



GOVERNMENT OF ANTIGUA AND BARBUDA

Statement

by

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Check against delivery

Mr President, Mr Secretary-General, Distinguished Colleagues, Ladies and Gentlemen.

On September 6th, my small, two-island State, Antigua and Barbuda, was the victim of the ferocity of Hurricane Irma, the largest storm ever endured in the Atlantic in human history.

The island of Barbuda was decimated; its entire population left homeless; and its buildings reduced to empty shells.

Fortunately, Antigua and Barbuda was spared the full blast of Hurricane Maria just 9 days later, although, sustained winds of up to 60 miles per hour, gave us a troubling awareness, of the agony visited on the nearby islands of Dominica , Guadeloupe and Puerto Rico.

Having witnessed the devastation of Barbuda and the desolation of its inhabitants after the ravages of Irma, my heart bleeds for the people of the countries that have now been brutalized by Maria, and those that will suffer its cruelty in the coming days.

Mr President, I have come to this Assembly because, I consider it to be of utmost importance, to speak to the world's representatives collectively about my country's experience and the huge challenges faced by the Caribbean islands.

Barbuda and its inhabitants were among the worst in the region affected by Hurricane Irma.

Barbuda is 62 square miles.

When Irma thundered over the island, it was 375 miles wide, with gale force winds of 220 miles per hour.

Barbuda did not stand the faintest chance against such size, such ferocity and such intensity.

The island was completely destroyed, and my government was compelled to evacuate all of the inhabitants to Antigua.

For the first time in over 300 years, there is now no permanent resident on Barbuda.

The footprints of an entire civilization have been emasculated by the brutality and magnitude of Irma.

Everything that meant anything to the inhabitants had to be left behind – their homes, their possessions, their history; indeed, everything that defines them as a society and as a people.

Mercifully, Antigua, the larger of the two Islands, suffered no major damage and it could begin to function normally within 48 hours.

Had that not been the case, Mr President, how we would have coped, is simply beyond imagination.

Overnight, Antigua's population increased by almost 3 per cent.

I know of no country that could easily cope with such an unplanned, unexpected and unscheduled increase in its population.

In addition to providing shelter and accommodation and basic necessities to the evacuated residents of Barbuda, the social services on Antigua are now under great strain, to provide school places for an additional 600 children; medical services for the elderly; and a means of income for the able-bodied.

Naturally, the residents of Barbuda are anxious to return to their homeland.

But, as I speak to you, the island remains unfit for human habitation.

There is no electricity, no potable water, and 95 percent of the buildings have been destroyed or severely damaged.

Preliminary estimates have placed the cost of rebuilding Barbuda at about US\$250 million.

That figure, Mr President, represents 15 percent or more, of my country's Gross Domestic Product of approximately \$1.5billion.

It is simply, a stretch beyond our reach.

Antigua and Barbuda urgently requires the assistance of the international community, including the international development and finance institutions, to accomplish this vital task of rebuilding Barbuda.

And, I should say, Mr President that we have not outstretched the palm of our hand because we crave; we plead because we need.

Barbuda is not only a natural disaster, it is a humanitarian crisis that now consumes Antigua.

Even as my government and people look forward to the assistance of the better-off nations of the world, I thank those nations and persons who were the first responders, particularly the government and people of the Bolivarian Republic of Venezuela; who went beyond the call of duty to assist.

I also acknowledge the commitment and contribution from the government and people of the Peoples Republic of China; the governments of Cuba, United Arab Emirates, Qatar, Canada, Dominican Republic and sister states of the Caribbean Community, who gave generously from the little they have.

That includes Dominica which, through one wretched night, lost a significant amount of precious lives and years of hard-earned development, at the unrelenting battering of Hurricane Maria.

On Antigua, Barbudans are being cared-for as best we can with very limited resources.

But as the period of care lengthens, not only do the conditions worsen, but the cost increases, causing my government to borrow money on commercial terms at high-interest rates, swelling our already burdensome national debt.

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Mr President, the present international financial architecture is leaving small states such as mine behind.

Whatever position on Climate Change any nation takes, the evidence of global warming is now irrefutably stronger.

Two Category 5 hurricanes within 12 days, that unrelentingly pounded so many countries, can no longer be dismissed as 'the vagaries of the weather', nor can they be explained as 'nature's doing'.

Hurricanes are stronger and bigger because they are absorbing moisture from increasingly warmer seas, caused by global warming.

And, that is a man-made phenomenon, whose manufacture is attributable to those nations, that consume 80 per cent or more of the world's primary energy, emitting dangerous levels of pollution into the atmosphere.

All 14 Caribbean Community countries together produce less than 0.1 per cent of global emissions.

We are the least of the polluters, but the largest of the casualties.

The unfairness, injustice and inequality are painfully obvious.

If these frequent and brutal storms are to be withstood, Caribbean islands and certain parts of the United States, need to construct more resilient buildings and infrastructure than now exists.

This means, Mr President, that the international developmental and financial institutions, need to provide financing at concessionary rates without artificial impediments.

If this does not happen, the subsequent cost in lives and property is too frightening to contemplate.

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Mr President, increasingly, states, such as mine, are victims of an international economic and financial system that regards us merely as a numerical statistic or mere nuisance.

We are measured by the level of our income, even though it is an insufficient and unreasonable criterion for establishing vulnerability, poverty and need.

Like many other small island states, my developing country is categorized as “high-income”, thus denying it access to concessional financing and grant funding from international financial institutions and donor governments.

It is patently obvious, that the per capita income criterion is a skewed and flawed determinant.

