



House of Commons
Foreign Affairs Committee

**The UK's response
to hurricanes in its
Overseas Territories:
Government response
to the Committee's
Fifth Report of Session
2017-19**

**Ninth Special Report of
Session 2017–19**

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The Foreign Affairs Committee

The Foreign Affairs Committee is appointed by the House of Commons to examine the expenditure, administration, and policy of the Foreign and Commonwealth Office and its associated public bodies.

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The Committee is one of the departmental select committees, the powers of which are set out in House of Commons Standing Orders, principally in SO No 152. These are available on the internet via www.parliament.uk.

Publication

Committee reports are published on the Committee's website at www.parliament.uk/facom and in print by Order of the House.

Evidence relating to this report is published on the [inquiry page](#) of the Committee's website.

Committee staff

The current staff of the Committee are Tom Goldsmith (Clerk), Zoe Oliver-Watts (Second Clerk), Hannah Bryce (Clerk), Dr Ariella Huff (Senior Committee Specialist), Ashlee Godwin, Dr Eoin Martin and Hannah Stone (Committee Specialists), Clare Genis (Senior Committee Assistant), Zara Emmett and Matthew Chappell (Committee Assistants) and Estelle Currie (Media Officer). Tino Nieddu (on secondment from the National Audit Office), was also on the staff of the Committee during this inquiry.

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Ninth Special Report

On 7 March 2018, the Foreign Affairs Committee published its Fifth Report of Session 2017–19, on The UK's response to hurricanes in its Overseas Territories. The response was received on 9 May 2018. The response is appended below.

Appendix: Government Response

The Government notes the Foreign Affairs Committee's report on: The UK's response to hurricanes in its Overseas Territories.

This report sets out the Government's response to each of the Committee's conclusions and recommendations. The Committee's text is in bold and the Government's response is in plain text.

1. The FCO should work with regional and international partners to share best practice, disaster preparation plans and relief sites and develop an international strategy for disaster relief which will avoid duplication of efforts and make best use of nearby resources.

The destructive forces of hurricanes Irma and Maria were unprecedented, resulting in one of the most complex crises the Foreign and Commonwealth Office has faced in modern times. We have looked back at our response and drawn on the lessons learned to improve our approach to managing catastrophic events in the Overseas Territories. This includes the establishment of an inter-ministerial group to ensure a sustained recovery and reconstruction response, and working closely across UK institutions to prepare better for the coming hurricane season.

Our disaster preparedness strategy focuses on building individual OT capability, developing inter-OT capability, strengthening regional capability, and reinforcing UK response capability. This approach emphasises the need for a more cohesive and robust regional response, the role individual OTs have in preparing and the responsibility of the UK to assist in a major crisis. For financial year 2018/19 £2.5 million has been allocated from the Global Britain fund with a further £2.5m available to be drawn from the OT Conflict, Stability and Security Fund (CSSF) if needed. This will support both the OT-specific and regional capability building programmes.

The Caribbean Disaster and Emergency Management Agency (CDEMA) is the primary organisation responsible for regional coordination, and the FCO, Ministry of Defence (MOD) and Department for International Development (DFID) provide practical support to CDEMA by sharing best practice, participating in exercises and scenario planning and facilitating greater OT engagement. The Foreign Secretary met Parties, affected states and OTs at the UN in September 2017. We are also discussing with regional partners such as Mexico how they can work with and support CDEMA, since expanding coordination and cooperation across the wider region is fundamental to developing a long-term sustainable approach.

The FCO will host a follow up conference in early June for international partners with similar territorial commitments in the region (France, the Netherlands and the USA;

plus Canada) to share vulnerability assessments and discuss anticipated weather pattern scenarios for the coming hurricane season. This will lead to the development of a framework to facilitate a more rapid and coordinated crisis response.

A comprehensive series of exercises already under way will test individual OT and UK and regional response structures. On a regional level these include OT participation in events such as the Florida State hurricane preparedness exercise; and on a UK level the Civil Contingencies Secretariat are helping develop doctrine based on domestic response procedures.

