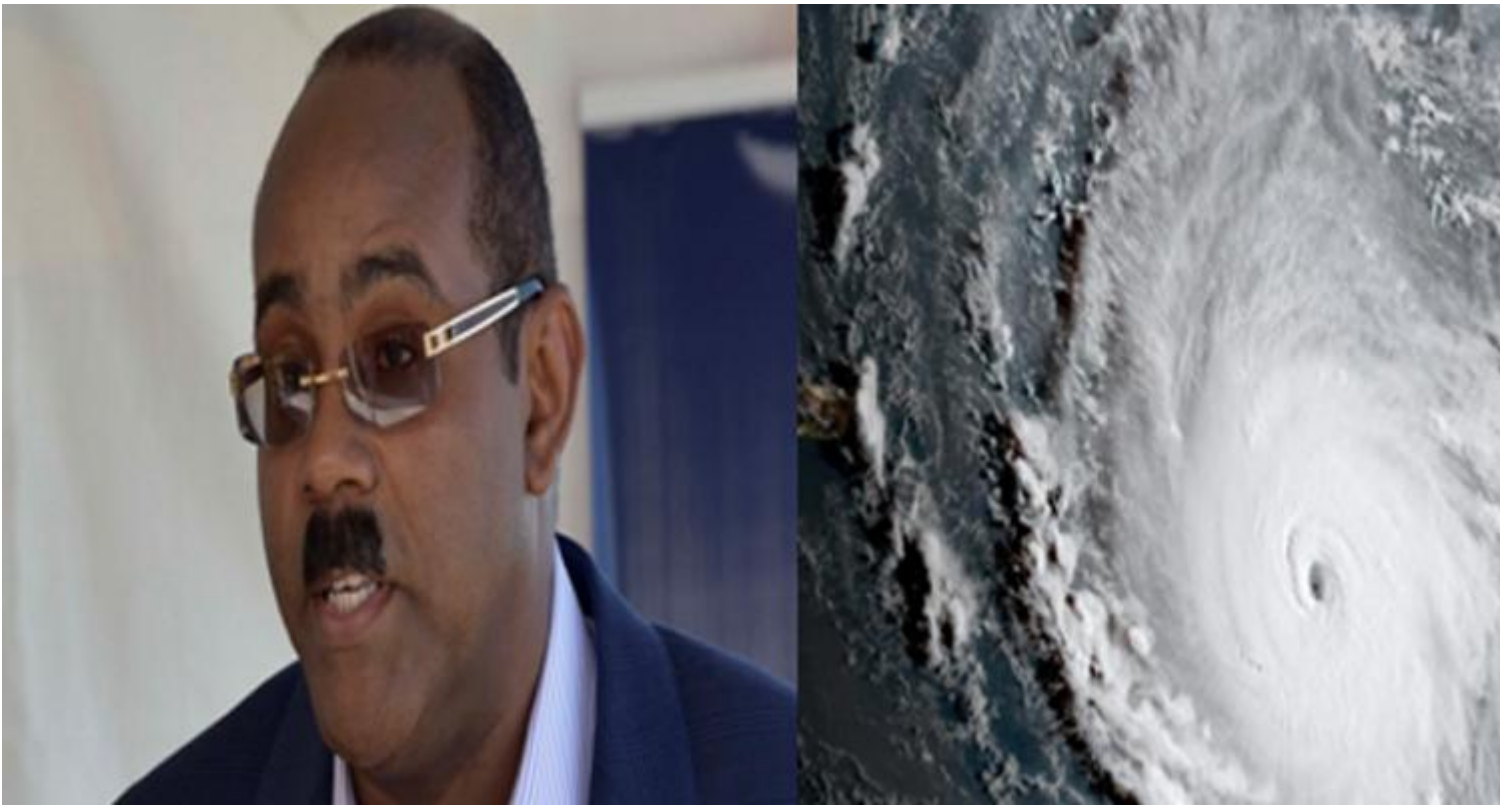


Hurricane Irma Devastates Barbuda and Claims Several Lives Across the Caribbean



St. John's (RHC-teleSUR)-- After the passage of Hurricane Irma, the Prime Minister of Antigua and Barbuda, Gaston Browne, says that more than 95 percent of buildings are damaged and the island is almost uninhabitable.

