

Remarks During a Briefing on Hurricane Milton Preparedness Efforts
October 9, 2024

The President. In less than 14 hours, Hurricane Milton will make landfall on the western coast of Florida. Winds will be fierce, at well over 100 miles per hour, with storm surges reaching up to 15 feet and up to 18 inches of rain. It's looking like the storm of the century.

I'm here with leaders in my administration who are on the front lines preparing for this storm and will brief me in our latest efforts to save lives and livelihoods.

I want to emphasize a few things.

First, many communities in Hurricane Milton's path do not have a moment to catch their breath between Helene and Milton, two historic storms in 2 weeks. I want to thank everyone who has followed local guidance to evacuate ahead of landfall. I know it's really tough leaving behind your home, your belongings, everything you own. But I urge everyone in Hurricane Milton's path to follow all safety instructions as we head into the next 24 hours. It's a matter of—literally a matter of life and death.

Second, for the last week, my team has done everything possible to prepare for this storm. I immediately approved emergency declarations in Florida and the Seminole Tribe in Florida. I also surged search-and-rescue teams, water, food, power generators, ambulances to the region. At my direction, Administrator Criswell will be in the State Emergency Operation Center in Florida tonight. And Kamala and I are going to keep pressure on the companies so prices stay stable on gasoline, flights, and goods people need.

Finally, we're teaming up with State and local officials to support impacted communities. I spoke with the Florida Governor, DeSantis; with Mayor Tampa—Castor—mayor—the Tampa mayor; the Clearwater mayor, Rector; and the Pinellas County chairwoman, Peters. I offered them everything we need—everything we have, everything they need. And I made it clear to them they should reach out if there is anything more they need. I gave them my personal phone number here at the White House to contact me directly if that's necessary.

Let me close with this. I want to thank the Governors of all the affected areas over the last couple weeks: Florida, North Carolina, South Carolina, Georgia, Tennessee, Virginia. You know, we've been in constant contact. And they've been very thankful and appreciative of the help the Federal Government is providing. And I'm appreciative of all they're doing as well. I've told them to contact me with anything else they need.

We have made available an unprecedented number of assets to deal with this crisis, and we're going to continue to do so until the job is done.

But now I want to be clear about something. Over the last few weeks, there has been a reckless, irresponsible, and relentless promotion of disinformation and outright lies that are disturbing people. It's undermining confidence in the incredible rescue and recovery work that has already been taken and will continue to be taken, and it's harmful to those who need help the most.

There is simply no place for this to happen.

Former President Trump has led the onslaught of lies. Assertions have been made that property is being confiscated. That's simply not true.

They're saying people impacted by these storms will receive \$750 in cash and no more. That's simply not true.

They're saying in—the money is needed to—for the—in the—for this crisis is being diverted to migrants. What a ridiculous thing to say. It's not true.

Now the claims are getting even more bizarre. Congresswoman Marjorie Taylor Greene, a Congresswoman from Georgia, is now saying the Federal Government is literally controlling the weather—we're controlling the weather. It's beyond ridiculous. It's got to stop.

In moments like this, there are no red or blue States. There's one United States of America, where neighbors are helping neighbors; volunteers and first responders are risking everything, including their own lives, to help their fellow Americans; State, local, and Federal officials are standing side by side.

Let me repeat: No one should make the American people question whether their governments will be make—to ensure that this disaster, when it strikes, they'll be there. We will, all of us.

Now I'm going to turn it over to Vice President Harris, if that's okay with all of you.

Thank you.

Madam Vice President.

[At this point, Vice President Kamala D. Harris spoke via videoconference as follows.]

Vice President Harris. Thank you, Mr. President. And, Liz, thank you for the work that you have been doing.

As the President said, we have working around the clock to prepare for Hurricane Milton and to ensure that people are safe, including ensuring Federal, State, and local resources are being coordinated in a smart and efficient and effective way.

[Vice President Harris continued her remarks, concluding as follows.]

The bottom line is this hurricane poses an extreme danger, and we urge everyone in Florida to take extreme caution. And we are with you, and we will get through this together.

And with that, I will hand it over to Homeland Security Adviser Liz Sherwood-Randall.

Homeland Security Adviser Elizabeth D. Sherwood-Randall. Thank you, Madam Vice President.

Mr. President, Madam Vice President, you will now receive a briefing on the latest forecast for Hurricane Milton and actions that we have taken to prepare for it and be ready to respond to it.

