

Administration of Joseph R. Biden, Jr., 2024

Remarks on Federal Response Efforts to Hurricanes Milton and Helene and an Exchange With Reporters

October 11, 2024

The President. Well, folks, Kamala and I have just received a briefing from senior leaders across the—our administration from Hurricane Helene and Hurricane Milton. And to state the obvious, I'm sure you feel the same way, our heart goes out to all those folks who have lost not only personal property, but their homes and some lost lives—and grieving after the aftermath of the tornadoes, brutal winds, record downpours, and historic flooding.

I must have spoken in the last 3 days to 50 to 75 members of the—in—from North Carolina all the way down to Florida, talking to mayors and county executives and—anyway, it's just—it's amazing what's going on.

And you know, this is the third major storm—third major storm—to hit California—I mean, excuse me, Florida, in 3 months. And experts estimate that as—and it's early—early estimates—it could be more; it could be less—but estimates that it's caused damages around \$50 billion from Hurricane Milton alone—just alone, \$50 billion.

And I want everyone in the impacted areas to know we're going to do everything we can to let you—help you pick back up the pieces and get back to where you were.

We've been in constant contact, calling and reaching out to over 40 State and local officials, as I said, and they need—we have to give them a little bit of hope. I mean, some of you have been through crises. You know the one thing you wonder about when things are really bad is, is there hope? Is anybody coming? What's going to happen? And that's what's happening right now. State and local officials are—doing everything they can to help these folks recover.

At my request, the primary focus of today's briefing has been on the power restoration and debris removal, because there are urgent needs. Milton left over 3 million people without power, but with the dedication of 50,000 powerline workers—50,000 powerline workers—from 43 States and the country of—and Canada have stepped up and come down to help and to restore—they've already restored power to 1 million people so far.

And by the way, if you ever watch these guys and women climb these poles in the middle of nowhere, this is—anyway, they're risking this while they're doing this work.

And I've—we just spoke to the CEOs of the public and private electric utilities to thank them for surging their—their restoration crews to people urgently needing power, even in the communities they don't serve. That's the—one of the points: A lot of these folks are going into the communities they have—they don't serve at all and just volunteering. And the energy sector is real.

And by the way, our Secretary, Jennifer Granholm, of Energy, is—she calls it a "mini NATO," a commitment to mutual assistance and another shining example of Americans—literally someone—when push comes to shove, they stand up and take care of one another. We're going to continue to prioritize this effort until everyone is reconnected and back on line.

We've been able to get this work done quicker because of critical infrastructure investments we've made, but when I was Vice President—both when I was Vice President and since I've been President to harden the grid—the grid—you all know it, but "the grid" meaning, for your listeners, the electric power grid that transmits power—harden the grid by incorporating

innovative technologies like burying transmission lines underground, replacing wood power poles with concrete power poles that don't snap in the wind.

To reduce the impact of extreme weather and climate change, we have to continue making these investments. We were just talking about it with the utility companies and with our team here and with the Secretary.

You know, over the years, the past several years, Florida has taken the money, back when we—I got when we were Vice President—when I was Vice President, to invest in putting these lines underground. It costs a hell of a lot more to put the lines underground than it does up in the air, but—up to six times more or seven times more—but it makes sense, because—and anybody who says, "We don't want to spend the money," think of the three storms. Every—after every damn storm, it will wipe out the power grid; you've got to rebuild it. And so, if you can keep it so it's not wiped out, it makes a long-term savings.

And the other thing that's a big deal is debris removal. FEMA and the Corps of Engineers and the Florida National Guard are now on the ground helping the State clear debris to reopen roads and critical ports as well.

I mean, you've seen the pictures. Some of you have been there. You see when—for example, in North Carolina, where half a mountain comes down and the bridge rolls into the water, and you've got piles. I mean, you see at the end of a river in a cul-de-sac. I mean, piles are 3, 4, 5 feet high with all kinds of debris in there. It's going to take a lot of time and money to remove it.

