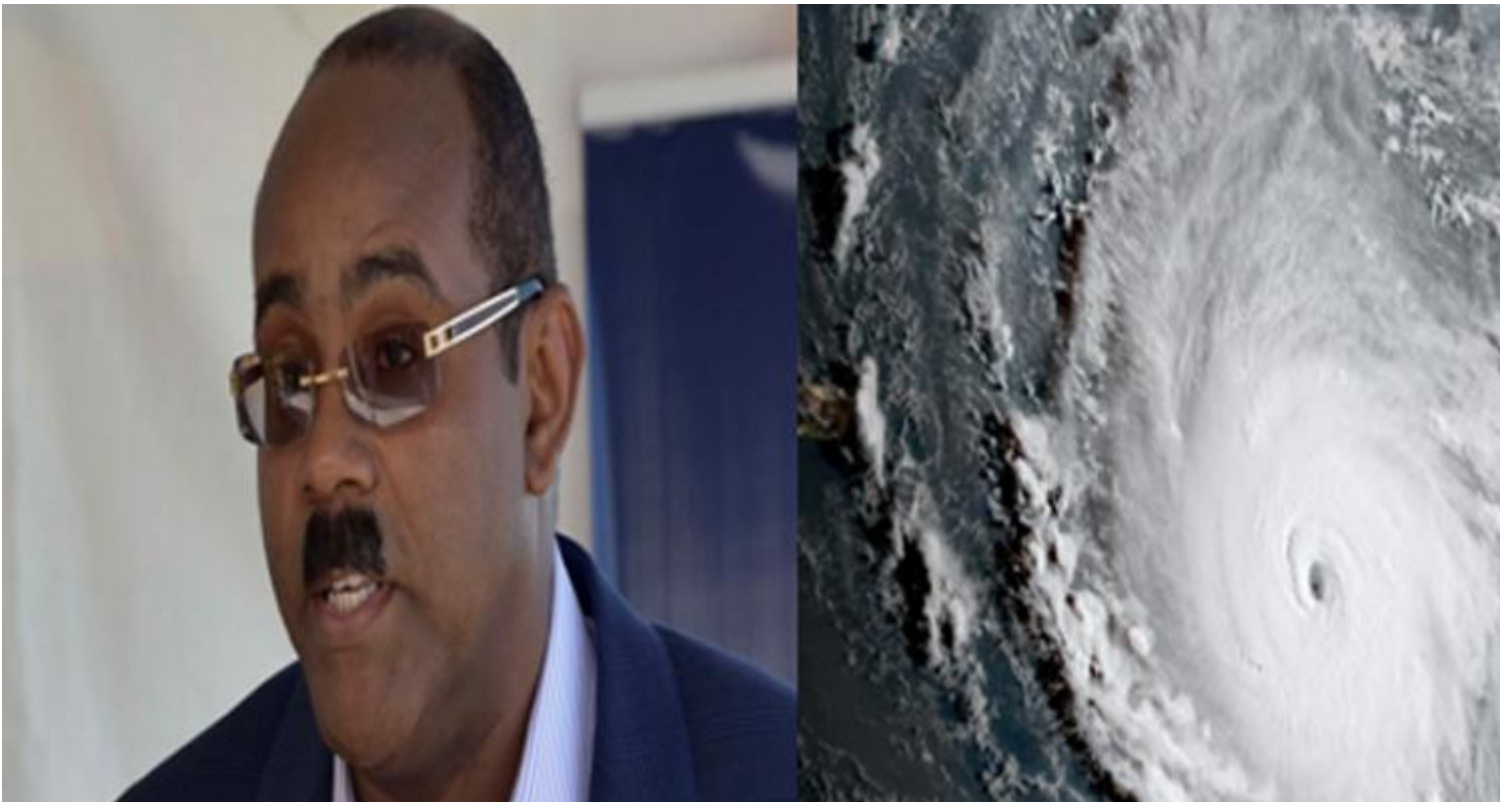


Antigua and Barbuda Prime Minister Thanks Venezuela for Aid in Wake of Hurricane Irma



St. John's, September 13 (RHC)-- The Prime Minister of Antigua and Barbuda Gaston Browne has thanked Venezuelan President Nicolas Maduro for his "timely intervention" during Hurricane Irma. In an exclusive interview with teleSUR, Browne said: "If it wasn't for the availability of the military aircraft from Venezuela, we would not have been able to evacuate the Barbudans" ahead of Hurricane Jose. And he added: "Venezuela has gone above and beyond the call of duty."

Around 180,000 Barbudans were evacuated from Barbuda after Hurricane Irma devastated the island. Browne told teleSUR the hurricane had left Barbuda "a mangled wreck" that is "totally uninhabitable." The prime minister warned that it may take years for the island to recover from the devastation.

Earlier, Prime Minister Gaston Browne told Parliament that reconstruction will cost \$200 million — nearly double the initial estimate made immediately after his tour of the island after Irma struck. "We need to have all hands on deck. The enormity of the damage is such that it will cost us, at least, based on one report that I've seen, or one assessment, in excess of \$200 million to rebuild Barbuda," he said.

teleSUR correspondent Francesca Emanuele, who attended the session, said the prime minister promised to raise \$50 million in the next 30 days to fast-track the much-needed recovery efforts. And Prime Minister Browne also promised to build 200 homes in six months.

The prime minister told Parliament that because Barbuda is now considered a high-income earner they are blocked from accessing international development loans, grants and emergency funding — a situation that has complicated recovery efforts. The prime minister added that help from any and everywhere was absolutely necessary.

“Already, there is one individual who has actually pledged \$1 million. And I expect every single resident, or homeowner on Jumby Bay, to make a contribution to that relief fund.” Jumby Bay is an extremely wealthy residential area in Antigua, populated by movie stars and high-income earners from around the world.

Prime Minister Browne said they have already activated funding from the Caribbean Catastrophic Insurance fund and are expected to receive \$7 million from it. He has asked that they advance \$3 million from the fund immediately, which should be received in 48 hours. Browne wants to raise \$10 million in seven days to charter a ship to bring the equipment needed to begin repairs to Barbuda's electrical as soon as possible.

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