

ORAL STATEMENT ON HURRICANE IVAN

14 September 2004

The Secretary of State for International Development (Mr Hilary Benn):

With permission, Mr Speaker, I wish to make a statement about Hurricane Ivan. This is the most powerful hurricane to hit the Caribbean for many years. It has been moving across the region for several days, causing devastation in its wake. I'm sure the House would first of all like to express its sadness at the loss of life, injury and damage to homes that so many people have experienced.

Initially, Hurricane Ivan was a category 3 with wind speeds of 111-130mph. It was on a course towards Barbados but veered south, passing the island by about 100 miles. This was, however, still close enough to create tidal wave surges, uproot trees, bring down power lines, rip off roofs and damage hundreds of properties. Fortunately there was no serious flooding.

Ivan then strengthened to a category 4 hurricane as it reached Grenada on 7 September, bringing sustained winds of 115 miles per hour and gusts of up to 150 mph. Several hundred people from the low lying areas of Saint George's, the Grenadian capital, were evacuated but 17 people are reported to have been killed and 60 taken to hospital. Approximately 60,000 people were made temporarily homeless – about two thirds of the island's population. Water and electricity supplies were severely affected. Telephone lines were cut making initial contact with the island very difficult. There were also problems of looting, so security personnel were deployed from Barbados, Antigua, St Kitts and Trinidad and Tobago to assist security officials in Grenada in restoring law and order.

The hurricane caused structural damage to nearly every major building in Saint George's, including the island's Emergency Operations Centre, the Prime Minister's residence, several schools, the main hospital and a nearby prison.

The immediate help requested by the Government of Grenada was for supplies of plastic sheeting, tarpaulins, tents, roofing material, building supplies, construction tools, food and batteries.

Ever since the development of the first hurricane system to affect the region, (Hurricane) Frances, the Ministry of Defence, the Department for International Development and the Foreign and Commonwealth Office have been working closely together to ensure that HMS Richmond and Royal Fleet Auxiliary Wave Ruler were available, equipped and in position to provide immediate assistance.

HMS Richmond and RFA Wave Ruler began helping the Grenadian relief effort at the earliest opportunity on 8 September. They provided a party of 48 sailors to clear debris and undertake the most urgent repairs, including restoring electricity supplies to the hospital. They were also able to provide medical staff, deliver medicines, offer basic air traffic control for the island and help re-establish the island's Emergency Operations Centre. A helicopter was made available to the Prime Minister and officials for aerial surveillance of the island to help with initial damage assessment.

As a result of preparation for the hurricane by the Caribbean Disaster and Emergency Response Agency, and of collaboration between DFID and the United States Agency for International Development, arrangements were in hand to access relief stores from the USAID's Miami warehouse. The first emergency relief supplies, funded by USAID arrived in Grenada on 9 September, including blankets, plastic sheeting, dry food and water for 20,000 people. The Governments of Barbados and Trinidad and Tobago also shipped bottled water, food, tents, generators, plastic sheeting and water bladders using Coast Guard vessels. Following a request, on 10 September, from the Pan American Health Organisation, the UK provided an immediate contribution of £83,000 which enabled emergency personnel to undertake disease surveillance and control, and provide urgently needed medical supplies. DFID also had an aircraft on standby, in Miami, to deliver 140 rolls of plastic sheeting – enough for 1,400 families – and 11,000 jerry cans.

Because of conditions on the ground, the Caribbean Disaster Emergency Response Agency asked for the flight to be held back 24 hours. It arrived in Grenada on 11 September.

The International Federation of the Red Cross has released money from its disaster relief emergency fund – DFID contributes to it annually – which exists to provide urgent help. Further assessment of needs on Grenada is now being undertaken.

The eye of hurricane Ivan then moved to the south of Jamaica on the night of 10/11 September and moved across the Cayman Islands on 12 September. Its strength varied, reaching category 4 in passing Jamaica and then to variable 4 to 5 on its approach to the Cayman Islands.

Initial reports from Jamaica indicate that the impact has, fortunately, not been as severe as first feared, although tragically 15 people have reportedly lost their lives and there has been widespread damage. The Jamaican Government has declared a State of Emergency and called for international assistance. Initial assessments have been undertaken by the international and regional Red Cross teams, Save the Children UK and Oxfam, and the UK has sent two humanitarian advisers to the region to advise on what help is needed. They are in Jamaica now currently and will be reporting this afternoon.

Initial reports indicate that the Cayman Islands have been severely affected. There has been extensive roof damage to many homes. As of last night, there were no reports of loss of life, but there are unconfirmed reports of injuries. Contact is still extremely difficult with the island authorities, but HMS Richmond – which is now offshore – reports that travel is very restricted, with 25% of Grand Cayman under water. The sewage system is flooded and there has been no power since Saturday. The Governor has requested immediate supplies, including plastic sheeting, cots for small children and water purification equipment. We are looking to despatch these in the next 24 hours.

The Governor has also put a curfew in force. The DFID assessment team will try and get to Grand Cayman tomorrow.

The hurricane has since moved on to Cuba. Initial reports suggest that it has only affected the far west and south west of the island, which had been evacuated. There are reports of flooding. We are ready to provide assistance if requested.

Mr Speaker, we will continue to monitor the situation on the ground across the Caribbean. The International Red Cross intends to launch a regional appeal in the coming days, and we will contribute to it.

I am sure that the thoughts of the House are with all those who have been affected by this terrible force of nature. We will continue to do all that we can to help them as they seek to rebuild their homes and their lives.

ENDS