

INTERVIEW: Hurricane-hit Caribbean nations can build back better, says UN development official

19 October 2017 – Mere mention of the Caribbean conjures up images of pristine waters, beautiful beaches and fun in the sun. However, the images emanating from the region over the past couple of months have painted a very different picture.

“A paradise turned into hell,” was how United Nations [Secretary-General](#) António Guterres described Barbuda earlier this month after visiting the island that was ravaged by Hurricane Irma. During a two-day visit to the Caribbean, he also witnessed the devastation wrought by Hurricane Maria on the small island nation of Dominica.

Mr. Guterres was accompanied by Stephen O’Malley, the [UN Resident Coordinator and Resident Representative of the UN Development Programme \(UNDP\)](#) for [Barbados and the Organization of Eastern Caribbean States](#).

“People want to live here for very good reason – they’re beautiful islands, it’s where people have lived for centuries, their families have lived here for centuries,” Mr. O’Malley said in an interview with *UN News* on the side lines of the Secretary-General’s visit. “So how do you make sure that you use the right techniques to keep yourself as safe, and your country as safe, as possible?”

Mr. O’Malley, whose remit includes Barbados and nine other countries in the region, describes what it was like for him to see the aftermath for the first time, what the priority needs are, and what countries can do to mitigate the risks as well as build back better following such disasters.

UN News: What were your initial impressions when you saw the aftermath of the recent hurricanes?

Stephen O’Malley: Dominica, maybe I’ll start there because I’ve been to Dominica probably 10 times over the last four years. It’s a country that I feel I know quite well. When we were flying in and you were looking down at this ‘nature isle’, as it’s called, and it was totally brown... you could see the trees blown over and hardly any green at all. We came in to land at this small airport and there are all these logs which had come down from the hillsides. They were all along the waterfront. We started driving into the city and, literally, it was like going... I’m from Canada... it was like going into a city after there’d been a snowstorm but the storm was mud and not snow. It had all been pushed up to the banks, on the sides of the street. You had galvanized sheeting, you had plastic, you had mattresses, all kinds of stuff. I had seen the pictures and I have to say it was still very emotional for me to see the effect.

VIDEO: Stephen O'Malley talks about the UN helping storm-ravaged Caribbean countries as well as reducing disaster vulnerability in the region.

UN News: Can you give us a brief overview of the current situation in Barbuda and in Dominica?

Stephen O'Malley: They're very different places. Barbuda is part of a twin-island State – Antigua and Barbuda – and is a relatively small island. There's about 1,600 people there. So they were very badly affected... I mean the infrastructure was very badly hit and then we had another storm coming, another hurricane right behind that. So the Government took the decision, I think wisely, to evacuate the population. Their houses were destroyed. They had nowhere to properly shelter. So they were evacuated to Antigua by plane and by boat in one day, which was really pretty amazing.

And since then they've been sheltering here, and the Government has been working on cleaning up the island. What does that mean? It's pumping out all the standing water. When I went there two weeks ago, you were just covered in clouds of mosquitoes because of the breeding. So clean up the standing water... and then clean up dead farm animals and other animals... and establish a health post... and try and make it a place where, as people are able to, they can come back and they can start working on their homes bit by bit to restore them. They've lifted the mandatory evacuation order but for now, people go back and forth during the day.

Understandably, the people who are here [Antigua], who were evacuated, the Barbudans, like people everywhere else, they want to go home. They have one thought in mind – how can I go home? When can I go home? And so in the meantime they've been in shelters, and the United Nations – [UNICEF](#), [UNFPA](#), [UN Women](#), [IOM](#) – we've been supporting them in those shelters. So has the Government, of course. And then some people are with family or friends. But, people want to go home. So, how can that be done in a safe way? What are the minimum conditions that people need? And of course, there wouldn't be any operational schools there. So what do you do if you have school-age children?

The biggest challenge is that the storms are getting stronger.

