

Congress of the United States
House of Representatives

COMMITTEE ON OVERSIGHT AND GOVERNMENT REFORM

2157 RAYBURN HOUSE OFFICE BUILDING

WASHINGTON, DC 20515-6143

MAJORITY (202) 225-5074
MINORITY (202) 225-5051

<http://oversight.house.gov>

September 29, 2017

The Honorable Trey Gowdy
Chairman
Committee on Oversight and Government Reform
2157 Rayburn House Office Building
Washington, D.C. 20515

Dear Mr. Chairman:

We are writing to express our extremely grave concerns about the dire status of recovery efforts in Puerto Rico and the U.S. Virgin Islands and to request that the Committee hold an emergency hearing next week with officials from the Departments of Defense, Homeland Security, and Health and Human Services, as well as from the White House.

The full Committee currently has no hearings, business meetings, or other activities scheduled for the entire week, and this issue is in desperate need of rapid and robust oversight. Millions of American citizens residing in Puerto Rico and the U.S. Virgin Islands are facing massive calamities—including widespread disease and death—and we need to help them now.

Lt. General Russel L. Honore (ret.), who commanded Joint Task Force Katrina, recently warned, the Administration's response to this humanitarian crisis is "replaying a scene from Katrina."¹ Admiral Paul Zukunft, the Coast Guard Commandant, warned this week that the victims feel betrayed: "They feel isolated, and they're probably getting a sense of betrayal, of, well, 'Where is the cavalry?'"² San Juan Mayor Carmen Yulín warned that her constituents are "literally gasping for air."³

Reports indicate that one of the biggest challenges is simply moving cargo through Puerto Rico's ports and into the cities and countryside. For example, CNN has reported that a "mountain of food, water and other vital supplies" is stalled in Puerto Rico's main port of San

¹ *Puerto Rico Relief Effort Replays Scene from Katrina, Retired General Says*, Morning Edition: National Public Radio (Sept. 28, 2017) (online at www.npr.org/2017/09/28/554157428/puerto-rico-relief-efforts-got-off-to-a-poor-start-retired-general-says).

² *The Sad Suspicion About Trump's Shameful Treatment of Puerto Rico*, Washington Post (Sept. 26, 2017) (online at www.washingtonpost.com/opinions/the-sad-suspicion-about-trumps-poor-treatment-of-puerto-rico/2017/09/26/5a54cde4-a2ef-11e7-8cfe-d5b912fab99_story.html?utm_term=.7f065b09fceb).

³ *San Juan Mayor Says People Are 'Gasping for Air' as Maria Cripples Puerto Rico*, ABC News (Sept. 26, 2017) (online at www.abcnews.go.com/US/san-juan-mayor-people-gasping-air-maria-cripples/story?id=50106214).

Juan because the Administration apparently had no plan to deploy airlift capacity.⁴

The Administration did not send the U.S.S. Abraham Lincoln as it did after Hurricane Irma hit Miami.⁵ The Administration waited more than a week to deploy the hospital ship USNS Comfort, even though it will take five to nine more days to sail to Puerto Rico. This delay reportedly “stands in sharp contrast to the speed with which it was detached to Haiti after the 2010 earthquake.”⁶

Based on current reporting, which is spotty, approximately 44% of people in Puerto Rico are without drinking water, and “island-wide water service may not resume until electricity is restored across Puerto Rico, which could take months.”⁷ Residents are reportedly “scavenging for food, collecting water from mountain streams and drinking the rain.”⁸ People are also drinking shallow ground water that “is incredibly susceptible to contamination from sewage and other sources.”⁹

Experts warn that “the presence of the *V. cholerae* bacterium, poverty, collapsed infrastructure and lack of potable water access—create a toxic mix that could promote cholera outbreaks in Puerto Rico during the coming days and weeks.”¹⁰

Yet, the health care infrastructure is decimated, with many hospitals running only on emergency power. One press report relayed a first-hand account from Domingo Cruz Vivaldi, the Vice President of the San Jorge Children’s Hospital:

⁴ *Puerto Rico’s Aid is Trapped in Thousands of Shipping Containers*, CNN (Sept. 28, 2017) (online at www.cnn.com/2017/09/27/us/puerto-rico-aid-problem/).

⁵ *Navy Orders Aircraft Carrier Ready for Irma*, CNN (Sept. 8, 2017) (online at www.cnn.com/2017/09/08/politics/navy-aircraft-carrier-hurricane-irma/index.html).

⁶ *Navy Hospital Ship USNS Comfort Prepping for Puerto Rico Rescue Mission*, U.S. News & World Report (Sept. 27, 2017) (online at www.usnews.com/news/national-news/articles/2017-09-27/navy-hospital-ship-usns-comfort-prepping-for-puerto-rico-rescue-mission).