The FCO continues to coordinate Whitehall preparations for hurricane season. DFID has offered to help design regional insurance mechanisms and a catastrophic resilience bond for non-ODA OTs. Catastrophe bonds offer investors a return in exchange for sharing the risk of catastrophic events. Money from the sale of these bonds is paid out to insurers when catastrophe strikes. Through this, OT Governments could partially mitigate against a major climatic shock, reducing the need for assistance from the UK. DFID and FCO economists regularly discuss the preparation of loan disbursements for affected territories with the Caribbean Development Bank (CDB), to ensure harmonized conditionality and a common perspective on financial sustainability.

DFID also participates in CDB Board meetings and reviews proposals for new disaster-related financing mechanisms and is considering future funding options for CDEMA.

The MOD is considering how the existing Multinational Coordination Cell (Caribbean), a virtual forum for coordination of regional assets, can be further developed to support a response to a major crisis.

2. The FCO should ensure that the needs of Overseas Territories, many of which are regularly vulnerable to natural disasters, are considered as part of the decisions to be made within Government about the future of the UK's naval fleet and that assets are dedicated to the disaster response role.

The 2015 Strategic Defence Security Review (SDSR) National Security Objective 1 is “to protect our people—at home, in our Overseas Territories and abroad, and to protect our territory, economic security, infrastructure and way of life”.

Defence takes the needs of the UK Overseas Territories, particularly those most vulnerable to natural disasters, into account during the planning process. While no assets are dedicated completely to this role under current planning, the Royal Navy is tasked to provide a ship capable of delivering Humanitarian and Disaster Relief assistance (including aviation facilities) to the Caribbean during the core hurricane season (June to November). Naval assets are routinely tasked in support of those Overseas Territories under Atlantic Patrol Task (North) and the FCO is present at the biannual Maritime Commitments Strategic Steering Group, providing the opportunity to influence this and other worldwide commitments.

This task has most recently been fulfilled by the Royal Fleet Auxiliary ship MOUNTS BAY, an amphibious landing ship which succeeded RFA WAVE KNIGHT, a support tanker, in 2017. As part of the disaster relief function within Atlantic Patrol Task (North), MOUNTS BAY embarks specialist elements including a light helicopter and engineering

and logistics personnel from the Royal Marines and British Army; this capability was demonstrated to great effect during the relief effort following hurricanes Irma and Maria in 2017.

RFA MOUNTS BAY will remain on station until after the 2019 hurricane season and will then be relieved by another vessel. Future asset allocation is being developed in line with the introduction of new capabilities and platforms to the Naval Service; the current Defence Procurement programme supports maintaining this task into the future. Additionally, the FCO are present at Defence Strategy and Prioritisation workshops, enabling their view to inform the future commitments and capabilities of UK Defence.

3. Anguilla told us that it was not able to get clarity from the UK Government quickly about the availability and nature of crisis recovery funding. Although such funding is not wholly within the control of the FCO, as the lead department for international crisis response, and the one responsible for the Government relationship with the Overseas Territories, the FCO should seek to ensure clear Government communications and messaging on such important matters in future.

The Rapid Response Mechanism (RRM) enables a rapid cross-government response to crises, such as in the Overseas Territories. It allows up to £40m from the Conflict, Security and Stability Fund (CSSF) to be quickly released. The RRM was used effectively during the crisis, and the procedures have recently been reviewed and improved ahead of the next hurricane season.

In the immediate aftermath of hurricanes Irma and Maria, the Prime Minister announced that £57m would be provided to fund the priority relief effort, which included the rapid humanitarian and military responses to the hurricane impact. This was followed by a further £15m of support for early recovery priorities to ensure there was no gap in support while the longer term reconstruction package was developed. This £15m of funding, supplemented by FCO programme funds, has been spent on priority needs identified by OT governments, including in Anguilla, in consultation with Governors' Offices.

In Anguilla over £7m of funding has been directed to early recovery priorities. This has supported, amongst other things, the re-certification of Anguilla's airport, including the provision of a temporary air traffic control tower, linesman and equipment to support re-electricification, support for the police and prison and more recently funding for repairs to educational buildings to ensure children are able to sit their exams. In November the next phase of financial support, including a £60m grant for Anguilla, was announced.

The UK Government, again working through the Governor's office, has engaged closely with the Government of Anguilla following this announcement, to understand their spending priorities and to support them in the design of the relevant projects on a priority basis whilst retaining a focus on responsible financial management of this spend.

