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Hurricane Irma's devastation of Caribbean territories piles pressure on strained relationship with UK



Hurricane Irma has torn a path of devastation through the Caribbean. Current indications suggest that [at least 25 people have been killed](#) – a figure likely to rise significantly – while many thousands have lost their homes and businesses. The clean-up operation will take years to complete, with costs running into the hundreds of millions.

The [Leeward Islands](#) have borne the brunt of it. This island chain that marks the boundary of the Caribbean and the Atlantic is a patchwork of independent island nations and territories in various forms of association with France, the Netherlands, the US and the UK. However, while [France](#) and the Netherlands have been praised for their rapid and coordinated actions in their territories of Guadeloupe (France) and Sint Maarten (Netherlands) among others, the UK government has been [criticised for being too slow to act](#) in the British Overseas Territories of the British Virgin Islands and Anguilla.

Anguilla's representative to the UK and EU, Blondel Cluff, chided the Westminster government in a BBC interview for offering "[precious little support](#)", while demanding a "permanent commitment to the development of Anguilla". Others say that the residents of the overseas

territories have been made to feel like “[third class citizens](#)” of the UK. Television news reports added visual power to these claims, juxtaposing images of uniformed French and Dutch troops on the ground in Guadeloupe and Saint Maarten within hours of Irma’s passing with aerial footage of the British territories where UK troops had yet to arrive.

The evidence against the UK government certainly looks damaging at first – but, as always, the reality is rather more complex and nuanced. In this case it is important to set this current crisis within its geographical, geopolitical and strategic context.

Distributed support

There are distinct differences between the French, Dutch and British territories in the Caribbean, leading to the adoption of quite different security and defence regimes.

The French West Indies, for example, has a population approaching 850,000 people spread over seven islands (the largest being Guadeloupe) in relatively close proximity in the Antilles archipelago. The Dutch Caribbean has about 315,000 spread over six islands in the Antilles. The UK, on the other hand, is responsible for five island groups in the Caribbean region dispersed over a distance of more than 1,250 miles: from west to east, the Cayman Islands, the Turks and Caicos Islands, the British Virgin Islands, Anguilla, and Montserrat, with a total population of fewer than 100,000 people. Add to this the British Overseas Territory of Bermuda in the North Atlantic and it is perhaps understandable why the UK has adopted a mobile defence and security presence for its Caribbean territories, as opposed to the more garrisoned approach taken by their French and Dutch equivalents.

This has had implications in the immediate aftermath of Hurricane Irma. Whereas France and the Netherlands had a large number of troops to deploy quickly from their territorial bases, the UK was reliant on a supply and logistics ship — the [RFA Mounts Bay](#) — positioned nearby in the Caribbean to deploy troops and equipment to areas of need once the hurricane had passed. This maritime approach is supplemented with aid and military reinforcements transported directly from the UK by air. In this way, so the Ministry of Defence’s argument goes, the UK has been able to deliver the most appropriate aid to the most acutely affected areas, irrespective of whether they have international airport facilities.



A young boy in Dominica, one of the island nations hit hard by hurricane Irma. Roberto Guzman/EPA

Global Britain?

While there is some merit to this approach, this does not exonerate the British government from the pointed criticisms expressed by Caribbean representatives following Irma's passing through the region. Complaints about the UK's lack of attention to its Caribbean territories and their citizens – the majority of whom are black people – speak to much more longstanding concerns about the political, economic and diplomatic marginalisation of the small, less economically developed territories within the club of 14 British overseas territories.

For instance, in written evidence presented to the [House of Lords EU select committee](#) earlier this year, the government of Anguilla criticised the UK's one-size-fits-all administrative approach to its overseas territories in ways that ignore their heterogeneity. Their accusations of "nominal" economic support from the UK were equally damning, emphasising perceived shortfalls in funding, "despite Anguilla having a lower GDP than other recipients of aid and British overseas territories being deemed to have first call on DFID [Department for International Development] support".

All too often, the public and political discourse related to the overseas territories has been dominated by the military, defence and security priorities of disputed territories such as [Gibraltar and the Falkland Islands](#). When Caribbean overseas territories appear in the

mainstream news it has tended to be in response to crises, such as the [volcanic eruption in Montserrat in 1995](#), or [corruption such as in the Turks and Caicos Islands](#), or in the recent [Panama Papers tax haven scandal involving the British Virgin Islands, among others](#).

The spectre of Brexit cannot be ignored here. During a series of focus groups held earlier this year at a conference reflecting on the future of Britain's Overseas Territories at the National Maritime Museum, young citizens of the Caribbean overseas territories spoke of their frustration that their relationships with Europe ([and their European neighbours in the eastern Caribbean](#)) would be affected by a vote they were not allowed to participate in.

More troubling were their reflections on their changing feelings towards the UK: some felt that the racial undertones in some of the pro-Brexit campaigning had directly targeted "people like us", and some had even experienced a rise in racial abuse in the weeks and months after the referendum while working and studying in the UK. It is a reminder that the "loyalty" of the British Overseas Territories and their citizens should not be taken for granted, and requires mutual trust and respect.

Britain's commitment to its Caribbean overseas territories will be seriously tested over the coming months and years. For how long, and to what extent, will the UK's humanitarian support be sustained? How will the UK now support the longer-term redevelopment, defence and security needs of these devastated communities?

As the UK prepares to reposition itself as a global player outside the European Union – perhaps at the centre of a rejuvenated Commonwealth – the UK's actions in the Caribbean will serve to give substance to the highly tweetable, but so far distinctly nebulous, hashtag much favoured by the Foreign Office and other government departments. What kind of [#GlobalBritain](#) will the UK choose to be?



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