr. President?

The President. His wife wrote us a letter and addressed it to my wife and myself. And we're in contact with her now, and we want to bring her to the White House. It's a very sad situation. It's a very bad situation. And we want to get to the bottom of it.

Q. Do you think he's dead, Mr. President?

The President. I don't want to make—I don't want to say that. I hope he's not. I hope he's not.

Q. Would you hold the Saudi Government responsible?

The President. Well, I have to find out who did it. But people saw him go in, but they didn't see him come out, as they understand it. And we're going to take a very serious look at it. It's a terrible thing.

Q. Have you spoken to the Saudis?

The President. I'd rather not say. But the answer is yes. [Laughter]

Q. Can you give us a sense of when his wife, fiancée, might be coming to the White House, and your message to her?

The President. I would say fairly quickly. I would say fairly quickly. They're in touch. You may just speak to First Lady's folks because they're in touch, and she'll be most likely coming to the White House. We'll work on it together. It's a terrible thing.

Q. Lindsey Graham says there will be hell to pay if the Saudis are, in fact, responsible. Do you share that view?

The President. Well, Lindsey can speak for himself. But this is a bad situation. We cannot let this happen to reporters, to anybody. We can't let this happen. And we're going to get the bottom of it. Okay? But you may want to speak to the First Lady's office about it.

Disappearance of Saudi Journalist Jamal Khashoggi

Q. Mr. President, who did you talk to in the Saudi Government?

The President. I'd rather not say, but at a very high level.

Q. Was it to King Salman?

The President. The highest level. Let me say this: It's the highest level. Okay?

Q. In the last couple days? The last week?

The President. Yes. More—and more than once.

Saudi Arabia-U.S. Relations

Q. You had mentioned that you spoke with King Salman. So, I mean, the highest level.

The President. Well, I do anyway. And I've always found him to be a fine man. We've had a very good relationship. I'm not happy about this. We have to see what happens.

Q. Did it come——

The President. We have to see what happens. Nobody knows what happened yet. They don't know over there. But it's a very serious situation, and it's something we're taking very seriously. Okay?

Iranian Oil Sales

Q. Mr. President, several countries, like India and China, are planning to buy oil from Iran, even after November 1. What is the message to those countries?

The President. We'll take care of that. We'll take care of that.

South Korea

Q. Mr. President, there's a report out of Seoul today that the South Korean Government is considering lifting some sanctions against—the South Korean Government is considering lifting——

The President. Well, they won't do it without our approval. They do nothing without our approval.

Q. Have you been in contact with the South Korean President?

The President. Yes. They do nothing without our approval.

Presidential Pardons and Commutations

Q. President Trump, do you have plans to release more people like Alice Johnson?

The President. We'll talk to you about that later.

Q. Are you any closer to picking a replacement for Ambassador Haley?

The President. And by the way, when we get—Alice Johnson is such a great person, such a great case. I'd like to find a lot of people like Alice Johnson. And there are a lot of people that are in a situation like that, and we are actively looking for those situations. She's a terrific woman. I've been watching her a lot. And what a great spokesman she is for that situation. And that's

covering a lot of people. There are a lot of people like that that will unfortunately be locked up for many, many years. And there's no reason for it.

So we'll be—we are looking for—we are actively looking for other situations exactly like that.

Potential Successors to U.S. Permanent Representative to the United Nations Nikki R. Haley

Q. Would you consider Dina Powell the frontrunner to U.N. Ambassador?

The President. No, but she's somebody we're talking to. We like Dina. Dina did great here. She then went back into the private sector for a while, but she always wanted to come back. She loves this administration. So we're certainly looking at Dina, and we're looking at others. There's some tremendously talented people. Nikki is going to be here until the end of the year. Nikki is our friend. She's been great. I want whoever it is to spend some time with Nikki before Nikki goes out and gets herself a job and, hopefully, does—she's going to make a lot of money. And I think Nikki will come back in some form too. But she's an extraordinary person, good person.

But we're looking at many people. Many people want that job.

Resignation of U.S. Permanent Representative to the United Nations Nikki R. Haley

Q. Mr. President, any concern about the fact that she announced her departure before the midterms? Some here——

The President. No, there's no good time. I mean, there will be no good time. She told me about this a long time ago. And frankly, it's—you know, almost 4 weeks. So it's not that bad. No, I don't think so at all. I thought it was very elegantly done.

