

Bahamas: Response to Hurricane Dorian

September 25, 2019

On September 1-2, 2019, Hurricane Dorian, a Category 5 storm with winds of 180 miles per hour and storm surges of up to 23 feet, caused widespread damage to the islands of Grand Bahama and Abaco in the northwestern Bahamas, a country of some 700 islands off the southeast coast of the United States (see **Figure 1**). The official death toll is 53 as of September 23 (with over 80% on Abaco) but is expected to rise, according to the Bahamian government's [National Emergency Management Agency \(NEMA\)](#). NEMA also estimated the number of missing at around 1,300 (down from 2,500). With an estimated population of 51,000 on Grand Bahama and 17,200 on Abaco, the two islands account for about 18% of the Bahamas' population of almost 390,000. According to the U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID), 60% of the structures on Grand Bahama and Abaco were completely or severely damaged and 27% were moderately damaged. Among the areas suffering the most severe damage was Abaco's town of Marsh Harbour. Thousands of people from the two islands have relocated to other parts of the Bahamas, especially New Providence Island, where Nassau, the capital of the Bahamas is located; about 1,600 were residing in shelters as of September 23. According to press reports, U.S. Customs and Border Protection maintained that about 3,900 Bahamian evacuees had arrived in Florida as of September 13.

U.S. and International Humanitarian Response

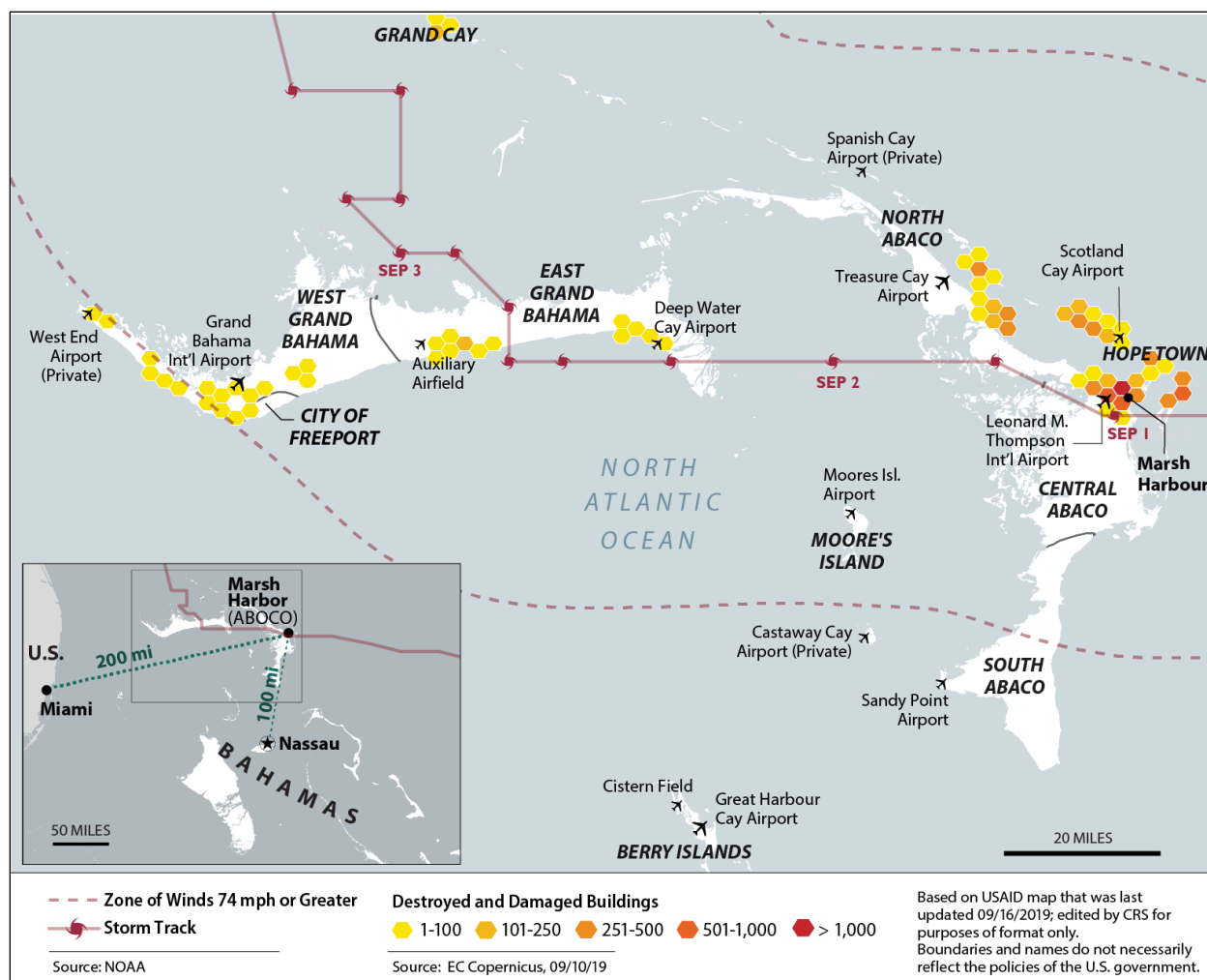
Through its Office of U.S. Foreign Disaster Assistance (OFDA), USAID coordinates the U.S. government emergency response to international humanitarian crises and disasters. U.S. Chargé d'Affaires Stephanie Bowers at the U.S. Embassy in Nassau declared a disaster on September 2. OFDA then deployed a Disaster Assistance Response Team (DART) to the Bahamas and activated a Response Management Team based in Washington, DC. DARTs are activated in the wake of a disaster to coordinate and manage the U.S. government response, and they work closely with local government officials, the international community, and relief agencies.

