

Administration of Joseph R. Biden, Jr., 2023

Remarks at the Federal Emergency Management Agency Headquarters and an Exchange With Reporters

August 31, 2023

The President. Well, I don't know why I'm paying attention to these few guys up here, instead of everybody, but all kidding aside, my mother would say——

[At this point, the President turned to briefly address Federal Emergency Management Agency staff members behind him.]

——"I apologize for my back." *[Laughter]* I apologize.

But, folks, look, yesterday I convened the entire Cabinet for a long meeting to make sure that we had a whole-of-Government response. Every single Cabinet agency has some contribution they can make and some responsibility.

And I'm here at FEMA today. Just a few minutes ago, I received a call from your Administrator and—Criswell—and—who's in Florida and helping them recover—at least doing the initial assessment of that category 3 storm that made landfill [landfall; White House correction].

And this morning I spoke again—we're—it seems like we should be on direct dial, the two of us, Governor DeSantis and I. We spoke again this morning, and I let him know that I approved his major disaster declaration.

And I also spoke with Governor McMasters [McMaster; White House correction] and with the—for South Carolina's emergency declaration as well. And I spoke the day before to the Governors of not just Florida and South Carolina, but of North Carolina as well as Georgia.

And look, it means we're making available Federal assistance for Florida survivors, whose homes were damaged or destroyed, by the declaration that I agreed to. And we're helping both Florida and South Carolina with the delivery of meals, waters, and debris removal that's going to help both States begin their road to recovery and do it immediately.

But before we do anything, I'm here to thank all of you. And I really mean this.

[The President addressed staff members behind him as follows.]

Thank you, thank you, thank you. You are making an incredible contribution.

I mean, it's—I don't think—I hope the American people have a sense of—and it's hard to understand it because, you know, we usually don't—we're not this engaged this often. But this last couple of years with climate change and—really kicking in, you guys are going 24 hours a day and 365 days a year. And it seems to just keep piling up.

And I mean it sincerely: I admire—I admire—what you do. I've been to almost every one of the areas you're talking about, that you've had to deal with. And your sister—your brother and sister organizations—from the Coast Guard, military—I mean, across the board, it's amazing the sacrifices and, I might add, risks—risks—your folks are taking out in the field. And so thank you, thank you, thank you.

It's important the American people understand it.

[The President resumed his remarks at the podium.]

Because we're in a situation where, you know, we're—how can I say it? There's still some deniers out there in terms of whether or not climate change has anything to do with any of this, and we're going to need a whole hell of a lot more money to deal with emergency appropriations, to deal with all you're taking care of.

And on behalf of the country, I want to deliver the heartfelt thanks of—to the emergency personnel in our communities all across the Federal Government, including right here—all of you in front of me—FEMA's National Response Coordination Center.

And those out on Maui, you know, you've—it's just amazing. You've seen it. Some of you have been there. It's just pure devastation, that whole part of the island just leveled. There's nothing left.

And before this week's storm, we predeployed 1,500 Federal personnel and Coast Guard throughout the Southeast. Federal search-and-rescue teams have been helping people whose homes have been surrounded and inundated by water. And FEMA and the Small Business Administration are on the ground to help residents whose homes and businesses have been destroyed or damaged.

And I want to, again, thank you all. It really, really, really matters.

And one more thing: Every American expects FEMA will show up, and when they—in the middle of a disaster. And I'm calling on Congress to make sure you're able and have the funds to be able to continue to show up and meet the needs of the American people to deal with immediate crises that we're facing right now, as well as the long-term commitments that we have to make to finish the job in Maui and elsewhere.

Showing up for the moment to save the lives is critically important, but that's just the beginning. Just the beginning. And some of this is going to take months and years to make sure we restore the people to the circumstances they were at before this disaster hit.

And as I said, you know, and—to the people of Florida and throughout the Southeast, I'm here to make clear that our Nation has your back. And we are not going to—we're not going to walk away. We're not going to give up. We're not going to slow down.

And again, you know, we—we're in a situation where—how can I say it? Some of my colleagues—my former colleagues in the Senate and people I work with every day in the United States Senate think that this disaster relief money we're asking to continue to finish the job so far and have enough money to continue to work to save the American people's—their lives, their homes, their well-being, is somehow—I don't know—not needed or—I'm not even sure what their thinking is.

But we need this money done. We need this disaster relief request met. And we need to do it in September. We can't wait.

But I'll take a few questions from the press if you have any right now. But then I'm going to go talk to these folks.

Opioid Epidemic/Drug Interdiction Efforts

Q. President Biden, do you have any comment on Overdose Awareness Day?

The President. Yes. Look, I've been dealing with the drug epidemic in America since I was the chairman of the Judiciary Committee when I was a U.S. Senator. And it has, in many cases, gotten much worse because of the nature of the drugs that are being consumed.

And fentanyl is a new and really, really dangerous addition. More people—more young people—no, not just young people have been dying as a consequence of ingesting fentanyl. Sometimes it's not even known it's in the drug they're taking.

And one of the other things I'm—I've been asking the Congress for—there was a need of about \$15 billion along the border to be able to deal with the technology needed to be able to determine whether or not this—these precursor drugs are making it into Mexico or into the United States and dealing with that. So there's more to do there as well.

Q. Have you spoken to Leader McConnell?

Potential Lapse in Federal Government Funding/Federal Emergency Management Agency Funding

Q. Mr. President, are you concerned about a Government shutdown, and how would that affect the work that's being done here at FEMA?

The President. It would be a serious, serious problem. I'm hoping that there's greater maturity to prevent that from happening than some think.

Senate Minority Leader A. Mitchell McConnell

Q. Sir, have you spoken to Leader McConnell?

The President. Yes, I have. I spoke to Mitch. He's a friend. And I spoke to him today. And you know, he was his old self on the telephone.

And having a little understanding of dealing with neurosurgeons and people and—and one of the leading women on my staff, her husband is a neurosurgeon as well. It's not at all unusual to have the response that sometimes happens to Mitch when you've had a severe concussion. It's part of a—it's part of the recovery.

And so I'm confident he's going to be back to his old self.

Q. President Biden, do you have any concerns about his ability to do his job?

The President. No.

Q. Do you have any concerns about his ability——

The President. I don't.

Q. President Biden, Speaker McCarthy——

The President. Do you want to talk to me about——

Q. Will you give your bank records to Congress, as Speaker McCarthy requests?

The President. Do you—do you want me—[laughter]. Let's talk about why I'm here.

Q. Will you give your bank records to Congress, as Speaker McCarthy requests?

President Xi Jinping of China

Q. I just have one question about President Xi. Are you expecting President Xi to attend the G-20 summit?

The President. The answer is, I hope he attends the G summit—20 summit.

Thank you. All right.

The President's Travel to Florida

Q. Will you be going to Florida, sir? Are you going to Florida?

The President. By the way, I am going to Florida. I am going to——

Q. [*Inaudible*]—bank records——

The President. I'm going to Florida Saturday morning.

NOTE: The President spoke at 2:08 p.m. in the National Response Coordination Center. In his remarks, he referred to Gov. Ronald D. DeSantis of Florida; Gov. Henry D. McMaster of South Carolina; Gov. Roy A. Cooper III of North Carolina; Gov. Brian P. Kemp of Georgia; and Homeland Security Adviser Elizabeth D. Sherwood-Randall and her husband Jeffrey B. Randall, a neurosurgeon with Sutter Health in Castro Valley, CA.

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