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Tom Bossert

Briefing on U.S. Government Hurricane Relief Efforts in Puerto Rico

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Mr. Bossert: Thanks, Sarah. Good afternoon. As you know, President Trump has put people first and paperwork second. He's had us call out and pull out all the stops, and put out as much federal relief into Puerto Rico and the U.S. Virgin Islands as we can muster. And we've been ongoing in our efforts to accomplish that and meet his objectives over the last eight days.

And I'm here to take some questions. I know you've heard some reporting from Sarah, so if I could, I'll just jump right in.

Peter.

Question: If I can ask you -- first of all, thanks for being here. Specifically on the Jones Act, which has been the focus of a lot of attention in the course of the last 24 to 72 hours right now, critics say the White House should have moved more quickly in waiving the Jones Act, lawmakers among them. Why is that an unfounded complaint?



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Mr. Bossert: Okay, so it is an unfounded complaint and here's why: The Jones Act, real briefly stated, is a rule that favors flag vessels -- U.S. flag vessels. If there are not enough U.S. flag vessels -- the capacity, in other words -- to meet the need, then we waive the Jones Act. In this particular case, we had enough capacity of U.S. flag vessels to take more than, or to exceed the requirement and need of diesel fuel and other commodities into Puerto Rico.

What happened is, I think almost 17 or 18 days' worth of now what you're seeing -- backlogged diesel fuel need in the island. But it was a little bit misunderstood and misreported that we had a capacity problem and had to waive the Jones Act. Not the case. The idea here is that we had provided as many commodities as were necessary to the island. The challenge became, then, land-based distribution. That remains the challenge; that remains the priority today.

However, last night, Governor Rosselló called me a little after eight o'clock and said, at this point, to ensure that the additional needs are met as we move forward, it might be a good idea to proactively make sure that we pull out all the stops just in case that capacity problem ran into the requirement problem. I talked to the President; he thought that was absolutely the right thing to do, and waived it right away.

So that was not too late. It was not even too early. It was just the right thing to do proactively.

Question: So to be very clear, through this point, then obviously distribution is one of the biggest challenges. You talked about 44 of 69 hospitals now being up and running as necessary to bring those people whose lives are at risk. What percentage of the country would you say you really haven't had a chance to even explore to see how they've been impacted by this?

Mr. Bossert: Yeah, so it's hard to answer the percentage of the country, so I'll answer it this way: Through aerial surveillance we've seen the entirety of Puerto Rico. Some of the southwest and southeast sections of the island have had a little bit more sparse on-foot exploration. But it's the interior of the island that's presenting the biggest problem for us right now. The mountainous interior is where we're dedicating our efforts to try to get in with rotary wing support. The margins, so to speak, are now open to airports and seaports, so that's where we're freeing up some of that delivery.



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But again, back to the Jones Act question, we had -- up until the waiver last night -- enough capacity in U.S. flag vessels to get all the commodities necessary into the island. We just then ran into the priority challenge of distributing land-based commodities into the people, and that's -- if I can pivot before I take the next question, that's a challenge or a function of two problems:

First, the capacity of the locals in the state were diminished because those people are victims, as well, that work for the state and work for the local authorities. And then, secondly, the debris and down power lines had to be pushed out of the way. And so we've got the resources there to do that now, but that's the challenge remaining.

The central interior is going to be reviewed and looked at very carefully over the next 24, 48 hours to make sure we're getting the needs of the people met.

Question: A quick follow on John, if I could. Had Governor Rosselló, Tom, not requested -- protectively -- a waiver in the Jones Act, would you have seen a compelling reason to initiate a waiver?

Mr. Bossert: I wouldn't have, and I wasn't recommending to the President that he waive the Jones Act at the time until I got the governor's request. And it may be a historical note of relevance: Sometimes we'll see the carriers request the waiver, right? So you'll have foreign flag vessels or U.S. flag vessels or carrier companies call us and say, "Please waive it because there's an issue." We didn't get, to my knowledge, any carrier requests.