Dominica, I was there two weeks ago, and I was just there the beginning of this week as well. You could see the change. You could see that there was actually some green on the hillsides and the roads were clear. There's a bit more order to things. Civil servants were coming back to work because they were able to get into the city. But you know they still have some very big challenges. I mean we've managed to help the Government distribute 60 metric tonnes of food in the last week. We have to keep that up so that people feel safe and secure, that they do feel like 'okay I'm being properly taken care of, I have enough food, I have enough water, I have enough shelter, things are getting better.' People have to believe that and if they believe that, that's a very important psychological boost. They can get the medical care they need, etc.

So, it's getting better but we have a long, long way to go, and there's still parts of the country we've only maybe been to once or twice because the access has been so difficult. We were very fortunate that we had support from a number of different foreign militaries and they airdropped via helicopter or took boats in and dropped stuff off to a range of coastal communities. More than 50 different coastal communities received some kind of food and/or water drop from, primarily, the Dutch and French military but also the Americans, the Canadians, the Brits and the Venezuelans.

UN News: What are the most immediate needs right now?

Stephen O'Malley: I think the most immediate thing is to keep that good flow of relief aid to people so that they feel comfortable and they feel they're being properly taken care of. I mean, the water system is coming back up slowly, electricity is coming back up slowly but that's still mostly in the capital city of Roseau. It's people in the rural areas who we have to reach in one way or the other. So we need to make sure they have the food and the water, then they can start to shelter themselves. But we still have two more months in this hurricane season left.



Scene from Codrington town in Barbuda during the Secretary-General's visit to survey the damage caused by recent hurricanes. UN Photo/Rick Bajornas

UN News: What will be the main challenges going forward?

Stephen O'Malley: I think it will be expensive to rebuild. Two years ago, there was a tropical storm over Dominica – Tropical Storm Erica. It was mostly heavy rainfall... In six hours, it did about \$480 million worth of damage. Even two years later, in some places the country's still recovering from that. So now we have damages which are clearly going to be higher than that. And so where do you get the money, as a small island developing State, to redevelop? So we have the money part.

I think the other big piece... and this is where I think the Government in Dominica is working hard... is what's the strategy? You need to have a way to get money back into people's hands. You want to get the economy going again, and then you want to start building real climate-resilient infrastructure.

On Barbuda, I think it's how do people get back and start rebuilding their lives there. Here you have people who are displaced and they want to go home. How can they do that in a way that's safe and in a way that contributes in a positive way to the redevelopment of the country? Again, you need a good strategy and certainly there'll be some funding requirements as well.

UN News: What have you heard from the people you've met who have been uprooted?

Stephen O'Malley: I think the biggest thing was the sense of shock at how fierce the storm was. I know people across the region. I know people who were in Dominica, people who told me 'you know I was sitting in a house' – a

concrete house, we're not talking about a flimsy, wooden building or a tin-walled shack, we're talking about concrete-block wall houses – and people telling me 'I thought I was okay. I was in this house, and then the wind just ripped the roof off.' It was a terrifying experience for a lot of people.



Aerial view of Salybia, Dominica, where swathes of forests were left bare following the category-5 hurricanes that struck the region. UN Photo/Rick Bajornas

UN News: In a region that has seen its share of natural disasters, what can countries do to mitigate the risks, as well as build back better?

Stephen O'Malley: I think that's a very important question. The countries know their location. The biggest challenge is that the storms are getting stronger. And that seems to be the consensus of scientists, that these storms are going to get stronger for a variety of interrelated reasons – the warming Caribbean Sea and other things. We may get more frequent storms but the storms we get will be stronger. So, what do you require to have a house or an office building that can withstand that? It's interesting, you know you can go to communities and you can see three or four houses that are really badly affected and another one that isn't. You can look at that house and you can say, 'well I can see that this house was constructed to building code.' How do you make sure everybody has the resources they need, because not everybody has the money to build to code. And then, those houses that already exist that need to be retrofitted, again you have to help people with that.

