

November 8th, 2017

Dear Members of Congress,

We write as faith based organizations and allies to ask the U.S. expedite responses to hurricane affected communities in Puerto Rico, the U.S. Virgin Islands, Cuba and the wider Caribbean.

The 2017 hurricane season has dealt devastating blows to the Caribbean. Never in the history of the region have its communities endured multiple Category 4 and 5 hurricanes within the space of weeks. Never before have communities had so little time to recover from one storm before having to prepare for another. Never has destruction been observed on such a scale.

We recognize that the federal government has taken steps to provide FEMA with the additional resources needed to address emergencies in multiple locations including Puerto Rico and the U.S Virgin Islands. USAID, which has now airlifted more than 151 metric tons of emergency relief supplies to Antigua, Barbuda and the Bahamas, is to be commended. We also acknowledge positive steps taken by the Administration to waive the Jones Act, allowing needed aid to access ports in Puerto Rico. We thank the members of Congress who have taken the time to visit that island and made strong statements to urge that its emergency needs are met. We applaud those parties currently discussing new terms, and possibly cancellation of Puerto Rico's debt. However, although important, these steps alone are incommensurate with the scale of the disasters this season.

We ask Congress to heed the urgent, moral, call for action to protect vulnerable and at-risk Caribbean communities, including:

- Keeping U.S. emergency response personnel on the ground in Puerto Rico and the U.S. Virgin Islands. To avert the onset of more humanitarian disasters, both will require short- to medium term assistance. Federal funding will be necessary to help them rebuild their infrastructure and maintain government services including healthcare, housing and telecommunications.
- Calling on President Trump to remove restrictions on the ability of United States companies to export relief and reconstruction supplies to Cuba, as outlined by 22 House Representatives in their recent bipartisan letter.
- Ensuring that Congress fully reinstates and maintains consistent support for US budgetary allocations to UN and other multilateral funds that are responding to Hurricane Maria and which support Small Island States, including the Green Climate Fund, Adaptation Fund and Least Developed Country Fund
- Working with the Climate Solutions Caucus to urgently review practical solutions for increasing US ambition on global warming mitigation and adaptation.

We also call on Congress to ensure that US funding to multilateral donors, such as the IMF and World Bank, support emergency fiscal measures to support rebuilding programs across the Caribbean. Multilateral donors should refocus on supporting disaster resistant recovery, with:

- Implementation of an immediate moratorium on debt payments for Puerto Rico, the U.S. Virgin Islands, Dominica, Antigua and Barbuda and other severely impacted countries so that they can use these resources to recover and rebuild
- Outreach to other members of the Paris Club, notably Japan, France, China, Kuwait and to join this moratorium.
- Provision of United States bilateral and multilateral relief aid in the form of grants, as opposed to loans
- Delivery of sufficient recovery resources for Puerto Rico and the US Virgin Islands so that they can rebuild
- Adequate relief to bring the debt of other islands down to sustainable levels, so that they also can begin the process of recovery.

Small islands states have long asserted they were especially vulnerable to the impacts of rising tides, higher temperatures and extreme weather events; they have long pleaded for special support from wealthier countries to help them prepare for global warming. This season bears witness to their testimonies on the lived costs of extreme, changing weather:

- On September 20<sup>th</sup>, Hurricane Maria made landfall in Puerto Rico, entirely covering the island and unleashing 30 hours of extreme rain and wind, 155 mile-an-hour winds and 30 inches of rain in one day. All are now too familiar with the magnitude of damage done: the country's entire power supply was damaged; virtually all communities lost access to water supply. Catastrophic flooding has led to the collapse of bridges, dams, roads and buildings; telecommunications systems were entirely knocked out. A major humanitarian crisis has unfolded as the hundreds of thousands in need of water, food, medicine failed to receive it due to the blockage of supplies at hurricane affected ports. Barely functioning hospitals have been unable to provide the critical care needed by older people, pregnant and nursing mothers. Early reporting on the agriculture industry suggests it has been mostly wiped out.
- Two Category 5 hurricanes hit the U.S. Virgin Islands, causing widespread destruction. Hurricane Irma, on September 6<sup>th</sup>, caused significant damage to the water, power and tourism infrastructure of St. John and St. Thomas. Hurricane Maria, just two weeks later, devastated St. Croix's power grid and damaged 70% of its buildings. The US Department of Agriculture has declared the Islands a disaster area. More than 4,500 Virgin residents were evacuated, initially to Puerto Rico, which itself later struck by Hurricane Maria. Schools on the islands, which currently are still being used as shelters, will only reopen in late October.
- On September 8<sup>th</sup>, Hurricane Irma devastated Cuba, the largest hurricane to ever make landfall in its history. The country, which for decades has had Latin America and the Caribbean's most advanced disaster preparedness and emergency response mechanisms, could not withstand the ferocity of this storm. 13 out of 15 territories were directly impacted; up to 200,00 homes damaged or destroyed. 70% of its hospitals and polyclinics are severely damaged and 2,189 schools. 1.7 million people were evacuated; almost 9.5 million directly affected. The hurricane has damaged water and sanitation infrastructure, potable water services, disrupted power, telecommunications and transportation services. Today, more than one month later, nearly 2.5 million persons, including women and children, remain in need of emergency aid.
- Hurricane Irma also damaged 95% of buildings and infrastructure on the island of Barbuda, destroying water and electricity supply and rendering the island barely

habitable. For the first time in the island's history, its entire population was evacuated to neighboring Antigua.

- On September 19<sup>th</sup>, Hurricane Maria devastated the island of Dominica in the Windward Islands, leading to destruction of more than 90% of its housing stock, compromising public buildings, the main hospital, telecommunications and infrastructure as well as agriculture.
- Haiti, which has yet to recover from 2016's Hurricane Matthew which decimated much of its agricultural production in southern departments, also experience severed flooding in its northern districts because of Hurricane Irma.

Across the entire Caribbean region, dozens of lives have been lost, homes and livelihoods destroyed. National economies have been set back several decades as individual island nation states struggle to put a price tag on the destruction wrought. Considering this devastation, we urge that the U.S. Congress and Administration to act swiftly, and generously, to mitigate the damage experienced in the Caribbean.

Our organizations represent religious people all over the United States, who for decades have worked with our Caribbean neighbors, both in their countries at home, and as members of our own faith communities here in the United States. Having over time built indissoluble ties of solidarity, fellowship and partnership through our work, we are compelled to stand in solidarity with them and heed their call for an urgent, moral and ethical approach to addressing their fragility.

We urge that the U.S. Congress and Administration do the same.

Yours respectfully,

Church World Service

Columban Center for Advocacy and Outreach

Franciscan Action Network

Jewish Council for Public Affairs.

Jubilee USA Network

Latin America Working Group

Maryknoll Office for Global Concerns.

Islamic Society of North America

Mennonite Central Committee U.S. Washington Office

National Advocacy Center of the Sisters of the Good Shepherd

National Council of Churches

Pax Christi USA

Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.)

Sisters of Mercy of the Americas' Institute Justice Team

Sojourners

The United Methodist Church, General Board of Church and Society

Washington Office on Latin America

United Church of Christ, Justice and Witness Ministries

Unitarian Universalist Association (UUA)

Unitarian Universalist Ministry for Earth (UUSM)

Unitarian Universalist Service Committee (UUSC)

Unitarian Universalist for Social Justice (UUSJ)