

Irma: US crisis cell brings stranded tourists home

September 12 2017, by Dave Clark



Tourists arriving with the first flight from Sint Maarten, walk on the tarmac at the Eindhoven Military Airbase

In flooded resorts and storm-ravaged beach hotels dotted along the Caribbean archipelago, hundreds of US tourists are waiting for news

from the State Department crisis task force.

More than 2,000 Americans left stranded by the passage of Hurricane Irma have been flown out of the holiday island of Saint Martin by the Air National Guard—or loaded onto passing cruise ships.

As many more again are thought to be in the region, although exact numbers are hard to come by with many phone and power lines down.

Now the focus is shifting to farther flung resorts, where hundreds more tourists and expats await news—some of them cut off without communication, other just in need of a flight.

On the seventh floor of the State Department in Washington, between a table heaving with emergency supplies of coffee and doughnuts and banks of screens and phones, Lucia Piazza is taking stock.

The air bridge set up by the New York, Kentucky and Puerto Rico National Guard units is bringing out tourists by the planeload, and Royal Caribbean Cruise Lines has picked up hundreds more.

"Part of the challenge has been we don't have a presence there and communication lines were almost completely disrupted," said Piazza, the head of a team from the office of crisis management support.

"But where we know we have a few pockets of American citizens we think we may have a couple of thousand more," she estimated.

"We're also starting to focus resources on the British Virgin Islands, where we know we have a number of American citizens in distress," she told AFP on a visit to the center on Monday.



Buildings collapsed in Grand-Case in Saint Martin after it was hit by Hurricane Irma

Maps of the Caribbean islands are plastered along the walls of the room, where staff in headsets and in front of screens monitor the rotation of the planes and the collection of stranded families.

A young man—one of the diplomats and civil servants seconded to the emergency team—puts his phone aside after a call from one of the islands and says: "A plane just landed, it can take 120."

Critical situations

Most of those picked up in the islands are brought out to San Juan in Puerto Rico on National Guard flights. A Royal Caribbean liner will stop at Saint Thomas and a flight has arrived in Turks and Caicos.

In a room across the corridor from Piazza's emergency logistics team, Elizabeth Cherry—director of consular crisis management—has a team taking calls from anxious US families.

The State Department has issued an emergency number and a switchboard ranks the incoming calls in three tiers.

Tier one calls from citizens expressing general concern or offering donations are politely redirected. Tier two calls with news of citizens stranded in the hurricane zone come to the crisis center.

There, so-called tier three calls get priority, Cheery explains: "Those [critical situations](#). Someone who has run out of medication, or there's an infant child in distress."

The operation is proceeding, and so far there have been no nasty surprises—no US citizen has been confirmed killed by the storm on the holiday [islands](#)—but the search continues.

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