The Category 5 storm, one of the most powerful and longest lasting hurricane ever recorded in the Atlantic, has caused widespread devastation in Barbuda and several other islands in the northeastern Caribbean. So far at least eight deaths have been reported, one in Barbuda, one in Puerto Rico and six in the French territory of Saint Martin.

The death toll in Saint Martin is likely to rise, according to the prefect of Guadeloupe, which administers the island. "The police and firecrews couldn't go out until mid morning because of the strength of the wind," Eric Maire said. "We haven't explored all parts of the island, and may find more casualties." Other reports said that about 90 percent of properties had suffered damage in Saint Martin.

Still packing sustained winds of almost 300 kph, the monstrous storm has pulled away from Puerto Rico, churning its destructive path northwest, and heading toward the Dominican Republic, Haiti, Cuba and the

Bahamas.

Mandatory evacuations of vulnerable zones have been ordered by the Dominican Emergency Operations Center in advance of the hurricane's arrival, according to Non-Aligned Movement News Network. Santo Domingo, as well as 16 other provinces, are under red alert.

Although the mountainous regions of Haiti and the Dominican Republic might slow down the winds slightly, the difference is expected to be negligible at this level of intensity.

While British Development Secretary Priti Patel has expressed the nation's solidarity with "all those affected by Hurricane Irma" and informed that three British "aid humanitarian experts" as well as a naval ship with 40 royal marines, army engineers, vehicles, tents and other vital equipment are being made available to victims of the storm, authorities from British overseas territories have slammed the government's "disgraceful" response.

Saint Bathelmy, another Caribbean island belonging to France, and Sint Maarten, part of the Netherlands, suffered heavy damage as well. The Princess Juliana airport in Sint. Maarten was largely destroyed, with huge rocks crashing into planes and terminal buildings.

The prime minister of Antigua and Barbuda, Gaston Browne, visited Barbuda during the day on Wednesday and reported that 90 percent of buildings there had been severely damaged. The island, with 1,800 inhabitants, had been completely cut off since the hurricane hit just before 2am.

The Prime Minister said one infant was killed, and that the death toll may rise. TeleSUR English spoke to the Deputy Director of News, Sports and Current Affairs at ABS TV/Radio Nicola Barriteau, she says while Antigua was spared most of Irma's wrath, Barbuda received the full brunt of the Hurricane.

Puerto Rico managed to avoid the worst of the storm, as the eyewall passed about 80 miles north of the island, but still experienced high winds and a power blackout.

Meteorological predictions indicate that once the storm passes over the Bahamas it is expected to make landfall directly onto the U.S. state of Florida, possibly still as a Category 5 storm. Mandatory evacuations have been declared in several Floridian counties.

Earlier Prime Minister Gaston Browne issued a statement which noted that a "chain of brotherhood and sisterhood that strengthened our collective resolve" as well as government preparation prior to the storm's arrival "paid remarkable dividends."

The storm had knocked out communications with the Barbuda. And the weather made it difficult for the Prime Minister to get to the island before the afternoon, where he was able to see the effects for himself.

Over in St. Kitts and Nevis the Island's Police Commissioner Ian Queeley communicated with the New York Times via text saying: "Not too bad at this time. Still plenty rain and strong winds."

Meanwhile, officials on the French-controlled islands of Saint-Barthelemy and Saint-Martin stated that the storm had caused severe destruction. It's been reported that two persons were killed by the storm. The Times is reporting French President Emanuel Macron as saying: "We will have victims to lament, and the material damage on the two islands is considerable." He made the statement after a crisis meeting about the Hurricane in Paris.

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