You'll hear from Administrator of FEMA, Deanne Criswell; the Director of the National Hurricane Center, Mike Brennan; the Director of the National Weather Service, Ken Graham; Secretary of Homeland Security, Ali Mayorkas; and the Commandant of the Coast Guard, Admiral Linda Fagan.

We'll begin the briefing with Administrator Criswell. Over to you, Deanne.

[Federal Emergency Management Agency Administrator Deanne Bennett Criswell spoke via videoconference as follows.]

Administrator Criswell. Thank you, Liz.

Mr. President, Madam Vice President, I just want to assure you we are taking this storm very seriously. As you will hear from Dr. Brennan shortly, Milton is currently a category 4 storm and will remain a hurricane as it crosses over Florida.

At your direction, Mr. President, I will be traveling down to Tallahassee tonight to embed at the State EOC to meet with my team as well as our State partners, and I will be there to assess the damages and the impacts immediately following the storm, working in close coordination with the State to ensure that they have everything that they need to support their priorities.

[Administrator Criswell continued her remarks, concluding as follows.]

So, in short, Mr. President and Madam Vice President, I assure you, we are taking this storm extremely seriously. We are focused, and we are ready to support the people of Florida.

The President. Deanne, you're doing a hell of a job. You always have. I know we've been through a lot of this together, all three of us, including the Vice President.

And I have one question right now, though. What are you most worried about today and into tomorrow? And what messaging can we do to help people in the hours before it makes landfall?

Administrator Criswell. Mr. President, the biggest concern is making sure people have gotten out of harm's way.

Over the next 24 hours, we are going to see significant winds. We are going to see storm surge. We are going to see flooding from the rain. People need to be able to take this storm seriously. They need to move if they still have time to move out of harm's way. And we are prepared to support Florida with additional search-and-rescue assets to help save lives.

That's our immediate concern, Mr. President, is saving lives over the next 24 hours.

The President. Have you ever seen a storm like this one, since you've been in charge?

Administrator Criswell. I think this is going to be one of the biggest ones that we have seen after it makes landfall. I mean, we saw a lot of impact from Hurricane Ian, but this one is different. This one just looks different. And I think we're going to have a lot of impacts and people that are going to need our help, sir.

The President. Well, thank you very much.

Administrator Criswell. Thank you.

Vice President Harris. Administrator Criswell——

Administrator Criswell. Yes, ma'am.

Vice President Harris. ——are we concerned about any misinformation or disinformation regarding evacuations that we need to clear up at this point?

Administrator Criswell. There's been a lot of misinformation out there, Madam Vice President. That's for sure. But I have not heard anything specific to the evacuations.

I think that the local officials, the State officials, have been very strong in getting that message out there and getting people to move out of harm's way.

I was in Florida on Monday. I met with the mayor of Tampa as well as the mayor of St. Petersburg, and we saw people evacuating. And so they are listening to their local officials, and that was encouraging.

Vice President Harris. That's great. Thank you.

Homeland Security Adviser Sherwood-Randall. I think we'll move on, then. Thank you, Administrator Criswell. We'll move to Director Brennan from the National Hurricane Center.

[*National Hurricane Center Director Michael J. Brennan spoke via videoconference as follows.*]

Director Brennan. Thank you, Liz. Mr. President, Madam Vice President, good afternoon.

As Administrator Criswell mentioned, we are just hours away from seeing a potentially catastrophic hurricane landfall along the west coast of Florida, with the center of Milton expected to cross the coast late this evening or very early tomorrow morning.

[*Director Brennan continued his remarks, concluding as follows.*]

And I finally want to thank the NOAA and Air Force Reserve hurricane hunters who've been flying into Milton for days now, providing us just tremendously valuable direct data that has really helped inform our lifesaving forecast and warnings.

So, thank you, Mr. President, Madam Vice President.

The President. Mike, I know you're tired of hearing from me. I've been talking to you so much lately. But I appreciate your constant input you've given me and letting me know what's going on.

What more can you tell us about how the location of this storm is going to affect the storm surge in Florida? I mean, because——

Director Brennan. Yes. I'll——

The President. ——that's pretty consequential——right?——the surge? I mean, that's——is that what you're focusing on?

