

Administration of Joseph R. Biden, Jr., 2024

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

October 8, 2024

The President. Thanks for your patience. As you know, I put out a statement this morning: I'm canceling my trip to Germany and to Africa. We're going to try to work those out later. But I just don't think I can be out of the country at this time. Number one.

And number two, we're going to stay focused on what's ahead of us right now. I've been briefed by the senior leaders of this administration and—who are driving our preparedness for Hurricane Milton, which could be one of the worst storms in a hundred years to hit Florida, and continued efforts on Hurricane Helene.

I've directed this team to do everything it can to save lives and our communities and help our communities before, during, and after these extreme weather events that—and that's being done. That's being done.

I've spoken to all the political leaders in the region, some of them more than once. And they've—I've told them anything they ask for, they can get, they—we've given. And we've gotten overwhelming response—a positive response from everyone, from the Governors of Florida up to North Carolina.

And mayors, leaders, local are—have expressed their sincere gratitude for the work of FEMA and for the work of my entire administration.

Now, I've also surged thousands of Federal personnel on the ground across the Southeast already and deliver every available resource as fast as possible. And my priority is to increase the size and presence of our effort and—as we prepare for another catastrophic storm about to make landfall.

You know, it's been a—I've been in constant contact with our Director of the National Weather Service, Ken Graham, who has kept me informed the last several days on what to anticipate. You never know until it happens, but they're very, very engaged.

He made clear to me just how dangerous this storm is, indicating that winds had reached up 180 miles an hour—180. That's not guaranteed it's going to hit the shore at 180 miles, but they've reached up to 180 miles an hour—and a possible storm surge, as it hits the coast of Florida, of 15 feet, which can be devastating.

The current path of this storm is expected to hit Tampa Bay area and cut directly across the State—east to west, all the way across the State—with the potential for this storm to both enter Florida as a hurricane and leave Florida as a hurricane on the Atlantic coast.

This could be the worst storm to hit Florida in over a century. And, God willing, it won't be, but that's what it's looking like right now.

I immediately approved the prelandfall emergency declarations in Florida. This is the second one in a week—second time in a week, and there've been two before that, by the way.

And I sent FEMA Administrator Criswell down to Florida yesterday to work and—intensively with the State and local partners as we prepare to deploy more resources. She's going to continue that work between Florida and North Carolina in the coming days.

I'm calling on the airlines and other companies to provide as much service as possible to accommodate evacuations and not to engage in price gouging, to just do it on the level.

And last night I spoke again with the Governor of Florida, DeSantis, and Tampa Mayor Castro and—or, excuse me, Castor—and I made it clear to them, they should reach out, including to me directly, with everything else they may need as they see this storm hits. And I gave them my personal number to contact me here in the White House.

Most importantly, I've urged everyone—everyone—currently located in Hurricane Milton's path to listen to local officials and follow the safety instructions. You all have been reporting on the highways and shoulders being opened. Everybody is heading out. And if you're under evacuation orders, you should evacuate now—now—now. You should have already evacuated. It's a matter of life and death, and that's not hyperbole. It's a matter of life and death.

So let me add that FEMA has provided 300 ambulances to move people who can't move themselves out of health care facilities.

And while we prepare for Hurricane Milton, we're still surging resources in North Carolina, in Georgia, South Carolina, Florida, Tennessee to respond to Hurricane Helene. And it's real. The impact is still there.

And we're going to leave—we're not going to leave until the job is done. It's going to take time. And before it's all over, it's going to take tens of billions of dollars to get it done.

And Kamala and I are keeping all of you in our prayers out there. There's a lot of people.

The good news is, I—just before we called you in, I received information that the number of missing persons has been significantly reduced of lost from the first hurricane. But we'll have more information on that later.

So that's the situation, and we're not going to leave until the job is finished. It's going to take a while.

Federal Disaster Assistance to States/Importance of Accurate Information Regarding Hurricane Response Efforts

Q. Sir, what's the risk of political figures sharing misinformation during this time?

The President. The past is prologue is real. But the fact of the matter is, I think we have—I've been able to contact all the Governors. They've—are sticking up for what they've asked for. They're pointing out that they're satisfied with everything they're getting.

But I can't speak for others on the internet and—and I mean, it's just—look, those who do it do it to try to damage the administration. Well, that's—we can take care of ourselves. But it misleads people. It puts people in circumstances where they panic, where they really, really, really worry. They think, "Now we're not being taken care of."

And it really is—and it's going to sound—I'll use an old phrase: It's un-American. It really is.

People are scared to death. People know their lives are at stake—all that they've worked for, all that they own, all that they value. And it's just—it's just—anyway.

[*At this point, several reporters spoke at once.*]

Q. Mr. President, can you give us a sense of how Vice President—

The President's Schedule

Q. Mr. President, how soon do you think you'll be able to travel to Germany and Angola?

Q. [Inaudible]—Vice President Harris's role in this?

The President. Whoa, whoa, whoa. Wait, wait, wait. I'll be—I'll have plenty of time to talk about Angola. I still plan on going to Africa. I'll have plenty of time to talk about what's going on in Latin America and South America in terms of the Amazon. And I'm going to be talking today with the—my friend, the Chancellor of Germany, and we're going to try to work that out.

We've already contacted all these people. Okay? But I'm going to be on the phone today.

I'm heading shortly—when I get up from here, I'm heading out to Wisconsin, to Milwaukee. And—but I think we can—I'm still planning on visiting all the places I said I'd be and all the conferences I said I'd participate in.

[Several reporters spoke at once.]

Florida/Federal Disaster Assistance

Q. Mr. President—what's your relationship like, Mr. President, with the Governor of Florida? Is he cooperating as far as everything that you would like to do with Hurricane Milton?

[Several reporters spoke at once.]

The President. The Governor of Florida has been cooperative. He said he's gotten all that he needs. I talked to him again yesterday. And I said, "Whatever you"—he said: "No, you're doing a great job. It's being—all being done well. We thank you for it." And I literally gave him my personal phone number to call.

So I don't know—there was a rough start in some places, but every Governor—every Governor—from Florida to North Carolina, has been fully cooperative and supportive and acknowledged what this team is doing, and they're doing an incredible job. But we got a lot more to do.

[Several reporters spoke at once.]

Vice President Kamala D. Harris

Q. Has the Vice President been helpful in this as well, Mr. President?

The President. Yes.

NOTE: The President spoke at 11:03 a.m. in the Roosevelt Room at the White House. In his remarks, he referred to Gov. Brian P. Kemp of Georgia; Gov. Henry D. McMaster of South Carolina; Gov. Roy A. Cooper III of North Carolina; Mayor Jane Castor of Tampa, FL; and Chancellor Olaf Scholz of Germany. The transcript was released by the Office of the Press Secretary on October 9.

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

Locations: Washington, DC.

Names: Castor, Jane; Cooper, Roy A., III; Criswell, Deanne Bennett; DeSantis, Ronald D.; Graham, Kenneth; Harris, Kamala D.; Kemp, Brian P.; McMaster, Henry D.; Scholz, Olaf.

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