But once the governor calls and says, "Proactively, as I see out into the future, on the horizon" -- then I think that we should listen to him. And the President completely agreed.

Question: Was this just all overhyped, in simple terms?

Mr. Bossert: Well, perhaps misunderstood. I think there's also some critics that believe that it was a price issue, and for those, I can't answer it. I don't know how the markets price these things. But I can tell you is already bought and paid for by the U.S. taxpayer in a humanitarian effort, and I think it's an absolutely wise investment to save lives, whether they're U.S. citizens or not.



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In this particular case, we've got U.S. Virgin Island citizens, Puerto Rican citizens -- all American citizens. I think that's the right investment to make. Whether it could have changed the price point, I don't know. There was an op-ed piece on that.

But capacity is the issue. Lifesaving requirements -- that's the need. And we had that capacity met.

Yes, ma'am.

Question: Tom, your need is immediate, and with all the challenges that are coming, what are the conversations about with airdrops -- just airdropping in certain areas? Because people are talking about running out of water, running out of food like in hours or minutes. What's happening with that conversation? And also, once again, an issue of housing. We're hearing about ships -- cruise ships. What else is going on with this?

Mr. Bossert: So there's a number of things happening. With respect to the distribution of commodities, that is the biggest challenge right now. But the restoration of power is also a big challenge, and I'll tell you why. Energy here -- electric power -- is supplying the hospitals that are providing medical care to the wounded and those that brought medical conditions and had chelation needs and other needs.

So there's kind of a dual priority going on in terms of power restoration, emergency power, and then blocking, clearing, pushing out of the way all the roads to open them up so we can get commodities delivered. There's still a shortfall there, though, and that is drivers for all those trucks. So we are pushing personnel in to augment state and local authorities to continue to push those commodities.

What you saw today, though, I think was some reporting and some loop footage of some trucks sitting on ports and docks. We're moving those trucks quickly. We're also prioritizing what needs to come off first so that we can get generators --

Question: Wouldn't airdrops circumvent all of that having to rebuild infrastructure and move things away?



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Mr. Bossert: Yeah. At this point, if airdrops are under consideration, I'm not aware of it. But I would promote it if it's a faster way to get food and water to people who are in need. We now have a one-star general, General Kim, in place, who's in charge of all ground force operations to make sure there's one person in charge of marshaling all those efforts. And if he recommends airdrop, then I think we airdrop.

Sir.

Question: Tom, I've got a text here from a volunteer who has boots on the ground, and he says that they need helicopters to evacuate people from remote areas of the island. And he says there are people burying their family members in front yards, communication is badly needed, and they look at apocalyptic conditions between 48 and 72 hours. There's a little bit of disconnect from what I'm hearing here and what they're telling me there. Can you explain the difference?

Mr. Bossert: Yeah, no, there's no disconnect. If that's accurate, then it needs to be addressed and remediated immediately. So what I want to do here is be careful not to micromanage it from here. That's the mistake you've seen in the past. I believe -- I'm confident anyway -- that we've got enough resources marshaled and deployed forward to make those decisions under the right command and leadership structure.

What we've done, and as I've explained in the past, is we've had to augment and change our business model in the field. We did that last Thursday in earnest; you saw the effects of it over the weekend. But what we did is we had to augment the local and state authorities, not just at the top, but all the way out through and to the lower levels. So now there are federal officials that are identifying needs and requirements, requesting them of the state level, augmenting the state level to validate those requirements, and then from the federal side, providing them.

So we are in every stage of the identification, validation, and provision of requirements and the delivery of them to people in need. And a couple of things here: First, people seeing 24- and 48-hour horizon problems where they're saying, I don't see enough food and water coming, it's my sincere belief that that food and water is going to get to them before that deadline arises and that we're going to save their lives. I have no doubt in it.



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We've got over 10,000 people there now, and there's more on their way, including a lot of aerial support, USS Comfort.

I'm going to read the numbers here for you. There's 12 Coast Guard cutters, three United States Navy ships, one DOT Maritime Administration vessel, six commercial ships with supplies in route -- this was as of 5:00 a.m., so there's more since -- seven additional ships to house responders, and we've got commodities distribution now exceeding millions. So 1.3 million meals, 2.7 million liters -- that type of thing -- of water.