Director Brennan. Yes, Mr. President. The——just a shift of a few miles in the landfall location will make a big difference in what area sees that very worst storm surge. So a track of the center to the north of Tampa Bay would push the highest storm surge into Tampa Bay itself. A track 5 or 10 or 20 miles south would push that higher storm surge, say, down to the Sarasota/Port Charlotte area.

Even as close as we are to landfall, it's not really possible to tell exactly where that worst surge will occur. It's one wobble away from shifting 10 or 20 miles. So that's why we've, you know, conveyed that risk across such a large area to help support the evacuation of much of that west central coast of Florida.

The President. But Tampa Bay is particularly vulnerable, correct?

Director Brennan. Correct. Yes, Mr. President. It's one of the most vulnerable locations along the entire west coast of Florida, because water gets funneled up into the bay. If you were to see a worst-case scenario there, you could see storm surge as much as twice as high as they saw during Helene. Where it got up to 7 or 8 feet in the bay, it could potentially get up above 10 feet in this——in this event.

The President. Well, thanks a lot, Mike. I appreciate it.

Vice President Harris. Hey, Mike. It's good to see you again. And thank you for all your work.

So, for the folks who have been living in Florida a long time and have experienced these storms many times, how are you talking with them about how this is going to be different and what and so, the difference between what they are used to and what this will be as a way to hopefully give them more encouragement to know that they need to get out.

Director Brennan. Yes. Thank you, Madam Vice President. Yes, we've been emphasizing the size and the intensity of the storm and the direction at which it's approaching, which is unusual and really raises that storm surge risk for the west coast of Florida.

We typically see hurricanes approach the west coast of Florida from the south or southeast, moving parallel to the coast. This track more perpendicular to the coast really raises the storm surge risk. And the size of the storm is going to produce hazardous impacts across much of the peninsula.

So we've been hitting, you know, the surge risk on both coasts, actually—the hurricane-force winds, the flooding rainfall threat, the tornadoes—and trying to reemphasize the scale and breadth of the threat, which is somewhat unusual for Milton.

Vice President Harris. Thank you. And thanks for your good work. It's good to see you again.

The President. Mike, one more question.

Director Brennan. Yes, sir.

The President. For people listening, what is the—what is the width of the State of Florida, from the Tampa Bay area across to Sebastian Inlet and that area to Palm Beach?

Director Brennan. Yes, that's a—

The President. What kind of distance are we talking about?

Director Brennan. You know, across the State of Florida, you're probably talking about, you know, 150, maybe 200 miles. I'd have to—that's an estimate. But the storm is going to be moving at 15 miles per hour, so it's going to be moving across that area very quickly. And the tropical storm force winds, the 30-, 40-mile-per-hour winds or greater now extend almost out more than 200 miles from the center. They're going to get even larger as the storm approaches the coastline. So that's going to cause those wind impacts to affect much of the State.

The President. The reason I asked the question is, I think it—at least for me, having done a lot of this the last 3 years—emphasizes the consequential damage this storm can do. I mean this is—it's going to enter Florida on the west as a hurricane and leave as a hurricane, and that's—

Director Brennan. That's correct.

The President. —that's pretty unusual.

Well, anyway—

Director Brennan. It is.

The President. —thank you.

Director Brennan. Yes. Yes, sir. Thank you.

Homeland Security Adviser Sherwood-Randall. Thank you so much. We will move on now to the National Weather Service Director, Ken Graham.

[*National Weather Service Director Kenneth Graham spoke via videoconference as follows.*]

Director Graham. All right. Thanks, Liz. I appreciate it. And wanted to thank Administrator Criswell for everything through this, and Dr. Brennan as well. The Hurricane Center has been really focused on this and on it with such great forecast the whole way. I just wish we could minimize those impacts, but that doesn't look like what's going to happen.

[*Director Graham continued his remarks, concluding as follows.*]

As always, the Weather Service remains on duty 24 by 7 to make sure the decisionmakers have all the information they need and the updates to this storm.

The President. Ken, I'd like to focus on one thing you said. I don't think most people would think it, but, you know, the idea that sometimes it takes days for rivers to crest after a major storm like this—are there any particular areas of concern that you—you've—that are related to this type of flooding? And how long do you think the flooding conditions could last?

In other words, I think people think once the winds are died down and gotten through that, "Okay, we're all set," but these rivers flooding are consequential, and that takes time, right?