4. The FCO should be more active in making the Overseas Territories as resilient as possible to major natural disasters, economically as well as in terms of their physical infrastructure. The FCO should provide us, by 1 September 2018, with an update on the recovery status of the affected territories and a strategy for widening their economic bases which includes ambitious deadlines for implementation.

The FCO agrees with this. The British Overseas Territory Governments are responsible for preparing and delivering on their strategic medium to long term recovery and reconstruction plans and disaster preparedness for the forthcoming season, as well as for their own economic diversification strategies, but it is of course essential that the UK Government supports them in fulfilling this role.

A team of UK Government experts were sent out as soon as possible to the affected Territories following the devastating consequences of hurricanes Irma and Maria to assess the extent of the damage and its economic impact. In November, the Prime Minister held a meeting with leaders from the Overseas Territories reiterating the UK's commitment to support them in their long-term reconstruction efforts and announced the next phase of financial support. This consisted of a new £70 million package of recovery and reconstruction support, supplemented by up to £300 million of UK loan guarantees for territories that needed support to access finance.

An Inter-Ministerial Group chaired by the Foreign Secretary was set up to oversee the UK Government's support to the territories in their recovery efforts. It agreed as part of the implementation of the UK assistance package a set of principles tailored to the local circumstances of the territories that would maximise value for money and increase the OTs' economic and physical resilience against future fiscal shocks.

The FCO supports the FAC's recommendation on the importance for the Overseas Territories widening their economic bases. The FCO has Fiscal Frameworks in place with most of the Overseas Territories in the Caribbean which outline principles for managing the public finances. Under these arrangements, we will continue to work with the respective Governments on economic diversification.

The FCO will provide a further update by the deadline requested.

5. The Government should press the OECD Development Assistance Committee to bring to an early conclusion its work to develop proposals to reinstate ODA eligibility for states and territories that suffer a persistent drop in per capita income, and its examination of the short-term financing mechanisms available in response to crises. It should inform interested Overseas Territories as soon as possible of the consequences for them of the outcomes.

As a direct result of the UK highlighting the issue, the Development Assistance Committee (DAC) Secretariat is developing proposals, in consultation with DAC member states, to allow countries and territories to regain their ODA-eligible status if their income per person falls low enough.

The UK was also instrumental in securing DAC commitment to establish a process to examine short-term financing mechanisms to respond to catastrophic humanitarian crises in countries and territories that have recently graduated from the ODA-eligible list, including a possible role for ODA spending.

For example, DAC members are considering what factors need to be considered before a country is reinstated. This includes, for example, how long a country should be below the High Income Country threshold before it is reinstated. To support this work, DFID is seconding an official to the OECD.

DFID will work through FCO to keep the OTs informed as part of its regular dialogue with the Governors.

6. We call on the Government urgently to clarify the position of Anguilla and other Overseas Territories with regard to both the continuation of current EU-funded programmes and access to future development assistance from the European Union.

The UK and Overseas Territory governments share a responsibility to the British citizens living in those territories to help enable them to lead secure, stable and more prosperous lives.

The UK will remain party to the 11th European Development Fund (EDF) which runs until 2020, and all previous EDFs. The European Commission has confirmed that the OTs shall benefit from these Funds until their closure.

After we leave the EU, we will want to take our own decisions about how to deliver the policy objectives previously targeted by EU funding. The UK government will take account of the impact of EU Exit on the Overseas Territories, including the question of access to future EDF funds, to ensure that we support the OTs in achieving sustainable public finance. We are meeting and regularly updating the Overseas Territories on EU Exit and its implications.

7. The FCO should explore the possibility of establishing an independent, formal channel through which Overseas Territories can provide feedback on the FCO's performance and their relationships with the FCO. It should also consider publishing, in the longer term, an updated policy paper with detailed consideration of the changing circumstances of the Overseas Territories including, but not limited to, the implications for them of the United Kingdom's planned departure from the European Union.

The FCO places great importance on open and constructive two-way dialogue with the Overseas Territories governments, and welcomes any feedback on performance or the direction of the overall relationship.

Over the last nine months we have increased regular Ministerial and official dialogue across a broad spectrum of issues provides a range of opportunities for both sides to raise concerns, and the annual Joint Ministerial Council provides the platform for direct engagement at senior Ministerial level. We see no need to establish an independent channel.

The 2012 White Paper remains a valid statement of our policy aims for the OTs, and the FCO will consider publishing an updated strategy once the UK has left the EU.