So that's moving in today, and you're seeing the distribution problem unclogged. Now, if there's somebody burying somebody in their front yard, that's an absolutely terrible story. What I don't want to do though is project it as the norm, and I think there's a careful distinction here.

Question: What is the norm?

Mr. Bossert: Right now we've seen 16 fatalities confirmed from the state authorities. No fatality is acceptable. If that number increases significantly, that will be a devastating blow. We are going everything we can to prevent that. The loss of life from the storm is one thing; loss of life that's preventable is another. And that's why we're trying to marshal our resources.

Ma'am.

Question: Senator Rubio, who just got back from the island, says there are significant logistical concerns with the administration's response. He says there's no clear command, control, and communication between local and federal agencies. And he says this requires a response led by DOD. Is that option on the table here?

Mr. Bossert: Sure. It's already been undertaken. So I was with the senator briefly on Monday, in Puerto Rico, and I think what he's identifying there is something that we already had in place -- or a solution for. So he's identifying a traditional problem between municipal and state government authorities.



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Normally, FEMA and the federal government would provide aid to the governor, to the state, and then they would work it out with the local authorities. What we've identified here as of last Thursday, and you saw it implemented over the weekend, was a lack of capacity coupled with this insular several hundred-mile away, divided by an ocean island problem. And so what we've done is provided federal authorities -- largely guys in green, right -- Title X and Title XXXII forces -- but also FEMA emergency managers, to stand next to each of those municipality leaders, whether they're mayors or local authority figures, like the water authority or electric authority leaders. And they're being augmented by federal forces.

So we've addressed those challenges in communicating between local and state authorities by augmenting them with federal staff. That's something that wasn't necessarily apparent to the senator as he got there. He identified a problem, but it was a problem already being fixed. And it's one that he probably wasn't able to see at the municipal level for two reasons. One, he didn't get out there to them. Neither of us could make it out to the municipal levels when we visited on Monday. And two, there was a communications problem of grave import that persists to this day, and that communications problem is tied to the electric power restoration problem.

If I could, before I take the next question, let me explain why and how the power restoration process is unfolding.

What we decided to do is take the action of putting the United States Army Corps of Engineers in charge of power restoration on the island. So to your question about whether the military is in charge, it depends on the mission and function. They're in charge of a lot, but not everything. The people of Puerto Rico are strong, competent, and where they're not diminished in capacity, they're in charge. And that's the best way to handle things. But where they're not able, and where they have diminished capacity, we're taking extreme steps.

So a direct federal assistance order was given, a mission assignment was given. I've heard others on TV quibble whether it's a mission or not. Let me make it clear: General Semonite from the United States Army Corps of Engineers has been given a mission to restore power on Puerto Rico, writ large, full stop. He has some priorities.

His priorities are temporary power generation right now. That's the big diesel-run generators that are supporting the hospitals and other lifesaving capabilities. Two, permanent generation.



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He's going to restore the damaged power generation capacity on the south of the island. Three, transmission. Those are the big lines that transmit power to and from. And then, fourthly, distribution. That's the last mile -- capillaries hook up to the houses and that type of power generation.

So those are his priorities, and I'm pretty certain that the Puerto Rican people are going to see the results of a dedicated Army Corps of Engineers mission.

Ma'am.

Question: If airdrops would help, why are those not happening? Is that a military issue? Is that a problem with them not stepping up?

Mr. Bossert: Yeah, it's my belief that right now both the state government and most of the municipalities involved have identified the fastest route is available to them being ground based. If that's not the case, then I'm confident -- but I want to make sure that I don't step in between something that I could be far removed from. If the ground force commander down there has identified an airdrop mission as faster and more productive, then I endorse it from here. I certainly wouldn't question his judgment.

But it was my reporting and understanding earlier today that they identified the fastest delivery methodology to be through ground-based means by clearing first and delivering second, and that we needed drivers and we're augmenting them, and they needed security forces, and we've applied those. There's a security force plan now laid down for each of the drivers so that they can feel safe.