But the Army Corps and the Florida National Guard in Florida are on the ground helping clear this debris and reopen the roads. And so we can make—they have to do it for other reasons, to make critical deliveries of food, water, and tarps and lifesaving supplies.

The Coast Guard is leading the effort to reopen the Port of Tampa, which you—as you all know, because we've—everybody's been covering it and they've done a good job of doing it—covering it because it's a port that delivers a lot of fuel that goes into the region and goods that are necessary. It's critical for the economy of the region.

And, again, let me say that the misinformation out there is not only just disgusting, but it—it's dangerous, and it's misleading. And, again, the first thing it does—and I mean this sincerely. I don't—a lot of you have been through these crises, some of you personally. But people desperately want hope—"Tell me it's going to be okay." "Tell me it's going to be okay." And they're in real trouble, a lot of them.

And to hear this malarkey you're hearing from some of the people we—I won't even get into, but—I'll lose my temper.

But, anyway, the truth is, we're providing all the resources that are needed.

Let me close with this. I want to thank you again to our brave first responders, powerline workers, State and local officials, and neighbors helping neighbors and so many more. Look, it's a team effort. I know that sounds corny, but it really is a team effort and everybody in the game here.

We're looking at it very seriously, and we're working together. And it's made a big difference. I think we've saved lives—not me, but we, all of those folks out in the field have saved lives.

But there's more to do, and we're going to do everything in my power to get it done. And the fact of the matter is that we're in a situation where—well——

Secretary of Energy Jennifer M. Granholm. She's—[inaudible].

The President. I know. I'm going to go to the Vice President in a second.

The—she's my boss here. [*Laughter*] [*Inaudible*]

Secretary Granholm. I wasn't sure if you saw it. [*Laughter*]

The President. We're going to be——

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

Vice President Harris. Mr. President——

The President. Hang on one second, Madam Vice President.

Vice President Harris. Sure. [*Laughter*]

The President. We're going to—we're going to be going to the Congress. We're going to need a lot of help, going to need a lot more money as we identify specifically how much is needed.

So I'm just telling everybody now. I don't want to hear the—this is going to be the end of it.

So—and so, with that, I'll yield to the President—I mean, the Vice President. [*Laughter*]

Vice President Harris. Thank you, Mr. President. And thank you to all of the men and women represented at the agencies that are represented by the members of the President's Cabinet for the work that they've been doing around the clock.

In the wake of Hurricane Milton, we have, of course, witnessed widespread devastation. Homes and neighborhoods have been severely damaged. Millions of people are without power and thousands without clean water.

To the people of Florida, and—you must know—and to the—all of those in the region, our Nation is with you. We see your incredible strength and resilience, and we are working around the clock to keep you safe. We continue to coordinate resources with local and State authorities, including food, water, medical supplies, and generators, and we will continue to work with the teams on the ground to restore water and power as quickly as possible.

In the coming days and weeks, President Biden and I will make sure that the communities that are there on the ground and have been affected will have the resources they need not only to respond to the storm, but also to recover. And we will continue to keep communities in Florida, Georgia, North and South Carolina, and across the Southeast—ensured that they will recover from Hurricane Helene.

Finally, I will say once again, as Secretary Mayorkas and I have discussed, to any company or individual that is using this crisis to jack up prices through illegal fraud or price gouging, whether it be at the gas pump, the airport, or the hotel counter, we will be monitoring, and there will be a consequence.

The bottom line is this: We are in this for the long haul, and the support and the coordination between Federal, State, and local authorities and leaders has been extraordinary and will continue for as long as it takes.

I thank you all.

The President. Thank you.

[*Several reporters spoke at once.*]

The President. Holler louder. Holler louder. I can't hear you.

Q. Mr. President, are you worried about——

Hurricane-Related Misinformation

Q. The misinformation that you've been talking about that you're so worried about? Do you——

The President. Say again.