So for me, the technologies are not difficult. They're not complex. People know them. It's how do we enforce the building codes. And then, it's the reality of some of these islands... I mean Dominica is a mountainous island. You have these very steep hillsides and a coast road running along there. In the best of times, you're getting rock fall and other debris coming down the mountains. So what can you do about that so that every time you have a serious storm, you don't have your entire road network go down for a week to two weeks? What are some of the other things you can do with the power systems? Now they have one interconnected power system, one interconnected transmission grid, and the electrical company is looking at the question of 'well, maybe we should split this grid into different pieces so that it might be less vulnerable.' You can bury the lines. You can see that in the Caribbean, you still have a lot of lines that are strung on poles. And that's another question – could we bury more of the lines and that would stop the electricity from going down.

So there are things we can do. People want to live here for very good reason – they're beautiful islands, it's where people have lived for centuries, their families have lived here for centuries. So how do you make sure that you use the right techniques to keep yourself as safe, and your country as safe, as possible.

Governments endorse UN-backed plan to tackle cancer, diabetes and other deadly diseases

19 October 2017 – Global leaders have pledged to take bold action to reduce suffering from noncommunicable diseases (NCDs), which include the world's leading killers – heart and lung diseases, cancers and diabetes – the United Nations health agency has reported.

Governments on Wednesday endorsed the [Montevideo Roadmap 2018-2030 on NCDs as a Sustainable Development Priority](#) at the opening of the three-day global conference in the Uruguayan capital after which the strategy is named, hosted by the World Health Organization ([WHO](#)) and the country's Presidency.

"It is shocking to see the growing toll diseases like cancer and diabetes are taking on the people who can least afford healthcare," said WHO Director-General Tedros Ad-hanom Ghebreyesus.

The pledge follows world leaders' agreement to reduce by one-third premature NCDs deaths by 2030, as part of the UN's [2030 Agenda](#) for Sustainable Development.

Today, these diseases kill 40 million annually, more than any other cause of death, of which 15 million occur prematurely among people aged 30-70 years, and seven million in low- and low-middle income countries.

"Governments must act on pledges to prevent these diseases in the first place, and to ensure that people can obtain services to treat them," he added. "Failure to do this imposes massive costs on individuals and communities. It totally contradicts global commitments to sustainable development."

The Montevideo Roadmap highlights the need for coordinated and coherent action from all sectors and the whole of society, as many of the main drivers of ill health lie beyond the control of health ministries, systems and professionals. Non-State actors, including civil society and industry, have important roles to play.

In addition to improved disease detection and treatment, the Roadmap also points out that the bulk of NCD deaths could have been prevented by action, such as against tobacco, unhealthy diets and harmful use of alcohol.

Among challenges identified in the Roadmap are uneven and insufficient progress to reduce premature deaths from NCDs; influence of the private sector on governments to prioritize trade over public health goals; and lack of high-level political leadership to ensure that health promotion and NCD

prevention and control are part of all areas of government policy.

Mr. Tedros Adhanom, who last week announced the launch of a new WHO high-level commission on NCDs, added: "This conference is a critical opportunity to accelerate efforts to get ahead of noncommunicable diseases. We must be prepared to have some tough conversations, and to take brave action."

"One vital step is for all countries to follow trailblazers, like Uruguay, that have ratified the protocol to eliminate the illicit trade in tobacco products," he added. "Ensuring that this protocol can come into force next year is key to advancing the impact of the WHO Framework Convention on Tobacco Control."

The Montevideo Roadmap will guide global preparations for the UN General Assembly's third High-level Meeting on NCDs next year to assess progress in meeting the target of reducing premature NCD deaths by 25 per cent by 2025 and then by one-third by 2030.

UN migration chief urges more support for Rohingyas fleeing Myanmar or 'thousands will suffer'

19 October 2017 – The United Nations migration agency and its partners are supporting Bangladesh in coordinating assistance for the influx of hundreds of thousands of Rohingya refugees, including with clean water and sanitation, shelter, food and psychosocial care for the most vulnerable.

