



BRIEFING PAPER

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UK assistance to affected British Overseas Territories after Hurricanes Irma and Maria

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Introduction

Members and their staff are receiving a significant number of representations regarding the UK government's post-Hurricane assistance to affected British Overseas Territories. Worst affected in September were the British Virgin Islands (BVI), the Turks and Caicos Islands and Anguilla.

This note provides a brief overview of what we know currently about the UK's assistance effort to date.

Periodic government updates and official statements do provide some valuable information but they are not comprehensive.

We do not know exactly how much is being spent by the UK in each affected Territory and on what.

We also do not know exactly how much of what is being spent can be counted as 'aid' – an issue which has caused considerable controversy (see below).

What has the UK government done so far?

The Department for International Development (DFID) puts regular updates on its [website](#) about UK assistance.

In [an update](#) on 18 September, shortly after Hurricane Irma but with Hurricane Maria imminent, the government announced the following support was being given to the region:

Over 1300 military troops are staying put in the region – either on the islands already affected or in locations from where they will be able to readily deploy once Maria has passed.

An additional 42 strong military resilience team has been deployed forward to British Virgin Islands prior to Hurricane Maria ready to support additional needs there.

A military reconnaissance team has been put on standby to go to Montserrat to assess need if it is hit by Hurricane Maria.

DFID has established logistics hubs in the Dominican Republic, Barbados and Antigua & Barbuda to ensure swift supply of relief items if required and is procuring additional supplies from Miami and Panama.

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HMs Ocean, which is due to arrive in the region at the end of the week, with 60 tonnes of DFID supplies on board will be deployed according to need once Hurricane Maria has passed.

On the basis of the latest weather forecast, we are advising against all but essential travel to Montserrat and Anguilla and against all travel to the British Virgin Islands.

All those in the region are urged to follow the advice of the local authorities.

To date, the UK government has allocated £57 million to the immediate response effort and agreed to match up to £3 million of public donations to the Red Cross appeal.

75 tonnes of DFID relief items have either arrived or been procured in the region including much needed food, water, nearly 3,000 shelter kits, 5,000 hygiene kits and 10,000 buckets.

40 tonnes of humanitarian aid has been distributed including over 4 tonnes of food and water on the British Virgin Islands; 720 litres of water to the Turks and Caicos Islands; and over 2 tonnes of building materials to Anguilla.

Montserrat, identified in the above statement as at risk, was not severely hit by Hurricane Maria although it was seriously [affected](#). Maria caused the most damage to Dominica, a former British country but today an independent, sovereign state. It subsequently received a [£5 million aid package](#) from the UK. No additional funds were announced for affected British Overseas Territories at this juncture.

At the time of writing, the amount pledged by the UK government for the Overseas Territories remains at £57 million.

Another update was issued by the UK government on 6 October, "[One month on from Hurricane Irma](#)". In it, Secretary of State for International Development Priti Patel said:

It was heart breaking to see the full extent of the devastation caused by the hurricanes; many homes were completely destroyed and families' lives were torn apart.

As soon as the hurricanes hit, the UK responded by leading the relief effort and making sure emergency supplies went to those who were worst-hit.

We are already seeing signs of daily life getting back to normal - schools are re-opening, local economies are back up and running and the debris and wreckage is being cleared.

Our UK task force is now working with the governments of the Overseas Territories to help them get on with the vital reconstruction work and to make sure the islands are built back more resiliently than in the past, so a future hurricane won't be as devastating.

The update also provided specific information about UK assistance to the three worst-affected Territories:

DFID Response Overview

2896 shelter kits, 4990 solar lanterns and 10,000 buckets are already in the region, as well as additional supplies from HMS Ocean

British Virgin Islands: UK aid

43 RAF transport flights, more than four tonnes of food and water and more than 816 shelter kits, as well as radios, debris clearing equipment, building materials, generators and communications equipment.

Turks and Caicos Islands UK aid

0.8 tonnes of bottled water, 922 Shelter Kits, 170 plastic sheets, four flat-pack schools, debris clearing equipment, building materials, generators, communications equipment, solar lantern, fuel and forklifts.

Anguilla: UK aid

6.8 tonnes of food and water, 18 tonnes of lumber, 1,000 Sheets corrugated iron, shelter kits, 15 Generators, debris clearing equipment, communications equipment, solar lanterns, 100 metres of electric cable and 500 hygiene packs.

In the most recent [update](#) on 13 October, the UK government announced the establishment of a private sector task force to assist in longer-term reconstruction (see below).

Which Overseas Territories qualify for UK aid?

UK funds spent on the BVI, Turks and Caicos Islands and Anguilla cannot count towards the UK's official aid target of spending 0.7% of Gross National Income on 'Official development assistance' (ODA).

This is because they are classified as 'high-income countries' by the OECD. This fact has caused considerable controversy here in the UK. Montserrat, classified as an 'upper middle-income country' by the OECD, is eligible for UK ODA.

