

Statement by
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Field Hearing

Chairman Farenthold, Ranking Member Plaskett, distinguished Members of the Committee, thank you for the opportunity to address you today on United States Northern Command (USNORTHCOM) support of the national response to Hurricanes Irma and Maria in the U.S. Virgin Islands (USVI).

The Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) is responsible for coordinating the Federal Government's response and recovery to major disasters and emergencies under the auspices of the National Response Framework. USNORTHCOM is the combatant command that provides FEMA with active duty military Defense Support of Civil Authorities (DSCA) in the USNORTHCOM area of responsibility (AOR). This AOR for DSCA includes the continental United States, Alaska, Puerto Rico, and the USVI, when directed by the President or when the Secretary of Defense has approved a request for assistance pursuant to the Stafford Act or the Economy Act.

A fundamental tenet of the national response system is that USNORTHCOM's active duty response is always in support of domestic civil authorities, in this case, FEMA. It is also important to note that the Federal military chain of command always runs from the President to the Secretary of Defense to the USNORTHCOM Commander, General Lori Robinson.

Prior to landfall, the Secretary of Defense directed USNORTHCOM to give full support to the national response to Hurricanes Irma and Maria, and USNORTHCOM specifically postured capabilities in advance of each hurricane. USNORTHCOM then provided significant support to the national response following Hurricanes Irma and Maria to save and sustain lives in the USVI. The men and women of USNORTHCOM – active duty military and Reserve Component, civilians, and contractors – were ready and acted with a great sense of urgency when they were directed through mission assignments generated by FEMA.

USNORTHCOM maintains a high level of preparedness by continually investing in preparedness, including through training, integrated planning with our Federal, State, and local partners, as well as joint exercises with our Federal, State, and local partners.

USNORTHCOM continually seeks to improve in our ability to provide timely support, and to work closely with its domestic agency partners. For example, during a disaster response, FEMA issues mission assignments to request support capabilities and resources. USNORTHCOM has worked closely with FEMA to develop all-hazard, pre-scripted mission assignments prior to disasters. This helps to expedite the process of requesting and delivering assistance. These pre-scripted mission assignments include: heavy and medium rotary-wing lift; strategic and tactical transportation; communications support; emergency route clearance; damage assessment; mobilization centers and operational staging areas; airspace control; deployable temporary medical facilities; and rotary-wing medical evacuation.

USNORTHCOM also has a standing DSCA Execute Order (EXORD), approved by the Secretary of Defense, that delegates authorities and assigned capabilities and resources to the Commander of USNORTHCOM to provide critical life-saving and life-sustaining capabilities. This includes such capabilities such as Defense Coordinating Officers and Defense Coordinating Elements; DoD installations to be used as FEMA mobilization centers; medium- and heavy-lift helicopters; search aircraft for disaster area reconnaissance; deployable communications support packages; joint task forces to command and control Federal military responders; Combatant Commander Assessment Elements; aeromedical patient evacuation and transportation; deployable hospitals and Forward Surgical Teams; naval vessels with medical and surgical services, and critical care patient capability.

The Commander of USNORTHCOM, using her delegated authorities under the DSCA EXORD, postured active duty military capabilities and equipment in advance of the hurricanes, including units capable of performing such response missions as aerial damage assessment, strategic lift (e.g., C-17 aircraft), medical evacuation, logistics support, and air and sea port opening. USNORTHCOM also deployed U.S. Navy ships, which were forced to avoid the consecutive hurricanes while remaining in vicinity of the affected areas in order to get on station and begin responding immediately.

FEMA issued USNORTHCOM mission assignments in the USVI for the national response to Hurricanes Irma and Maria requesting: search and rescue operations; port and airfield assessment; aerial port operations; emergency route clearance; air and ground transportation; aeromedical evacuation; National Disaster Medical System (NDMS) patient movement, reception, and medical care; medical support; strategic airlift to transport personnel, relief supplies, and equipment; imagery; life-sustaining commodity (e.g., food and water) distribution; power restoration and distribution; temporary shelters; water purification; logistics support; maritime freight support; Federal Aviation Administration (FAA)-capable radars; and installation support bases and responder support camps for FEMA responders. All mission assignments are now complete.

In conclusion, USNORTHCOM is a fully committed partner in the national response system and was proud to provide life-saving and life-sustaining support to our fellow citizens in need. Thank you again for the opportunity to appear before you today. I look forward to your questions.