Yes, sir.

Question: Tom, several aid flights have gotten out of South Florida and managed to get to the island and deliver food and water without having logistical problems. There's severe criticism coming from South Florida now, saying that there's mismanagement coming all the way from the President. How do you respond to that?

Mr. Bossert: Well, I'm not certain who you're talking about or who's criticizing us. There's plenty of criticism to go around, but I'm pretty confident --



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Question: The mayor [inaudible] managed to get an aid flight into the island and get it unloaded. And he says the problems that you're having logistically are of your own making from not taking action sooner and bringing in the military sooner.

Mr. Bossert: Well, first, I thank the mayor for providing aid. Second, the mayor is just dead wrong in this case, and I would challenge him to go down and get a better understanding first before rendering that verdict on what we've done, what we had been doing, and how blown away you're going to be when you see the full totality of the picture. So I'm certain that the mayor has had some positive experiences. I wouldn't be critical of him personally. But he's probably -- just like with the Jones Act criticism that he rendered -- just not yet informed on the facts.

So thanks for that question.

Question: How is he able to get supplies through? And why is it that there are 10,000 containers waiting at the port of San Juan?

Mr. Bossert: Well, to my point earlier, we're getting a lot of supplies through; it's just perhaps some misreporting that misunderstands that fact.

Question: The President has referenced some of the debt and economic problems that Puerto Rico has been struggling with for some time here. When you were talking about the lack of capacity, municipal and state level -- I mean, are you faulting local officials for a lack of preparedness?

Mr. Bossert: No, absolutely -- no. Let me be clear, when I say capacity, I'm talking about the capacity problem of people being victims that would otherwise be the first responders, repairers, and managers of the municipal government functions. So what we're doing is trying to restore baseline municipal government functions because they've been affected. Their homes are destroyed, their families are put in peril. That's the capacity problem that I'm addressing.

When you talk about money, I believe that the island authority in general, with -- Puerto Rico -- \$72 billion in debt, there's a restructuring effort underway.



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And Congress weighed in with the PROMESA Act, and that \$72 billion is being restructured and handled through, in part, bankruptcy proceedings and so forth.

Question: But how is that impacting this response? Because the President brought it up.

Mr. Bossert: Well, I think the President -- I know the President brought it up in terms of recovery. But here's how it affects the response: What it does is it puts the island in a position where they don't have the financial resources to meet the cost-share requirement for all of these goods and resources, personnel and materiel flowing into the island.

What the President did was acknowledge that, publicly and privately; realize that that would be a problem, at the advice of the FEMA administrator, myself, and Secretary Duke; and he took the step of doing a 100 percent federal cost-share adjustment to pay for all of this, from debris removal to debris pushing, power restoration, the Army Corps of Engineers, and all the emergency protective measures -- police, fire, EMS, truck drivers, all those sorts of things -- 180 days, so six months for the Virgin Islands and for Puerto Rico, until we can get our hands around this. All those functions and all those missions that I just described are all 100 percent federal cost-share. We don't want anybody worried about paper; we want them worried about people.

I'm going to take two more questions. Sir.

Question: I wanted to follow that a little bit and ask: As you're starting to envision, down the road, if any sort of bailout might be part of this sort of broader recovery package, that you look for in a supplemental. And on that supplemental, I know the first crack at it will be relatively soon. Aides on Capitol Hill are suggesting that it could be the first week in October. Is that the timeline that you're anticipated? And have you started to compile that?

Mr. Bossert: As my colleague, Mr. Cohn, alluded to, we're certainly willing to negotiate with Congress if there's some better fiscal idea.

From an emergency management perspective, in the next coming weeks it's important to understand that FEMA just got a \$7.1 billion appropriation released on October 1st, and what's going to happen now is we're going to go back for more.



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We're going to ask for that in the form of an emergency supplemental to provide money into the fund that does this lifesaving, life-sustaining effort, and even some of the early recovery efforts.