Reproduced in the Box below are extracts from a recent [blog](#) published by the Library which addresses this issue more detail.

Hurricane Irma: Who gets aid?

When Hurricane Irma recently devastated the Caribbean, some people were [surprised and angry](#) at the fact that the UK could not use its international aid budget to help its affected overseas territories. Although the Department for International Development was quick to deny reports that the UK's response to the hurricane had been affected, this did not prevent criticism of the rules surrounding aid and [calls for them to be changed](#).

What is the aid budget?

The UK has a legal commitment to ensure that across the whole of Government, 0.7% of the country's national income will be spent each year on aid (this came to £13.3 billion in 2016). Along with many other countries, the UK uses the [OECD's definition of aid](#) ('ODA'): it must be spent in low and middle-income countries, and must be mainly used for their economic development and welfare.

Why can't it be used in this case?

The British overseas territories affected by Irma – Anguilla, Turks and Caicos and the British Virgin Islands – are all classified as high-income economies, with national incomes of over US\$12,235 per person. This means that although the UK government is free to spend money on helping them, this spending may not be counted as aid, and must therefore be taken from sources other than the aid budget.

Which countries do get emergency aid?

There is no shortage of low and middle-income countries affected by disasters and emergencies, and the aid budget is frequently used to help these places. In 2015, the UK gave 91 different countries and regions a total of £1.3 billion in [humanitarian aid](#), which covers the immediate response to emergencies, coping with their short-term aftermath, and work to be more prepared when another emergency strikes.

Dominica, which was hit by hurricanes Irma and Maria in quick succession, has also received aid from the UK. Because Dominica is not a high income country, this contribution – and the

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extra £5 million [recently pledged](#) for humanitarian needs and recovery – does come from the aid budget.

Can the rules be changed?

International development secretary Priti Patel [has written to the OECD](#), asking for changes to its rules to reflect the fact that small island nations are particularly vulnerable to disasters like Irma despite their national income. She also suggested that the impact of natural disasters [should lead to a change](#) in how territories were defined for aid purposes.

The OECD's aid definition has been changed before, most recently in 2014, when the OECD's Development Assistance Committee agreed to modernise its statistical reporting system for aid, channel more money to poorer countries, and make technical changes to reporting of loans. However, this is a slow process, and [requires the agreement of all 30 OECD members](#), so it appears unlikely that much will change in the short term; in any case, some NGOs, such as Christian Aid, [think that the existing rules should not be changed](#).

The money announced to date for UK government assistance to the affected Territories has come from a number of budgets. In a [parliamentary answer](#) on 11 October, DFID Minister of State Sir Alan Duncan provided this breakdown of the £57 million pledged to date:

- £32 million has come from the Conflict, Security and Stability Fund – a significant proportion of this fund has been spent on 'non-ODA' activities since it began operations in April 2016;
- £25 million has come from Treasury reserves (£15 million) and from DFID (£10 million).

There has been some debate in the media about whether the aid rules as they stand have impacted on the amount of aid given. The [Guardian](#) reported in mid-September:

The UK has pledged a total of £57m towards disaster relief and the public has helped to raise a further £1.3m

But an unnamed minister told the BBC the figure would have been significantly higher without strict international rules governing the allocation of the £13bn aid budget, a claim disputed by Downing Street.

May's spokesman said the OECD rules do not "stop Britain dedicating the money needed for the hurricane recovery and reconstruction effort".

"The response would have been just as large and swift regardless of the aid rules," he said. But he added: "The prime minister is frustrated with the rules as they stand."

The [BBC](#) has also reported denials by officials that the rules have prevented aid going to affected Territories:

The Department for International Development insisted the fact the territories were not eligible for official development assistance had not affected the UK's emergency relief.

And officials denied that claims that five times as much money would have been available if ODA could have been used.

Priti Patel's September letter to the OECD on this issue has dovetailed with a wider UK government initiative to change the aid rules. The Conservative party [manifesto](#) for the June 2017 election said:

There are still ways that we can improve the way that taxpayers' money is used to help the world's most vulnerable people. We do not believe that international definitions of development assistance always help in determining how money should

be spent, on whom and for what purpose. **So we will work with like-minded countries to change the rules so that they are updated and better reflect the breadth of our assistance around the world. If that does not work, we will change the law to allow us to use a better definition of development spending, while continuing to meet our 0.7 per cent target.**

Are there other sources of assistance available?

Yes. For example, the European Development Fund (EDF) is the EU's main instrument for providing development aid to African, Caribbean and Pacific (ACP) countries and to overseas countries and territories (OCTs).

It provides aid to some British Overseas Territories which are not eligible for ODA under OECD rules. The six Territories that are eligible for EDF support are: Anguilla, Montserrat, Pitcairn, St Helena, the Turks and Caicos Islands and the Falkland Islands. However, the EDF also classifies the British Virgin Islands, Bermuda and the Cayman Islands as too wealthy to be given aid.