It should be eliminated and eliminated immediately.

Because we are small economies with inadequate domestic capital formation, our countries open our doors to foreign investment, granting significant tax concessions to attract investments, and to help provide jobs and curb poverty.

The consequence, is that a small percentage of persons in our community, mostly expatriates, at the top end of businesses, earn the largest percentage of high incomes and the mass of the population earns considerably less.

In addition, government tax revenues are significantly reduced from the investment concessions granted.

It is time that those who control the levers of power in the economic and financial international community, acknowledge that the per capita system of measurement is discriminatory, and resolve to change it.

It is time that this particular swamp be drained.

Now is the time for action.

In these United States, in which the United Nations Organization is located, and in which this Assembly is gathered today, one of its early leaders, Abraham Lincoln, declared, at a critical time in history that: this country could not survive "half-slave and half-free".

He may have been speaking specifically of America and of the disunity that gripped it at the time, but he was talking about more than immorality; he was also talking about social and economic justice.

Lincoln's observation is compellingly relevant to social and economic justice in our world today.

Injustice and inequality breed instability.

The world cannot survive with the wealthy few, controlling 90 percent of global resources: its centre will not hold, if the inequality between rich and poor nations increases; it will not be stable until social and economic justice prevails.

My country and its citizens do not want to beg for a living.

Mr President; we want to work for it; we want to earn our way.

But, we cannot do so if the international system refuses to provide us with the means and the tools to build our future.

Access to concessional financing is an imperative, that would give us a great leap forward.

It would take us out of the spiral of debt we incur, because we must repeatedly rebuild after disasters, with high-cost commercial money.

Where is the justice in large wealthy countries borrowing on their capital markets at 3 percent per annum, while so called "high income" small island states are forced to borrow commercially at 12 percent per annum, to repeatedly rebuild damaged infrastructure from hurricanes ?

Where is the justice ?

It is irrational and punitive, to graduate a small island state that cannot pay its debts, to high income status, thereby precluding it from much needed developmental funding.

Mr President, the theme of this Assembly's discussion is: "Focusing on people – striving for peace and a decent life for all on a sustainable planet".

That is all my people and the people of small island states want – peace and a decent life on a planet that is sustainable.

We deserve nothing less and we expect nothing less.

It is in that connection, that I draw attention to the fact that, even in the midst of our present crisis, Antigua and Barbuda is faced with demands from a Paris Club group of wealthy countries for the settlement of debt of US\$130M, incurred four decades ago, because concessional finance was – and is- denied to us.

It would be of enormous help to the plight we now face, and the daunting task of rebuilding Barbuda, at a cost upwards of \$250 million, if those wealthy Paris Club countries would forgive, or at least reduce significantly, the debt that now weighs so heavily on our shoulders.

It should be noted, that the amount outstanding constitutes primarily accrued interest.

This would provide us with the fiscal space to borrow, as we seek to garner every cent to recover and rebuild from Hurricane Irma and to give our people a chance to achieve a decent life, in keeping with the sustainable development goals.

In that same context, Mr President, my small country won a trade dispute with the United States in 2004, at the World Trade Organization (the WTO).

The US trade violation, led to significant loss of revenues to my country and unemployment of my people.

It has been 13 years since that judgement, and seven years since the final appeal by the US, resulted in a final ruling in my country's favour. Yet, the United States Government has failed to settle.

The loss of trade revenues to my small country has risen to in excess of \$200 million.

Our government has labored unsuccessfully for over 13 years to reach an amicable and reasonable settlement with the US.

This is a classic case, where might is right and where the rights of a small powerless state has been trampled upon.

I should mention that, over the last 13 years, the US has also enjoyed a trade surplus with my small country, of over two billion dollars.

I am well aware that the prolongation of a settlement of this judgement, is not the making of the present US administration which inherited it.

But in the interest of fairness, of justice and of good conscience, it would be beneficial to my nation, in this hour of its great need, for the United States government to settle it.

In this very hall just two days ago, President Trump said of the United States: "we can no longer be taken advantage of, or enter into a one-sided deal where the United States gets nothing in return".

His observation, which I welcome, is equally true for the relationship with Antigua and Barbuda.

Honoring their obligation to Antigua & Barbuda is not a one-sided deal, of which the United States gets nothing in return, because ultimately, 90 percent of the settlement proceeds will be spent in the US economy, as our primary source market.

The US is the greater beneficiary of trade with my country and has been so, year after year, for many decades.

Settling with us for over 13 years of trade losses would take less than one year of the trade surplus that the US's twenty -trillion-dollar economy has, with Antigua and Barbuda's mere one-billion-dollar economy.

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Mr President, over the last few days, the experience of the Caribbean islands demonstrate that entire and ancient communities, can be snuffed out overnight or, the quality of their life suddenly and irreversibly set-back.

I remind that, for the first time in more than 300 years, there is no permanent human resident on Barbuda.

But, my Government is determined to rebuild Barbuda however long it takes, and with whatever resources we can muster.

We are determined that no Caribbean society should be extinguished and that they should remain firmly on the global map.

But, even as we resolve, with limited means, to keep our societies alive and vibrant, we call on the international community to acknowledge its obligation to all humanity and to all peoples, without whom their own societies cannot prosper and will not thrive.

In the words of the Poet, John Donne:

“Any man's death diminishes me,

Because I am involved in mankind,

And therefore, never send to know for whom the bell tolls;

It tolls for thee”.

As citizens of planet earth, let us acknowledge our common humanity and work in harmony, to make our world a better place.

Thank you, Mr President.