

Administration of Joseph R. Biden, Jr., 2024

Remarks on Hurricane Helene Response and Recovery Efforts and an Exchange With Reporters

September 30, 2024

The President. Hello, folks. Good morning.

To state the obvious, over the weekend, we had devastating storms in the South. I spoke with—for a couple hours with leaders yesterday affected by the hurricane and—Governor Kemp of Georgia, Governor Cooper of North Carolina, county officials in the Big Bend region of Florida, and other leaders in South Carolina and Tennessee about the broad and devastating impacts of Hurricane Helene.

It's not just a catastrophic storm, it's a historic history-making storm—the entire Southeast and Appalachia. Damage from the hurricane stretches across at least 10 States. Winds over 120 miles an hour in some places. Storm surges up to 15 feet and record flooding.

Communities are devastated. Loved ones waiting, not sure if their loved ones are okay because they can't contact them because there's no cell phone connections. Many more folks displaced with no idea when they'll be able to be—return to their home, if ever—if there's a home to return to.

So we're keeping our—we're keeping them all in our prayers and all the lives lost—those particularly that are unaccounted for—there's nothing like wondering, "Is my husband, wife, son, daughter, mother, father alive?"—and many more who remain without electricity, water, food, and communications and whose homes and businesses have washed away in an instant.

I want them to know we are not leaving until the job is done.

I also want you to know I'm committed to traveling to the impacted areas as soon as possible. But I've been told that it'd be disruptive if I did it right now. We will not do that at the risk of diverting or delaying any—any—of the response assets needed to deal with this crisis.

My first responsibility is to get all the help needed to those impacted areas. And I expect to be there—

[At this point, the President coughed.]

Excuse me, I have a cold—I expect to be there later this week.

I and my team are in constant contact with the Governors, mayors, and local leaders. The head of FEMA, Deanne Griswell [Criswell; White House correction], is on the ground now in northern—in North Carolina. She's going to stay in Asheville and the Appalachia region for the foreseeable future.

There's been reports of over 100 dead and—as a consequence of this storm, and there are reports of up 600 million—600 people unaccounted for because they can't be contacted. God willing, they're alive, but there is no way to contact them, again, because of the lack of cell phone coverage.

I've directed my team to provide every—every—available resource as fast as possible to your communities to rescue, recover, and to begin rebuilding.

In addition to FEMA—it includes the Federal Communications Commission to help establish communications capability, the National Guard, the Army Corps of Engineers, and the

Department of Defense are going to provide all the resources at its disposal to rescue and assist in clearing debris and delivering lifesaving supplies.

So far, that's over 3,600 personnel deployed. That number is growing by the day.

I quickly approved requests from Governors of Florida, North Carolina, South Carolina, Tennessee, Georgia, Virginia, and Alabama for an emergency declaration. And I approved additional requests for the Governors of North Carolina, Florida, South Carolina and—for a disaster declaration to pay for debris removal, provide financial assistance directly—directly—to survivors.

FEMA and the Small Business Administration are there to help the residents whose homes and businesses were literally destroyed, washed away or blown away.

And the Federal search-and-rescue teams have been working side by side with State and local officials and partners in very treacherous conditions to find those who are missing, and they'll not rest until everyone is accounted for.

And I want to thank all the first responders and everyone who has been working around the clock. One of the brave teams that's volunteered to be there is from San Diego County Fire Department, set to travel all the way from California to North Carolina to help. But, on their way, they were in a terrible car accident in Louisiana. We pray for their full recovery, but it was a bad accident.

We know there is more to do, and we will continue to surge resources, including food, water, communications, and lifesaving equipment. We'll be there, as I said before, and I mean it, as long as it takes to finish this job.

Let me close with this. As President, I've seen firsthand the devastating toll that disasters like this take on families and communities. I've been on the ground at many disasters areas since I've been President——

[The President coughed.]

Excuse me—and I've heard dozens of stories from survivors about how it feels to be left with nothing, not even knowing where or when to get back on track.

I am here to tell every single survivor in these impacted areas that we will be there with you as long as it takes.

For the sake of yourselves—excuse me——

[The President coughed.]

——and your families, I urge everyone—everyone—returning to their communities and homes to listen to the local officials and follow all safety instructions. Take this seriously. Please be safe.

Your nation has your back, and the Biden-Harris administration will be there until the job is done.