In the Bahamas, the DART has worked closely with NEMA, which is coordinating the emergency response activities of more than 50 organizations. Immediately after the storm, the DART [deployed](#) 37 disaster experts and 64 search and rescue professionals; on September 14, the DART's search and rescue professionals left the Bahamas after a 10-day deployment in which they searched and assessed more than 1,000 structures. According to USAID, as of September 15, the response had shifted from immediate relief (first aid, search and recovery, and rapid damage and needs assessments) to focus on shelter for displaced populations, debris removal operations, and the restoration of communications, electricity, and water systems.

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Figure 1. Hurricane Dorian's Path and Damage Across the Bahamas

Source: CRS, based on USAID map from 09/16/19.

As of September 24, the United States had provided almost **\$25.8 million** in humanitarian funding for the Hurricane Dorian relief efforts in the Bahamas, of which almost \$16.3 million is being administered through USAID/OFDA (International Disaster Assistance account), \$1 million through the USAID/Office of Food for Peace (emergency food assistance/Title II account), and almost \$8.5 million through the Department of Defense (Overseas Humanitarian, Disaster, and Civic Action account).

Beyond the United States, governments and regional and international organizations have contributed to the humanitarian response. The United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA) and the Caribbean Disaster Emergency Management Agency (CDEMA) are supporting the work of NEMA and other Bahamian government agencies. U.N. Secretary-General António Guterres [visited the Bahamas](#) on September 13, expressing international solidarity with Bahamas and concern about the plight of undocumented Haitians living there and affected by the storm. He noted that hurricanes, “[powered by climate change](#),” are now “more intense, and more frequent.” Although the total cost of Hurricane Dorian has not yet been determined, the Secretary-General estimated it would be in the [billions of dollars](#).

U.S. and international humanitarian relief efforts are ongoing. For updates on U.S. emergency relief efforts, see USAID’s Hurricane Dorian response [web page](#). USAID’s Center for International Disaster Information also maintains a [web page](#) that offers information on how to support relief efforts in the

Bahamas. For information on international support to the Bahamas, see OCHA's ReliefWeb [web page](#) on Hurricane Dorian.

Congressional Interest

Many Members of Congress have expressed support for U.S. efforts to provide immediate relief to those affected in the Bahamas, and some have called for U.S. support for the country's longer-term recovery and rebuilding efforts. H.Res. 562, introduced September 18, calls for robust U.S. support for recovery and long-term reconstruction and resilience needs in the Bahamas and urges the President to make available resources necessary to provide relief, recovery, and reconstruction assistance.

Although the United States has had close economic linkages and cooperative economic relations with the Bahamas for decades, the Bahamas traditionally has not received significant amounts of U.S. assistance because of its high per capita income level (over \$34,000 in 2018). Nevertheless, cooperation on antidrug efforts has been a central component of relations, and the Bahamas has received support to counter illicit trafficking and increase citizen security through the [Caribbean Basin Security Initiative](#) (CBSI). Beyond continued support to the Caribbean for the CBSI, the report to the House-passed FY2020 foreign aid appropriations measure (Division D of H.R. 2740, which references H.Rept. 116-78 to H.R. 2839) directs that bilateral economic assistance be made available to strengthen resilience to emergencies and disasters in the Caribbean.

With the destruction caused by Hurricane Dorian, some Members also have expressed interest in options for Bahamians to travel to or remain in the United States. Several bills have been introduced (H.R. 4272, H.R. 4303, and S. 2478) that would provide [Temporary Protected Status](#) (TPS) to Bahamian nationals, although [press reports](#) indicate that the Trump Administration does not have plans to designate the Bahamas for TPS. For more, see CRS Insight IN11166, *Immigration Relief Options for Bahamians After Hurricane Dorian*.

For background on U.S. relations with the Bahamas, see CRS In Focus IF10666, *The Bahamas*.

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