

Speech: Their ordeal is not over but UK is doing everything it can to help Hurricane Irma victims: article by Boris Johnson

On a screen in the Foreign Office Crisis Centre, Hurricanes Irma and Jose are being tracked across the Caribbean – mile by devastating mile.

Britain would help any human being caught up in these forces of nature. But we have a special responsibility today because Hurricane Irma inflicted its most powerful blows upon British Overseas Territories, inhabited by 75,000 British citizens.

First was Anguilla, where Irma knocked out the power and cast the island into darkness, then came the British Virgin Islands – which have borne the brunt of the storm – followed by the Turks and Caicos.

I watched the 2 hurricanes swirl across the screen in the Crisis Centre where dedicated staff from the Foreign Office and the Department for International Development have been working around the clock since Wednesday.

They've been dispatching emergency supplies, mobilising ships and planes and trying to second guess nature by anticipating exactly what help would be needed, where and when.

Their task is complicated by the fact that they are dealing with not 1 storm but 2. Following closely behind Irma is Hurricane Jose – the first time that 2 category 4 or above hurricanes have struck in such quick succession since records began in 1851. To all intents and purposes, this is an unprecedented situation.

The Crisis Centre got through to Tim Foy, the Governor of Anguilla, who briefed me in calm and measured tones. The power station on his island had survived, he said, but 70 or 80% of the transmission poles had been toppled, depriving everyone of electricity.

I thought of the 15,000 Brits living in darkness on Anguilla, with destroyed homes and schools all around them, having endured one hurricane and now in the path of another.

But the Governor was full of praise for the immediate help provided by the men and women on RFA Mounts Bay. The government dispatched this 16,000-ton naval supply ship to the Caribbean in July in preparation for the hurricane season. She carries her own floating dock, a Wildcat helicopter and a special disaster relief team.

And the Governor described how these skilled personnel had managed to restore power at Anguilla's hospital, rebuild the emergency operations centre and –

perhaps most valuable of all – clear the runway and make the island's airport serviceable.

RFA Mounts Bay has now been repositioned to do everything possible to help the British Virgin Islands. But we must be humble in the face of the power of nature. Whatever relief we are able to provide will not be enough for many who have lost so much – and their ordeal is not over.

A crisis like this brings out the best in Britain's public servants. We can all take pride in people like Tim Foy and the other Governors of the stricken islands, the staff of the Foreign Office Crisis Centre, and the crew of RFA Mounts Bay. All are striving tirelessly to help those in need.

And so they must because the people of Anguilla, the British Virgin Islands and the Turks and Caicos are British. Our obligation to them does not depend on the happenstance of geography: we will help just as surely as if the hurricane had struck Inverness or Dover or St Ives.

It is precisely because of this overriding sense of obligation that the government has ordered the flagship of the Royal Navy, HMS Ocean, to head the Caribbean. Our biggest warship in service – carrying eight helicopters including 2 giant Chinooks – has left its NATO tasking in the Mediterranean and begun steaming westwards with all dispatch. HMS Ocean will cross the Atlantic and reach the Caribbean in about 10 days.

There is, of course, a desperate need for aid in the meantime. On Friday a giant C-17 transport aircraft from the RAF took off for the Caribbean, laden with enough emergency shelters for almost 1,000 people. In total, almost 20 tonnes of aid has already been sent by air, including rations, water purification kits and emergency lighting.

Expertise matters just as much as materiel, so 250 Royal Marines have been deployed in the region, including military engineers and medics.

They will reinforce the 40 personnel of the humanitarian and disaster relief team on board RFA Mounts Bay, whose excellent work has made such a difference in Anguilla.

In a situation where roads are blocked and communications disrupted, helicopters are essential assets. So a second C-17 left the UK on Friday carrying 2 Puma transport helicopters. They will join the Wildcat already deployed by RFA Mounts Bay.

We can be reassured that a great deal of aid has either arrived or is en route. But heartbreaking damage has been inflicted and no-one should assume that everything will go smoothly in the crucial days that lie ahead.

We are working alongside our friends, including France and the Netherlands, whose Caribbean territories have also suffered terribly, and the United States.

And the government has promised to match what I know will be the generous donations of the British public pound for pound.

We must now look ahead to where Irma will strike next. On Sunday the hurricane is expected to make landfall in Florida, where hundreds of thousands of Britons either live or go on holiday. Our Consul General in Miami is making every preparation.

In the coming days, our fellow Britons will be caught in the pathway of these forces of nature. We will not relent in our efforts to give them every possible help.