God bless you all. And I'm thinking of those that are still wondering where your loved ones are.

Thank you.

Funding for Federal Disaster Assistance

Q. Will you need to pass a supplemental to help the people in the Southeast, Mr. President?

The President. Say again.

Q. Will you need to ask Congress for a supplemental to help the people——

The President. That's my expectation, yes.

Hurricane Helene

Q. Do you know roughly how much you're thinking at this point?

The President. Not yet. It's been—this is a historic storm. It's devastating. They've not seen anything like this before. And some of them were back-to-back; there were three storms in a row. So it's really, really devastating.

Federal Disaster Assistance

Q. Would you consider asking Congress to come back for a special session to pass the supplemental?

The President. That is something I may have to request, but I have—no decision has been made yet.

The President's Travel Schedule

Q. Do you have a sense of where you'll go when you are able to go, sir?

The President. Yes. I told the Governor of North Carolina I'd go down. And I expect to be down there by Wednesday or Thursday if it would be clear for me to go. You guys who travel with me know there's an entourage that's—that is—can be disruptive.

Former President Donald J. Trump

Q. Is it a mistake for President Trump to be down there today in Georgia? Is that disruptive?

The President. I don't have any idea.

Q. On another issue on the other side of the world, in the Middle East. It's our understanding——

The President. I'm going to stick with this.

Q. What's that?

The President. I'm going to stick with this subject. But go ahead. I have a thousand Olympians——

Situation in the Middle East

Q. Well, it's just the fact that Israel may be now launching a limited operation into Lebanon. Are you aware of that? Are you comfortable with their plans, as best you know them?

The President. I'm more aware than you might know, and I'm comfortable with them stopping. We should have a cease-fire now.

Thank you.

Q. And Mr. President—Mr. President——

Q. Do you expect Iran to retaliate?

The President's Monitoring of Hurricane Helene

Q. On the hurricane, Mr. President. Why weren't you and Vice President Harris here in Washington commanding this this weekend?

The President. I was commanding. I was on the phone for at least 2 hours yesterday and the day before as well. I commanded. It's called a telephone.

Q. Is it——

The President. I had all of my security people.

Q. Is it not important for the country to see——

NOTE: The President spoke at 11:12 a.m. in the Roosevelt Room at the White House. In his remarks, he referred to Federal Emergency Management Agency Administrator Deanne Bennett Criswell; Gov. Ronald D. DeSantis of Florida; Gov. Roy A. Cooper III of North Carolina; Gov. Henry D. McMaster of South Carolina; Gov. William B. Lee of Tennessee; Gov. Glenn A. Youngkin of Virginia; and Gov. Kay E. Ivey of Alabama. The transcript was released by the Office of the Press Secretary on October 1.

Categories: Addresses and Remarks : Hurricane Helene response and recovery efforts; Interviews With the News Media : Exchanges with reporters, White House.

Locations: Washington, DC.

Names: Cooper, Roy A., III; Criswell, Deanne Bennett; DeSantis, Ronald D.; Ivey, Kay E.; Kemp, Brian P.; Lee, William B.; McMaster, Henry D.; Youngkin, Glenn A.

Subjects: Alabama, disaster assistance; Alabama, Governor; Army Corps of Engineers, U.S.; Department of Defense, natural disaster response capabilities; Disaster assistance, Alabama; Disaster assistance, Florida; Disaster assistance, Georgia; Disaster assistance, North Carolina; Disaster assistance, South Carolina; Federal Communications Commission; Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA); First responders, service and dedication; Florida, disaster assistance; Florida, Governor; Florida, Hurricane Helene damage and recovery efforts; Georgia, disaster assistance; Georgia, Governor; Georgia, Hurricane Helene damage and recovery efforts; Israel, military operations in Lebanon; Lebanon, Israeli military operations; Middle East, international diplomatic efforts; Natural disasters, Hurricane Helene; News media, Presidential interviews; North Carolina, disaster assistance; North Carolina, Governor; North Carolina, Hurricane Helene damage and recovery efforts; Small Business Administration; South Carolina, disaster assistance; South Carolina, Governor; South Carolina, Hurricane Helene damage and recovery efforts; Tennessee, disaster assistance; Tennessee, Governor; Tennessee, Hurricane Helene damage and recovery efforts; Virginia, Governor.

DCPD Number: DCPD202400848.