Q. The misinformation that you've been——

The President. Yes.

Q. ——talking about related to this hurricane and the recovery efforts. Do you think it's temporary, or do you think and worry that this might be a permanent state of being for this country?

The President. I think it's a permanent state of being for some extreme people, but I don't think it's what the country is about. It's—we're breaking through it. We're breaking through with the truth.

And if you've noticed—and I've really been proud of—I've been on the phone, talking with a lot of Republican mayors and Governors. They're standing up saying this is—not Joe Biden, but conservative, hardcore Republican Governors, hardcore Republican mayors standing up and saying: "It's got to stop. It's got to stop."

And I believe it's—there's nothing permanent about it. I am pleased that more Americans are coming together in a purely voluntary way. I mean, this is who the hell we are. When America is in trouble, we all jump in and try to help, help your neighbor. And that's basically what's happening.

But what—the thing that bothers me the most is, there's a lot of people who get caught in these crises who are basically alone—you know, widowers, people in hospitals, people who are all by themselves. And they don't know—and they lose contact, and they get—and they just get scared to death—scared to death. And—anyway.

So I think it's a—I think those who have been spreading these lies to try to undermine the opposition are going to pay a price for it.

Q. Mr. President, are you worried about this effect——

Former President Donald J. Trump

Q. But do you think Donald Trump is singularly to blame for all of this?

The President. No, he's not singularly—but he's just the biggest mouth.

Q. Mr. President, will you ask——

Disaster Assistance Funding/Federal Support for Small Businesses

Q. Mr. President, have you spoken to Speaker Johnson——

The President. No, I haven't——

Q. ——on calling Congress back?

The President. ——but we're going to—I've spoken to Republicans who want to speak to Speaker Johnson. And I think Speaker Johnson is going to get the message that he's got to step up, particularly for small businesses.

Governor Ronald D. DeSantis of Florida

Q. Do you plan to meet with DeSantis in Florida?

The President. I've spoken to him. If he's—if he's available, yes. He's been very cooperative. I've had no—we've had—we got on very, very well.

[Several reporters spoke at once.]

The President. Let me——

Israeli Missile Strikes in Lebanon

Q. Are you—are you asking Israel to stop hitting U.N. peacekeepers?

The President. Absolutely, positively.

Q. What—what about nuclear——

Former President Donald J. Trump

Q. Mr. President, will you—will you approve Mr. Trump's request to use military aircraft in the final stages of the campaign?

The President. I'm sorry?

Q. Will you approve Mr. Trump's request to use military aircraft in the final stages of the campaign?

The President. As long as he doesn't ask for F-15s. No, I'm being facetious.

Look, I've told the department to give him every single thing he needs for his—at any other—as he were a sitting President, give all that needs. If it fits within that category, that's fine. But if it doesn't, he shouldn't.

NOTE: The President spoke at 1:21 p.m. in the Roosevelt Room at the White House.

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

Locations: Washington, DC.

Names: DeSantis, Ronald D.; Granholm, Jennifer M.; Harris, Kamala D.; Johnson, J. Michael; Trump, Donald J.

Subjects: Army Corps of Engineers, U.S.; Bipartisanship; Climate change; Climate resilience, improvement efforts; Coast Guard, U.S.; Department of Defense, military aircraft use by Presidential candidates; Energy grid infrastructure, improvement efforts; Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA); First responders, service and dedication; Florida, Governor; Florida, Hurricane Helene damage and recovery efforts; Florida, Hurricane Milton damage and recovery efforts; Israel, military operations in Lebanon; Lebanon, Israeli military operations; National Guard; Natural disasters, Hurricane Helene; Natural disasters, response and recovery efforts; Natural disasters, Hurricane Milton; North Carolina, Hurricane Helene damage and recovery efforts; Secretary of Energy; Speaker of the House of Representatives; Vice President.

DCPD Number: DCPD202400902.