"The world has rarely witnessed [a refugee crisis of such speed](#), with more than half a million crossing into Bangladesh in just over a month," said William Lacy Swing, Director General of the International Organization for Migration ([IOM](#)), on Wednesday, as he completed a three-day visit to Bangladesh.

"The arc of misery that exists between Northern Rakhine state and Cox's Bazar is deeply upsetting – too many people suffering desperately with too little support," he said, adding that just two days ago, some 1,500 more Rohingya refugees waded through a river as monsoon rains drenched the country.

The Bangladesh Government has confirmed that it will move an estimated 15,000 people currently stranded in a so-called "no man's land" near the Anjuman Para border crossing point in Cox's Bazar's Ukhia District, into more appropriate settlement areas.

Director General Swing began his visit with a day-long tour of the makeshift settlements in Ukhia and Teknaf sub-districts, where an estimated 800,000 refugees are now living, to observe the scale of the crisis and the sheer enormity of needs.



William Lacy Swing, the Director General of the International Organization for Migration (IOM), visits Rohingya refugees at makeshift settlements in Bangladesh's Cox's Bazar. Photo: IOM

"I saw women carrying small babies, only a few days old, sometimes born while their young mothers were fleeing deadly violence in torrential rains. I saw young children, who had lost not just their parents, but any remnants of hope," Mr. Swing stated.

He called for global commitment to these women and children, who are among the most vulnerable in the world, to do everything possible to ensure that their suffering stops here. "If adequate resources are not mobilized by the international community, we cannot make that commitment. Thousands will suffer without food, shelter, health care and protection," he emphasized.

We must make a commitment to these women and children, who are among the most vulnerable in the world, that we will do everything in our ability to ensure that their suffering stops here.

Based on the recommendations of the Advisory Commission on Rakhine State established by Myanmar's Office of the State Counsellor and the Kofi Annan Foundation, the Director General highlighted the critical importance of a peaceful resolution to the crisis.

"Humanitarian aid alone is not a solution. The root causes of this crisis are in Myanmar and there can be no lasting peace in Rakhine without inclusive development," he said, pointing to the recommendations as a roadmap to peaceful co-existence and welcoming the Myanmar Government's commitment to implementing the Commission's findings.

"The first step in that implementation process will be to urgently allow UN agencies to resume their work in Rakhine state," Mr. Swing said.

Since late August, IOM has scaled up quickly, providing: shelter to 379,000 people; health consultations to 47,000 individuals; over 11,000 dignity kits; 678,000 litres of water; and 200 staff to assist the Health Ministry in vaccinating 679,000 people against cholera. IOM staffing has also been boosted with 443 staff and in-country volunteers.

Despite drop in under-five mortality rate, 7,000 newborns die every day – UN report

19 October 2017 – More must be done to stop babies from dying the day they are born, United Nations agencies said in a new report issued Thursday, which argued that life-saving know-how and technologies must be made readily available – particularly in Southern Asia and sub-Saharan Africa – where they are most needed.

Although the number of children dying before age five is at a new low – 5.6 million in 2016 compared with nearly 9.9 million in 2000 – the proportion of newborn deaths during that period has jumped from 41 to 46 per cent – or 7,000 babies.

This is according to the [Levels and Trends in Child Mortality 2017](#), released today by the Inter-agency Group for Child Mortality Estimation (IGME) – comprised of the UN Children's Fund ([UNICEF](#)), the World Health Organization ([WHO](#)), the World Bank and the Population Division in the UN Department for Economic and Social Affairs.

“The lives of 50 million children under-five have been saved since 2000, a testament to the serious commitment by governments and development partners to tackle preventable child deaths,” said Stefan Swartling Peterson, the UN Children's Fund's (UNICEF) Chief of Health, in a joint press statement.

But without a greater effort to stop babies from dying the day they are born, or days after their birth, this progress will remain incomplete. “We have the knowledge and technologies that are required – we just need to take them where they are most needed,” he added.