A March 2017 European Scrutiny Committee [report](#) looked at the support the EDF gives to BOTs in more detail.

The EDF is funded directly by EU member states rather than forming part of the EU budget. Any changes in the way that the EDF spends its money, including possibly extending its criteria to give aid to richer British Overseas Territories after hurricanes, would likely have to be agreed by all member states, making such a change difficult to achieve. Of course, the UK and the British Overseas Territories are due to leave the EU at the end of March 2019.

What are the responsibilities of the UK towards the Overseas Territories?

The UK is [responsible](#) for the defence and security of the Overseas Territories. Under the present constitutional arrangements, Overseas Territories with settled populations enjoy varying degrees of self-government under their own constitutions. But they are required to abide by the international obligations to which the UK is subject.

In the relation to emergencies like Hurricanes Irma and Maria, a [White Paper](#) published by the UK government in 2012 says:

The protection of the overseas territories and their people is one of the UK government's most important responsibilities.

The main threats to the territories are hurricanes, volcanoes, earthquakes and tsunamis.

The emergency services in a small territory can be overwhelmed by a major incident. The UK government recognises its responsibility to support a territory facing a disaster.

The White Paper does not say what extent long-term economic assistance the UK might provide in such circumstances.

The White Paper does refer to the role of UK ODA in helping to stimulate economic growth in eligible Territories:

Some Territories are in receipt of budgetary aid to assist them in their Government's business, infrastructure, development and growth prospects. Where the conditions are right, DFID will consider further investments that would stimulate growth and reduce financial dependency.

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The *International Development Act 2002* is an important piece of legislation governing UK aid policy today. Section 1 describes how and when such aid should be provided:

Development assistance

(1) The Secretary of State may provide any person or body with development assistance if he is satisfied that the provision of the assistance is likely to contribute to a reduction in poverty.

(1A) Before providing development assistance under subsection (1), the Secretary of State shall have regard to the desirability of providing development assistance that is likely to contribute to reducing poverty in a way which is likely to contribute to reducing inequality between persons of different gender.]

(2) In this Act “development assistance” means assistance provided for the purpose of—

(a) furthering sustainable development in one or more countries outside the United Kingdom, or

(b) improving the welfare of the population of one or more such countries.

(3) For the purposes of subsection (2)(a) “sustainable development” includes any development that is, in the opinion of the Secretary of State, prudent having regard to the likelihood of its generating lasting benefits for the population of the country or countries in relation to which it is provided.

But Section 2 of the Act does offer the Secretary of State more latitude with regard to British Overseas territories:

Development assistance for British overseas territories

The Secretary of State may also provide any person or body with development assistance in a case where the requirement of section 1(1) is not met, if the assistance is provided in relation to one or more of the territories for the time being mentioned in Schedule 6 to the British Nationality Act 1981 (c. 61) (British overseas territories).

On 7 September Foreign Office Minister Sir Alan Duncan [pledged](#):

In the long-term, we will of course always meet our full legal obligations under the International Development Act 2002 to our overseas territories.

However, this broader latitude does not override the UK’s obligations under the OECD’s current rules about what can be counted as aid.

What longer-term assistance might the UK provide?

Some outlines of the UK’s longer-term assistance have begun to emerge.

On 12 September, the Foreign Secretary, Boris Johnson, said:

The key message that we’re making, we’re giving is that we’re not just here to support these islands to get back up on their feet, we’re here for the long term. These are British people, and we’re here to help.

The [Guardian](#) reported at this time: “Ministers have said they believe there will be a way to use UK aid for the longer term reconstruction work.” But no further details were provided.

On 13 October, the UK government [announced](#) that it would establish a

Private Sector Task Force to help long-term reconstruction in countries and territories hit by last month’s Caribbean hurricanes.

It went on to provide further details about this initiative:

It will mobilise private sector support to rebuild critical infrastructure such as roads and power supplies essential to get economies up and running again, and better withstand future natural disasters.

The team of top business leaders, either CEOs or Chairs with experience in the Caribbean, will sit on the Task Force.

Ms Patel will announce the Task Force at a meeting to discuss the response to the hurricanes and how to enhance global crisis preparedness and response, hosted by the World Bank in Washington D.C.

The Task Force will look at ways in which support from the private sector, both financial and technical, in industries such as construction, insurance, banking and tourism, can be used to help reconstruction on the three UK Overseas Territories worst hit by last month's Hurricane Irma: British Virgin Islands, Anguilla and Turks and Caicos.

Ms Patel will convene a meeting in London in November to discuss how best to maximise the contribution of the private sector.

In a [parliamentary answer](#) on the same day, Foreign Office Minister Alistair Burt also said that the UK has “deployed a recovery planning team to support the affected territories in preparing plans for longer term reconstruction.”

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