Director Graham. It takes time. That storm surge pushes up every nook and cranny of Florida. So it goes up bays, goes up rivers. It fills in all these areas. And then you add that incredible amount of rainfall, and that rain can't drain because the storm surge has it blocked.

So just really looking at some of the areas in Hillsborough River, Alafia River, the Peace River—some of these type of traditional places that could flood are—we've really got to watch those, those areas and those communities. So——

Vice President Harris. [Inaudible]

Director Graham. It takes quite a while for that water to drain.

The President. Thank you very much.

Vice President Harris. Hey, Ken, I have a question for you. You mentioned words matter, and I know there is a lot of media following this—this briefing. So, there have been—we've gone from a cat 5 to a cat 4, and the language that a lot of folks have been using is "downgrade." But it sounds like you're cautioning us that that may communicate a sense that the danger is lessened, when, in fact, it's not.

Can you talk a little bit about that? Because I know a lot of folks are watching right now and would love to have your feedback on how we should be talking about this.

Director Graham. Yes. We need everybody that communicates to the public to be on the same page with the words, because I've—30 years of doing this, I've seen this so many times. People will think: "Oh, it was a cat 5. Now it's a cat 3." That's not a reason to relax. That's not weakened. That's not diminished. That means we've expanded the wind field. The impacts don't change associated with that.

And I've seen this in Hurricane Florence and other historic hurricanes.

So we have to be mindful of the words that we use and focus on those impacts. Those impacts haven't changed, no matter what the wind speed does over the next 24 hours.

Vice President Harris. Thank you. That's very helpful. Thank you.

Homeland Security Adviser Sherwood-Randall. Thank you, Director Graham. We'll go now to Secretary Mayorkas, the Secretary of Homeland Security. Ali, over to you.

[Secretary of Homeland Security Alejandro N. Mayorkas spoke via videoconference as follows.]

Secretary Mayorkas. Thank you very much, Liz.

Mr. President, Madam Vice President, if I can just pick up on the important phrase "the words matter." I want to thank you for the strength and moral clarity with which you have been speaking to bat down false information that is being spread. That false information is only hurting survivors in need of help, and it is also hurting the first responders who are so bravely risking their lives to deliver that help to the survivors.

[Secretary Mayorkas continued his remarks, concluding as follows.]

We have an entire administration dedicated to this effort at your direction. And with that, I'll pause.

The President. Hey, Ali—Mr. Secretary, do you have everything you need from all the Federal departments and the agencies in support of this response? Is there any—anything lacking?

Secretary Mayorkas. We certainly do have all of the resources. We are well positioned to continue to respond to Hurricane Helene, to respond to Hurricane Milton, Mr. President. We are meeting the moment and meeting the challenges because of the extraordinary people who have spoken before me.

The President. Well, I—you know, I want to thank the Governors. They've stepped up. You know, all this disinformation going out about how, you know, we're devoting all this money to migrants and we're—I mean, all the—even one Congresswoman suggesting that I control the weather and implying that I'm sending it to red States. I mean, it's stuff off the wall. It's like out of a—a comic book.

But, you know, people when they're in trouble, are—for example—and I asked this to the—our Administrator. They said that you get \$750, and that's it. And, "You've lost everything; you get \$750." That's—that's not—that's not it. That's just you're giving them immediately what you need to get by the next day—to get a prescription, to get a whatever.

Is—are you getting calls already about what we're going to be able to deliver for people who get in trouble?

Secretary Mayorkas. We are, Mr. President. Let me say that, you know, one of the false narratives is that the Federal employees who are actually delivering assistance will take an individual's land. And that is causing individuals, survivors not to approach the people who are there to help and obtain the relief to which they are entitled and that we have available to them.

And the Vice President knows very well, as a former prosecutor, that false information only is fuel for the criminal element to exploit individuals in positions of vulnerability. And Madam Vice President, your words at the outset were so very important for that reason.

The President. Thank you.

Vice President Harris. Mr. Secretary, I want to thank you and the folks in your agency working with FEMA, NOAA, and all the Federal agencies. I—I've seen—I've been on the ground, and the work that you all have been doing to coordinate with local and State law enforcement and first responders has been outstanding. It really does show the best of the kind of work that we do in a moment of crisis to work together.

So I applaud the folks that work with you and your leadership in that regard.

Secretary Mayorkas. Thank you, Madam Vice President.

Homeland Security Adviser Sherwood-Randall. Thank you, Secretary Mayorkas.