⁷ *Pentagon: 44 percent of Puerto Ricans Lack Clean Drinking Water*, The Hill (Sept. 26, 2017) (online at www.thehill.com/policy/energy-environment/352529-pentagon-more-than-80-percent-of-puerto-ricos-electric-system); *In Storm-Ravaged Puerto Rico, Drinking Water in Short Supply*, Reuters (Sept. 27, 2017) (online at www.reuters.com/article/us-storm-maria-puertorico-water/in-storm-ravaged-puerto-rico-drinking-water-in-short-supply-idUSKCN1C21BS).

⁸ *“I Don’t Feel Safe Here”: A Night of Desperation in San Juan’s Sweltering Airport*, CNN Money (Sept. 27, 2017) (online at www.money.cnn.com/2017/09/27/news/puerto-rico-san-juan-airport/index.html).

⁹ *In Storm-Ravaged Puerto Rico, Drinking Water in Short Supply*, Reuters (Sept. 27, 2017) (online at www.reuters.com/article/us-storm-maria-puertorico-water/in-storm-ravaged-puerto-rico-drinking-water-in-short-supply-idUSKCN1C21BS).

¹⁰ *Could Recent Hurricanes Cause Reemergence of Cholera in Puerto Rico?*, Baylor College of Medicine (Sept. 27, 2017) (online at www.blogs.bcm.edu/2017/09/27/recent-hurricanes-cause-reemergence-cholera-puerto-rico/).

Earlier this week, the hospital ran out of diesel, he says, and was without power between 6 p.m. and 2 a.m. With no power, Cruz says the hospital was forced to discharge 40 patients.¹¹

The conditions in the U.S. Virgin Islands, which suffered blows from both Hurricanes Maria and Irma, are also dire. A massive number of residents remain without power, the hospital on St. Croix has been condemned, communications are extremely restricted, air and maritime transportation channels are only starting to reopen with limited operating hours, and at least seven people have died. In St. Croix, “there is no clean water,” “roads are still blocked by downed trees,” and “[n]either landline phones nor cell phones are working yet.”¹² As one American Red Cross Disaster Manager warned, “the basic commodities are just not available in the Virgin Islands at this time.”¹³

In 2005, our former Chairman, Republican Tom Davis, led a major investigation by the Katrina Select Committee to examine the local, state, and federal response after Hurricane Katrina. Speaking on the mandate of the Committee at its first hearing, he stated:

It’s a mandate to stop attacking or defending government entities for partisan purposes and do the oversight we’re charged with doing. To investigate what went wrong and what went right. To do it by the book, and let the chips fall where they may.¹⁴

We agree. Urgent action by our Committee now could help accelerate the federal response to the devastation in Puerto Rico and the U.S. Virgin Islands and make a measurable and significant difference in the lives of American families there. Oversight now also could help prevent a worsening of the human tragedy that is unfolding and could help ensure that the lessons our Committee identified from past federal responses are implemented by the Trump Administration.

Thank you for your consideration of this urgent request.

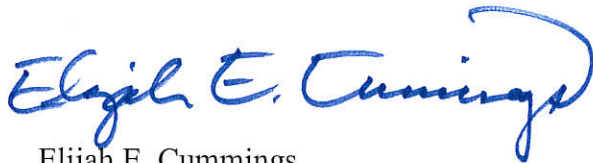
¹¹ *In Puerto Rico, Relying on Luck and Enough Gas to Get Medical Care*, National Public Radio (Sept. 26, 2017) (online at www.npr.org/2017/09/28/554182929/in-puerto-rico-relying-on-luck-and-enough-gas-to-get-medical-care).

¹² *Virgin Islands Bracing for Long Recovery After One-Two Punch from Irma, Maria*, Fox News (Sept. 26, 2017) (online at www.foxnews.com/us/2017/09/25/virgin-islands-bracing-for-long-recovery-after-one-two-punch-from-irma-maria.html).

¹³ *SC Team Heads to U.S. Virgin Islands to Help Hurricane Victims*, CBS News (Sept. 26, 2017) (online at www.wltx.com/news/local/sc-team-heads-to-us-virgin-islands-to-help-hurricane-victims/478843170).

¹⁴ Select Bipartisan Committee to Investigate the Preparation For and Response to Hurricane Katrina, Opening Statement of Chairman Tom Davis, *Predicting Hurricanes: What We Knew About Katrina and When*, 109th Cong. (Sept. 22, 2005) (online at http://katrina.house.gov/hearings/09_22_05/witness_list092205.html).

Sincerely,



Elijah E. Cummings
Ranking Member
Committee on Oversight and
Government Reform



Stacey E. Plaskett
Ranking Member
Subcommittee on the Interior,
Energy and the Environment