Whether we have to address or should address at that point the existing \$72 billion worth of debt and how it's been restructured is something that I'll have to take my lead from the economists on and from some of the budget hawks.

But I think that the best idea here for us would be to focus on PROMESA and PRASA -- the electric power authority and the water authority. Those are the two concerning elements where they're going to have to be rebuilt, they're going to have to be rebuilt under proper management, and they're going to have to be rebuilt under proper rebuilding codes and standards to make sure that they can withstand a future hurricane, and that we don't just go back to sticks and wires in the future.

So we're going to put federal money into this. We should do it wisely and prudently. I've said that from this podium here before. President Trump believes in that seriously. I don't think we're going to have to address the debt restructuring issue in this next go-around, but if we do, and if Congress wants us to, President Trump is up to that challenge.

Question: [Inaudible] supplemental?

Mr. Bossert: Well, it's going to have to come, I think, in the next two to four weeks, but I can't put a better date on it. I'd refer you to Director Mulvaney.

Let me take one more question here.

Question: I'm not sure if I still understand -- why has it taken eight days to get a three-star general on the ground to start organizing this? We know the island situation, et cetera. But why eight days?

Mr. Bossert: Yeah, well, because it didn't require a three-star general eight days ago. Let me explain to you how the process works. It will be the best way of explaining the answer. We have a three-star general in charge of this, and we had one in charge of this out of San Antonio from day minus-eight and day minus-two and all the way through until today.



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We forward-deployed a one-star general -- a brigadier general -- to take care of ground force command once we realized the problem of logistics distribution had outstripped the capacity of the affected municipal governments.

But that three-star general was there and running and coordinating operations as an extension of NORAD and Northern Command. We've made a number of improvements to that distribution process and that marshaling of military resources since, for instance, General Honoré experienced the problems he did in Katrina. We've matured quite a bit since that day.

The three-star command structure that he lacked back then has been put in place and has been in place for this response out of San Antonio, and augmented by a Northern Command structure that's been pretty robust and forward-leaning here. They've been doing vocal authorities; they're not waiting for paperwork. They've been doing things that -- or on-command authority; they don't wait for a governor's request. So all those forward-leaning lessons have been applied here, but perhaps misunderstood.

But now the change, move here on day eight was to take that three-star general and to put him there, physically located in the field. I don't anticipate he'll stay there long, but he needs to get there, have his eyes on it, and make sure that he's comfortable with the interaction between his forces and the governor and the municipal forces, because it's a little bit of a different business plan model in the field, and because it's unique and it's an island 1,100 or so miles away from the nearest land in Florida.

And so once he's satisfied, I think -- or would expect that three-star general to recede back into his appropriate command structure. But for now, both he and his one-star subordinate command will be there in charge of ground forces and overall military marshals, and we'll end up with a lot more people there over the coming days to try to address this really significant problem and significant need.

And if that's okay, I'd like to make that my last question.

Question: San Antonio is thousands of miles from Puerto Rico. Why -- was it a mistake -- would you acknowledge it was a mistake, looking back, to not have this three-star general on the ground earlier?



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Mr. Bossert: No, not at all. In fact, that doesn't affect the way we stage equipment and the way we handle area command and field operational commands. This is textbook and it's been done well. The unusual step has been to put the three-star general down forward-leaning. So I have every confidence that we'll handle that in the best way possible.

Peter, if I could --

Question: One quick one --

Mr. Bossert: John, I'm going to see if that's my last question, if I can.

As I always do, I'm going to end by saying I'd like everyone to say an extra special prayer for the people on Puerto Rico tonight. The U.S. Virgin Islands are dealing well. They're not getting a lot of coverage, but I'd like you to say that prayer for them as well. And also for the 10,000-plus federal workers, several thousand other volunteer workers, businessmen and others, men and women that are helping those in need. Honestly, this is something that is going to require weeks and months' worth of patience as we restore power, get food and water, and return to normalcy.

So thank you so much for your time. I'm very proud of the Puerto Rican people, their strength and leadership. Governor Rosselló has our full confidence and faith.

Thank you.