If she waited until after, then they'd say, "Oh, she . . ." You know, if we win, they'd say, why is she doing it? And if we lose, they'd say, oh, well that's obvious why she's doing it. Okay? So there's really no good time to do it.

But she and I had spoken at least 6 months ago. Maybe even a year ago, we had conversations. She wanted to be here about 2 years. And I think the point really was, last week at the United Nations, she wanted to get through that and then go probably into the private sector for a while. And I'm sure she's going to come back into Government, because she's a terrific person.

Potential Successors to U.S. Permanent Representative to the United Nations Nikki R. Haley

Q. What's the vetting process like, Mr. President? What are you looking for in your next U.N. Ambassador?

The President. Very strong vetting. But some of the people we've already vetted. Some of the people are with us. We're looking at people that are already with us. And we have some incredible talent in this administration. We have some great, great talent. And they've already been vetted. They're already approved.

Any other questions on this?

India's Purchase of Military Equipment From Russia

Q. Mr. President, one more question. Last week, India signed an agreement with Russia to purchase the S-400 missile defense system——

The President. Yes, I know they did.

Q. —for \$5.4 billion. Would CAATSA sanctions apply to India? Or are you planning to do—[inaudible]?

The President. India is going to find out, aren't they?

Q. Are you planning to give them a waiver?

The President. India will find out.

Q. When?

The President. You'll see. Sooner than you think.

Q. Can—I do have another question on this.

The President. Yes.

Hurricane Michael Preparedness Efforts

Q. You talked a lot about the size and the scope of it. Can you help us understand just how big it's going to be? Florence was a historic storm. Is it going to be bigger than Florence? How should we think about the size and the magnitude?

Administrator Long. Well, for this area of the Florida Panhandle, it's going to be historic. I mean, this is the worst hit that they've had in recent history. You know, you've only—it's cat 4 going in. What else can we say?

The President. Very rare that you see a 4.

Secretary Nielsen. That's about 150 miles per hour right now.

The President. And these winds are—yes, well——

Secretary Nielsen. I mean, this is a very serious storm.

The President. And much more in certain areas.

Hurricane Michael Preparedness Efforts

Q. How many people are unable to evacuate? Is there an estimate?

The President. Many. Many.

Q. Is it, like, thousands or——

The President. You have poor people. It's very sad. And they are unable. More than we would like. More than we would like. And you know, you have people that are stuck. They're just stuck there.

We're moving a lot of people out, but you have some people that don't want to go out. They own a home, and they just don't want to go out. And you can't force them to go out.

But these are great people that—I love this area. I love it. There's something about the people in the area. And they will be okay. They are strong, smart, wonderful people. But you have certain sections where, really, you have pretty extreme poverty; you don't have money. And it's very hard for those people. But we're moving a lot out.

Hurricane Michael Preparedness Efforts

Q. Do you have a message for those who are in the storm's active path that haven't evacuated?

The President. I say, "God bless you all." That's my message, because that's what it is. The storm is there. I mean, that storm is there. It's, sort of, too late to do anything about it now from the standpoint of moving.

Tell us about that. If somebody said—they're watching us now, and they want to leave, it's—
—

Administrator Long. Yes. The window to evacuate has come to a close. I mean, you know, once—you know, in some cases——

The President. Fast moving.

Administrator Long.——on these barrier islands, they have to shut down the drawbridges at certain sustained winds. And quite honestly, the ocean has already started rising in some of those areas where we're anticipating the storm surge.

And as I said earlier, the most important thing is, is that if you're in an area and you can't get out of that area, try to get elevated, and try to get into a facility that you think can withstand the winds.

Hurricane Michael Preparedness Efforts

Q. Is there anything that you're doing for this storm differently than you did for Hurricanes Maria or any of the other past hurricanes?

Administrator Long. You know what? We're putting the full force of the Federal Government, the firepower of the Federal Government down, and prestaging to be able to help our State partners. We don't treat——

The President. But I do think we're trying to move people more here because of the winds. We're worried about the houses. You know, these houses weren't built for 180-mile-an-hour winds. You have wind gusts up to 185, they say. That's as bad as—pretty much as bad as it can get. And these houses aren't built for that kind of destruction.

