

Press Release

Planning for the Hurricane Season amid COVID-19

This Press Release was issued by the Caribbean Disaster Emergency Management Agency CDEMA.

The start of the May rains reminds us that the threat of floods and shortly, the hurricane season, must now start to occupy the minds of the region's disaster risk management apparatus. This may seem daunting in the face of the Covid 19 pandemic which is already stretching resources. The economic impact of the pandemic will negatively affect response and recovery should countries suffer a weather-related disaster. In view of the April forecast by Colorado State University which calls for above normal activity for the 2020 North Atlantic season, the region must now start planning for the very real possibility of managing two major events concurrently.

Difficult though it may seem, all the usual preparatory activities for the hurricane season must take place. The use of technology will be very important. In the lead up to the season, national disaster offices must figure out how to plan and execute training and simulation exercises remotely. The ongoing pandemic presents a unique opportunity for response systems to be tested by the simulated event while managing a major real event. It also provides the opportunity for testing national coordination and communication systems as multiple response operations should be coordinated out of the national emergency operations centre with satellite command centres reporting in to the national command centre.

Plans, standard operating procedures and precautionary messages will have to be adjusted to include the combination of Covid 19 and hurricane operations.

Pre-impact

In order to accommodate the physical distancing required for COVID 19 additional shelter space may be required. The process of identifying these spaces, inspecting them and ensuring they meet required standards will take some time. In some instances, retrofitting may be necessary. Adequate supplies of water will be vital for preventing the spread of the virus. The need for additional storage capacity should be determined and installation of tanks and fittings undertaken.

Supplementing the normal shelter supplies with additional soap, disinfectants and cleaning agents, as well as training of shelter managers and volunteers in disinfection must be done.

Since it should not be assumed that all evacuees will turn up with masks each shelter should have a supply of masks for staff and evacuees. Medical staff will need PPEs and these should be stored in the shelters' emergency kits. As a precaution each shelter should have isolation areas in which evacuees who show symptoms of illness can be held or remain until they can be transported elsewhere.

Within communities there will be persons such as the aged and mobility challenged who will need to be in close contact with emergency personnel if they are to be evacuated. Provision of adequate personal protective equipment for emergency responders will be required. Community Emergency Response Teams (CERTS) which are part of the national disaster risk management structure are present in many communities. These teams represent a valuable resource as they combine training in basic disaster management skills with a knowledge of communities and residents. These teams would be useful in inspections, mapping areas of high exposure and locations of vulnerable community members and should be fully integrated into the response and recovery operations.

Minimising the risk of infection for first responders will require additional PPE as well as training in self-protection. As many initial rescues are carried out by community members, CERTS and other community groups should be sensitized on self-protection and be equipped with PPE. I say sensitised because it might not now be practical to fully train multiple community groups.

Post Impact

As we have seen, a major disaster triggers generous response from within and outside the region, including large numbers of humanitarian responders. Within CARICOM, the Regional Response Mechanism (RRM) which is a rapid response unit, includes personnel from all participating states. We do not know how the international humanitarian community will respond under the Covid-19 scenario. However, CARICOM, led by CDEMA must decide whether movement of humanitarian assistance into and within the region is to be allowed and under what conditions. Ideally there should be common procedures across all CDEMA Participating States. Most important, appropriate guidance must be communicated to the humanitarian community well before any event so that they are aware of the procedures.

There are reports of the Corona virus surviving on surfaces for several days. This poses the question of how incoming humanitarian supplies will be safely managed. Scientists can advise on the level of risk posed so that appropriate plans for isolation can be put in place if needed.

The restrictions imposed by the COVID 19 pandemic provide the opportunity for the disaster risk management community to introduce novel approaches to its operations. Restrictions on movement, allow space for the use of geo-spatial technology for damage and impact forecasting and assessment. Satellite imagery and drones can provide information from areas inaccessible to field teams. The enhanced use of information technology for COVID 19 provides the chance for integration of data bases into response and recovery operations. For example, data bases used for providing assistance to vulnerable persons for COVID 19 could also be used to provide post-impact assistance after a hurricane.

While the prospect of an above average hurricane season in the midst of the pandemic may seem daunting, the DRM structure embraced in the region facilitates multi-hazard planning. While the health ministries continue to lead the management of COVID 19 and potential outbreaks of dengue and other diseases, the national disaster offices can spearhead the necessary preparations for potential weather-related events. Within CARICOM the national coordinating bodies for disaster risk management are National Disaster Management Councils and Committees. These bodies include representatives from all sectors of society and are the ideal platform for the inclusive, integrated and cross-sectoral planning and resource mobilisation which needs to take place as our countries face the upcoming season.