

**STATEMENT TO THE HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES ON
THE MANAGEMENT OF THE PREPARATION FOR AND
RESPONSE TO HURRICANE MATTHEW**

**By the Hon. Desmond McKenzie MP
Minister of Local Government and Community Development**

Tuesday October 11, 2016

Mr. Speaker...

Last week, the people of Jamaica faced the greatest natural threat to their lives and livelihood for many years, in the form of Hurricane Matthew.

It is with the deepest sense of relief and gratitude that I say personally, and on behalf of the Government of Jamaica, we are thankful that this Hurricane veered away from its projected path, away from our island home.

The Government took all necessary measures to prepare the country for what was expected to be the onslaught of Matthew as it moved in a north-easterly direction past Jamaica.

The closest distance between Matthew and Jamaica was just 215 kilometres (134 miles) east of Morant Point, as it moved past the island as a powerful Category 4 Hurricane. Let me put that in context Mr. Speaker. The driving distance between Somerset Village at Negril Point in the west, and Morant point in the east, is 307 kilometres or 191 miles. The flying distance between the points is even closer: 232 kilometres or just 144 miles. It is difficult to imagine a closer brush with disaster, or such a dramatic escape from it.

I am certain Mr. Speaker that the Government and people of Haiti, are wishing they had had a similar escape. Infrastructure has been devastated. The death toll in the country is currently estimated at 900, and now, the citizens are having to contend with an outbreak of Cholera in the wake of the Hurricane.

The Government of Jamaica stands in practical solidarity with the Haitian people Mr. Speaker. Accordingly, the Office of Disaster Preparedness and Emergency Management (ODPEM) is spearheading Jamaica's effort to assist our brothers and sisters there. ODPEM is now represented in Haiti, as the damage assessment process continues.

I have seen Mr. Speaker, expressions of dismay and disappointment from some of our citizens that the Government had elevated the Hurricane threat in the public mind, only for mainly rains to occur. To them I say: count your blessings, count them one by one.

However, there is another saying that applies to our recent experience Mr. Speaker: “Take sleep mark death.” This weather system has provided an opportunity for us to put the disaster preparedness and response mechanism to work, and to evaluate its effectiveness to ensure continuous improvement.

PREPAREDNESS FOR THE HURRICANE

Even before Jamaica was placed on Hurricane Watch on October 1, the Office of Disaster Preparedness and Emergency Management (ODPEM) had started the process of preparing the country.

- The Agency activated the ***National Disaster Action Plan – Hurricane Standing Orders*** on September 26, which guided the actions of the National Emergency Operations Centre (NEOC) and Agencies involved in the response.
- A meeting of the National Disaster Risk Management Council was held by the Most Honourable Prime Minister on September 30, at Jamaica House and all 63 Members of Parliament were invited. Agencies, Ministries and Departments were placed on Alert.
- ODPEM continued to monitor the weather system and Parish Disaster Committees and Agencies were placed on standby. ODPEM issued news releases and hosted news conferences, as did the Office of the Prime Minister, about all matters concerning the progress of the Hurricane and the integrated national response.
- At the ***policy*** level, the NEOC was activated at level 2 on October 1.

- At the *operational* level, The NEOC commenced on September 30 at Level 1 activation, Level 2 activation on October 1 and Level 3 – the highest stage of activation – on October 2.
- A total of 16 Emergency Operations Centres were activated island-wide.
- 193 shelters were opened, and provided accommodation for 3,501 people. The highest numbers of people seeking the Shelters came from St. Thomas (1,067), Kingston and St. Andrew (578), Portland (677) and St. Mary (403).
- ODPEM ensured the distribution of important items to the Shelters including tarpaulins, raincoats, lanterns, blankets and mattresses, toilet paper and water. *The Administration also took the critical decision to provision the Shelters with food, to nourish people from the first day of entry.*

- Arrangements were made for homeless persons to be accommodated through the Local Authorities and the Ministry of Local Government and Community Development, the Ministry of Labour and Social Security and the Salvation Army.
- The Municipal Corporations are a critical part of the disaster management system, and I wish to commend them, and some of the Mayors who provided exceptional leadership when it was needed most.

EVACUATION

Mr. Speaker, I must express thanks to the Jamaica Urban Transit Company (JUTC) for the critical transport support provided for the evacuation effort.

It is publicly known that transportation was offered to people in vulnerable communities, and 104 people took advantage of the offer.

100 displaced people were taken from Old Harbour Bay Police Station to the Old Harbour High School for shelter, and 4 residents were evacuated from Port Royal. Two buses were stationed in the community to support the exercise.

Mr. Speaker, I am compelled to emphasize yet again, the critical importance of obeying the instructions of disaster officials to evacuate vulnerable areas.

No level of instinct, or hope, or stubborn determination to ride out the storm can replace the reality that when severe flooding or wind is imminent, people in disaster-prone areas are likely to suffer loss of property, loss of life or both.

We have intensified the national conversation about evacuation Mr. Speaker, and this will have to continue.

ACTUAL AND POTENTIAL LOSSES

One of the important concerns of the Government, was that public infrastructure would be extensively damaged by Matthew.

I am heartened to report Mr. Speaker that this is not the case. While the Municipal Corporations are concluding their investigations in relation to Parochial infrastructure, I have been formally advised that there is no severe damage. The National Works Agency has given similar advice in relation to the wider road network.

As far as total loss to the economy is concerned Mr. Speaker, we await the calculation of lost production hours among other factors by the Planning Institute of Jamaica, as part of the national assessment exercise.

Mr. Speaker, the process of evaluating this experience has already begun. ODPEM has commenced its review exercise, and this will also involve the Social Development Commission (SDC). We will be reviewing among other things in the short term, the Shelter Management Programme. Additionally, there will be:

- **A systems and procedures review of Internal and External Agencies.**
- **An update of the Standard Operating Procedures of the NEOC, after careful evaluation.**
- **The development of Mutual Aid Agreements and Contract Agreements with private sector partners, to ensure swift response.**
- **In the longer term, the National Response Coordination Plan will be updated.**

Mr. Speaker, I wish to thank all our partner Ministries and Agencies in the National Emergency Operations Centre for their hard and consistent work.

I want to thank our private sector partners for their dedication to service.

I also wish to specially commend the men and women of ODPEM, who worked day and night to prepare Jamaica for Matthew, from beginning to end.

While we hope that there will be no further brushes with weather systems for the rest of the Hurricane Season, the country can be assured that the Government will be ready to lead Jamaica through the storm.

Thank You Mr. Speaker.

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Minister of Local Government and Community Development
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