So I think more than anything else, we're trying to move more people out than we've ever before.

Administrator Long. I think what was different was Governor Scott leaning forward and using the wireless emergency alert. And I think that's the first time that it's actually been used in this platform, to my knowledge.

The President. Right.

Administrator Long. And you know, just trying to hammer home the point.

Secretary Nielsen. That was a great way to communicate with those barrier islands you see, using that alert system.

Hurricane Michael Preparedness Efforts

Q. A lot of folks, I think, woke up, and they were surprised when they saw category 4. Were State and local officials, or was the Federal Government, in any way caught off guard by the strength of this?

Administrator Long. FEMA was not, by any means, and neither was the State of Florida. You know, the bottom line is, is that any time we're dealing with a Gulf Coast storm, we always plan for one category, possibly two, higher, because we understand that trying to forecast the intensity of these storms is very difficult for the National Hurricane Center to do. So therefore, we always plan one or two categories higher than what's actually forecast days in advance, because

we know that the window to actually move people into position and get ready shuts pretty quickly in Gulf Coast storms, because of the—[inaudible].

Secretary Nielsen. This is why we have national hurricane season, right? I mean, the whole season we encourage everybody to be prepared, have your kits, know how you'll communicate with your family, know your evacuation route. Because sometimes, they increase in intensity so quickly. If you're thinking about it then for the first time, you're not going to be safe. So that's why we have the season. During that whole season, you should be prepared for a hurricane.

The President. Well, this was projected to be a storm 3 days ago, not a hurricane. And it grew, and it grew as rapidly as anything they've ever seen. That's the problem. And we're very, very prepared. We have massive amounts of food and water that gets brought in immediately as it's leaving. I mean, literally, we follow it right in.

And the electrical folks and, you know, the different electrical companies, they have thousands—they're going to have over 10,000 people, and they're literally waiting, and they go and follow it in. They have to clear out the streets. But they literally follow it right in.

So that's going to be okay. I mean, the thing we're worried about is that initial—the wind. Because supposedly, if you believe everything you're seeing not only from our people, if you see it on television, they haven't seen winds like this. So this is different than a lot of water, which is bad too. But they have not seen winds like this in a long time.

Administrator Long. Long time, yes. You can replace all the infrastructures. Yes.

The President. Some of it they had almost 200 miles an hour, and I've never even heard of that before. I've never heard of it. It's almost like a big—it's like a big tornado, a massive tornado. So we have to be very careful, and we just hope the structures can hold up. And if they can't, we hope people aren't in those structures; that they were able to get out.

Well, thank you all very much. We appreciate you very much.

Disappearance of Saudi Journalist Jamal Khashoggi

Q. You talked about Jamal Khashoggi. Do you have a message to the Saudi Government? Are you demanding information on—[inaudible]?

The President. Yes, we are. We're demanding everything. And we want to see what's going on here. That's a bad situation. And frankly, the fact that it's a reporter, you could say, in many respects, it makes it—it brings it to a level.

It's a very serious situation for us and for this White House. We do not like seeing what's going on. Now, as you know, they're saying we had nothing to do with it. But so far, everyone is saying they had nothing to do with it. And it's inside of Turkey. And the Turkish Government is working very strongly so far, so we'll see what happens.

Q. Sounds like you don't buy their denials.

The President. Well, I want to see what happens. And we're working very closely with Turkey, and I think we'll get to the bottom of it.

Thank you all very much. Thank you.

NOTE: The President spoke at 12:12 p.m. in the Oval Office at the White House. In his remarks, he referred to Hatice Cengiz, fiancée of Mr. Khashoggi; former Deputy National Security Adviser for Strategy Dina Habib Powell, in her capacity as partner in the investment banking division at Goldman Sachs; Sen. Lindsey O. Graham; and Memphis, TN, resident Alice Marie Johnson, whose lifetime prison sentence was commuted by the President on June 6. Administrator Long

referred to Florida Emergency Management Division Director Wes Maul. A reporter referred to President Moon Jae-in of South Korea. The transcript released by the Office of the Press Secretary also included the opening remarks of Secretary Nielsen and Administrator Long.

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