Current trends suggest that between 2017 and 2030, 30 million newborns will die within first 28 days of life. As such, the agencies stress that measures must be taken to achieve universal health coverage and ensure that more newborns survive and thrive, including by serving marginalized families.

Universal health coverage and improving quality and availability of services

“To prevent illness, families require financial power, their voices to be heard and access to quality care,” says Dr. Flavia Bustreo, WHO's Assistant Director-General for Family, Women's and Children's Health. “Improving quality of services and timely care during and after childbirth must be prioritized.”

Tim Evans, Senior Director of Health Nutrition and Population at the World Bank Group said that it is unconscionable that in 2017, pregnancy and child birth are still life-threatening conditions for women.

The best measure of success for universal health coverage is that every mother should not only be able to access health care easily, but that it should be quality, affordable care that will ensure a healthy and productive life for her children and family. We are committed to scaling up our financing to support country demand in this area, including through innovative mechanisms like the [Global Financing Facility](#), he added, referring to the principle financing arm of the UN-backed [Every Woman Every Child](#) initiative.

Despite progress, large disparities in child survival still exist across regions and countries especially in Southern Asia sub-Saharan Africa.

This new report highlights the remarkable progress since 2000 in reducing mortality among children under age five, said UN Under-Secretary-General for Economic and Social Affairs Liu Zhenmin.

Yet many deaths at these ages are easily preventable through simple, cost-effective interventions administered before, during and immediately after birth. Reducing inequities and reaching the most vulnerable newborns, children and mothers are essential for achieving the Sustainable Development Goals ([SDGs](#)) target on ending preventable childhood deaths and for ensuring that no one will be left behind.

[With fast-growing youth population, Africa's boasts enormous potential – UN deputy chief](#)

18 October 2017 – African countries individually represent relatively small markets, but collectively, they represent enormous market potential, the United Nations deputy chief told an Africa Week event in New York on Wednesday.

“The continent’s large and growing population represents [enormous market potential](#), especially with growing urbanization contributing to rapid growth in consumption by households and businesses,” said Deputy Secretary-General Amina J. Mohammed in her keynote address to the [event](#), titled ‘Regional and Economic Integration in Africa: How to Effectively Involve Africa’s Youth across National Borders.’

Yet, despite this potential, she continued, intra-African trade represents only about 13 per cent of Africa’s total trade.

By building on market potential and promoting regional integration, African countries could reduce their dependency on the sale of primary commodities, and shift to value added products – creating employment, reducing

inequalities, investing in sustainable infrastructure and ensuring sustainable economic growth.

Establishing a Continental Free Trade Area, as agreed by the African Union in 2012, would be a major step in the right direction.

“Once established, it would be the largest free trade area in the world with 54 member states – a single market of more than one billion people with a young and growing population,” she said.

The transformative changes envisaged in Africa’s development vision, Agenda 2063, can only be realized if they are forged around stronger regional integration, she added.

There are also encouraging success stories elsewhere. Today, regional blocks in South and Central America, Southeast Asia and China play a major role in global economy.

The Association of Southeast Asian Nations ([ASEAN](#)) Free Trade Area was established in 1992 to eliminate trade and non-trade barriers and improve the Southeast Asia’s competitiveness. Consequently, intra-ASEAN trade more than doubled between 1995 and 2010, and kept increasing to reach around 24 per cent of global trade last year – and 40 per cent if trade with China is included.

“We can achieve the same success in Africa,” Ms. Mohammed said.

Africa has the fastest growing youth population in the world, with 60 per cent of its population under 24.

Harnessing their capacity requires greater investments in education, especially in science and technology, to ensure a robust labour force capable of meeting the increasingly competitive demands of today’s globalized markets, she said.

Noting that gender inequality is costing sub-Saharan Africa tens of billions a year, she stressed the need to truly integrate women into Africa’s economies towards creating a prosperous and vibrant Africa.