We'll go now to Admiral Linda Fagan, the Commandant of the U.S. Coast Guard.

[U.S. Coast Guard Commandant Admiral Linda L. Fagan, USCG, spoke via videoconference as follows.]

Commandant Fagan. Thank you. Thank you, Mr. President, Madam Vice President, and I want to assure you that the Coast Guard is ready to respond.

We continue to monitor the storm closely and are mindful of how dangerous and devastating the storm is and the potential to the region, which is still recovering from Hurricane Helene.

[Commandant Fagan continued her remarks, concluding as follows.]

Mr. President, your Coast Guard is ready to respond, and we are well positioned for that. Thank you, sir.

The President. Admiral, one of the things that—I don't know whether people have not been through any kind of hurricane in the past may not understand is that when the rainfall and the flood surge are significant, but these elevated water levels are likely to be accompanied by large and destructive waves. It's not just the water rising. There's significant waves. And what do you anticipate—if anyone else wants to respond, what do we anticipate in terms of the wave damage that's done, not just the water rising, but these waves—large waves coming in?

Commandant Fagan. Sir, I'll just touch on the impact of the—of the water and the—just the flow and significance of any kind of increased water flow, storm surge, whether it's wave-driven or otherwise. It creates conditions that are incredibly hazardous to life. People can't swim or save themselves, which again just emphasizes why it's so critical that people evacuate and get themselves out of harm's way. And that allows then for the assessment with regard to any property or property impacts.

The President. I know search and rescue is obviously the number-one priority immediately after the storm, but we know that the Port of Tampa is critical—critical—for the State and the State's economy and the region as well. What can you and the Army Corps of Engineers do to get the port quickly reopened once this storm passes through?

Commandant Fagan. Yes. Thank you, Mr. President. We're already in conversations with the Army Corps of Engineers, aligned on the need to begin those assessments as quickly as possible to determine whether there were any impacts from the storm or not and regain and reopen the Port of Tampa.

The Port of Everglades is also a critical port on the east coast of Florida. The Port of Everglades remains open for fuel tankers to ensure that that commerce continues to flow into the State from other ports that are not in the direct impact of the storm.

But sir, I assure you, we and the Corps of Engineers are already in conversation with regard to what it will take to reconstitute the Port of Tampa, and we will lean into that work as quickly as possible.

The President. Thank you, Admiral. Appreciate it.

Vice President Harris. Commandant, I echo the President's words. Thank you for what you and the men and women of the Coast Guard have been doing in response to Hurricane Helene and now this, and your emphasis on the importance of the port in Tampa is critically important to recovery.

So, thank you for all the work that you are doing. I know that resources are spread thin, in terms of your folks being on the ground in every area right now, and you're doing an extraordinary job. So, thank you for that.

Commandant Fagan. Thank you, Madam Vice President.

Homeland Security Adviser Sherwood-Randall. To each of the dedicated professionals on this screen, we are truly in your debt and in debt to your teams for what they are doing right now to prepare for and respond to what is coming to Florida this evening.

With that, we will conclude the public part of this briefing. And if you'll just stay on the screen for a few minutes, we can——

The President. Can I say one closing thing?

Homeland Security Adviser Sherwood-Randall. ——have further conversation.

Of course, Mr. President.

The President. Pass on to your folks how much we respect and understand a lot of these folks are risking their lives——

Homeland Security Adviser Sherwood-Randall. Yes.

The President. They're risking their lives to help other people. I mean, this is Americans helping Americans in ways that when—you know, it's—to me, it's a measure of who we are as a nation when we see this happen, and it constantly happens—Americans stepping up to help other Americans and risking their lives.

So thank all these first responders. It really matters. Really, from the bottom of our heart, thank you, thank you, thank you.

NOTE: The President spoke at 12:42 p.m. in the South Court Auditorium of the Dwight D. Eisenhower Executive Office Building. In his remarks, he referred to Mayor Jane Castor of Tampa, FL; Mayor Bruce Rector of Clearwater, FL; County Commissioner and Chair Kathleen Peters of Pinellas County, FL; Gov. Roy A. Cooper III of North Carolina; Gov. Henry D. McMaster of South Carolina; Gov. Brian P. Kemp of Georgia; Gov. William B. Lee of Tennessee; and Gov. Glenn A. Youngkin of Virginia. Administrator Criswell referred to Mayor Kenneth T. Welch of St. Petersburg, FL.

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