

U.N. chief heads back to Caribbean to raise the alarm about climate change, hurricanes

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Almost two years after he visited the Caribbean to see for himself the devastation left by hurricanes Irma and Maria in Antigua and Barbuda and Dominica, United Nations Secretary-General Antonio Guterres is

back—this time to meet with leaders of the 15-member Caribbean Community, Caricom, in St. Lucia.

Guterres will attend the 40th regular meeting of the Conference of Heads of Government of the Caribbean Community, which runs Wednesday through Friday in the eastern Caribbean island. In his opening ceremony speech and discussions with leaders, Guterres will focus on the impact of climate change and the financing challenges for Caribbean nations, several of which are struggling to rebuild in the wake of the destructive 2017 hurricane season.

An overwhelming number of Caricom member states and associate members—Anguilla, Antigua and Barbuda, Bahamas, British Virgin Islands, Dominica, Haiti, St. Kitts and Nevis and the Turks and Caicos Islands—were affected by the deadly storms. So, too, were Cuba, the Dominican Republic, the French-Dutch territory of St. Maarten-St. Martin and the U.S. territories of Puerto Rico and the U.S. Virgin Islands.

"It is essentially a visit of solidarity; solidarity with Caricom and with the countries of the region that are in the first line of impact of climate change. They don't contribute to global warming, but they are the first victims of [global warming](#)," Guterres told the Miami Herald in a telephone interview ahead of his arrival in St. Lucia. "We are not only talking about the future. We are talking about the present with hurricanes becoming more intense and more frequent."

Guterres is a big proponent of fighting climate change, calling it "the defining issue of our time." During his visits to Barbuda and Dominica in October 2017, he was shocked by the level of devastation, saying at the time that Caribbean nations will need to employ new construction standards and farming techniques to resist drought and deluge from a changing climate. He also called on the international community to do

more to help rebuilding efforts.

On Tuesday, he said while there "has been a certain level of response" from the international community, "we believe much more needs to be done.

"I am not happy at all with the level of support that has been provided up to this moment," he added.

In the wake of the storms, financial institutions like the World Bank have provided a number of islands with funds to assist in the rebuilding. Meanwhile, former U.S. President Bill Clinton and Secretary of State Hillary Clinton have brought together organizations through their Clinton Global Initiative to help Dominica, the U.S. Virgin Islands and Puerto Rico.

Through their efforts, for example, the UN's World Food Program recently agreed to help improve humanitarian response in the Caribbean by supporting local and regional governments in their efforts to reach vulnerable populations and decrease the need for international interventions after a disaster.

"We are here to share ideas and experiences and figure out how we can better help the entire Caribbean become stronger, safer, and more sustainable," President Clinton said last month as he and his wife hosted the fourth meeting of the Clinton Global Initiative Action Network on hurricane recovery and resiliency projects in St. Thomas, U.S. Virgin Islands. "With the 2019 hurricane season upon us, the work of this network to ensure resilience, preparedness, and sustainability in the Virgin Islands, Puerto Rico, Dominica, and across the Caribbean is more urgent than ever."

But while some are benefiting from the continued focused on recovery,

others are struggling to rebuild. In the Turk and Caicos Islands, where nearly every structure on the island of South Caicos suffered some kind of hurricane damage, residents still do not have use of their [hurricane](#) shelter, which lost its ceiling in Irma.

The only visible sign of rebuilding on the island is a primary school, and a new waterfront government building on the southern part of the island, both under construction. Most of the damaged buildings and homes look the same way they did the day after Hurricane Irma pummeled the low-lying British overseas territory as a category 5 storm on Sept. 8, 2017.

Guterres' visit to Caricom comes as he prepares to host a U.N. climate change summit in September in New York. The gathering has several long-term goals, he said. Among them: reducing greenhouse gas emissions by 45 percent, ending subsidies for fossil fuels and high-emitting agriculture, and shifting toward renewable energy, electric vehicles and climate-smart practices. Attendees, which include government leaders, international organizations and society leaders, will also look at carbon pricing, shifting taxation from people to pollution; accelerating the closure of coal plants, halting the construction of new ones and other policies.

"If the international community (is able) to respond with ambition, the Caribbean countries will suffer much less," Guterres said.

Caricom Secretary-General Ambassador Irwin LaRocque said climate change, as well as matters concerning fisheries, ocean pollution and financing are of great concern to Caricom. Leaders, he said, are looking forward to their discussions with Guterres and Norway Prime Minister Erna Solberg, who will also be in St. Lucia ahead of the U.N. summit.

LaRocque said Caricom leaders want to "see how we get our views forward on financing for development, resilience building and access to

financing."

Wednesday's opening ceremony will set the tone for the two-day meeting in which other issues will also be on the agenda. They include discussions on trade and economic development within the 15-member states, and the blacklisting of some by other nations.

Guterres said he's quite aware of the many challenges Caribbean countries face as they pursue their own development strategies and it's important for the U.N. to show solidarity with them.

"We know the obstacles to development due to the small dimensions of the countries, difficult and inaccessible markets, the high levels of debt," he said. "One of the things that will be discussed is how can we support them in order to make sure that that debt can be alleviated knowing that they are middle-income countries."

For example, the United Nations Economic Commission for Latin America and the Caribbean, known as ECLAC, has proposed shifting part of Caribbean nations' debt into investments in resilience "in a way that kills two rabbits with the same bullet."

"On one hand, it reduces the level of debt and on the other hand, it increases the capacity of those countries to resist the negative impact of climate change," Guterres said.

The St. Lucia meeting comes four months after leaders of five Caribbean nations sympathetic to the Trump administration's hard line on Venezuela met with President Donald Trump at his private Mar-a-Lago resort in Palm Beach. The invitees were St. Lucia, Jamaica, Haiti, Bahamas and the Dominican Republic. The Dominican Republic, which had its application to join Caricom put on hold because of its treatment of Haitian migrants, is not a member of the regional bloc.

The Trump meeting focused on economic development and not climate change, which the U.S. president has been dismissive of.

Last month during a major climate conference in Germany, the adoption of a critical UN report related to the Paris Agreement was blocked, raising concerns among smaller nations. There were also major sticking points on issues of climate financing.

"I've been saying clearly, there is a paradox. On the one hand we see the impact of climate change becoming more devastating, more dramatic on the ground even more than the worst predictions and on the other hand, we see political will failing, especially by some key member state," Guterres said. "It is absolutely essential to overcome this. This is exactly the reason for the summit that I am convening. Indeed in Bonn there was some progress but the key issues that were on the table are not yet resolved and we will have to work a lot before the COP25 (climate talks in Santiago, Chile) in order to make sure that all of the outstanding issues find an adequate answer."

In addition to [climate change](#) and financing, other issues that are expected to arise when Guterres meets with Caricom leaders are drug trafficking, migration, and security concerns, including the recruitment of individuals in Trinidad and Tobago by terrorist organizations.

The ongoing political crises in Haiti, which is a member of Caricom, and Venezuela, which isn't, may also come up. The U.N. Security Council last week voted to replace the current peacekeeping mission in Haiti with a special political mission, and the bloc remains divided on Venezuela as several countries see a spike in Venezuelan refugees.

"I do believe that the central question in Haiti is a question of political dialogue," Guterres said. "There is no way the international community or the United Nations can replace the work of the Haitian institutions."

What we need to do is support those institutions, to create mechanisms of dialogue and mediation, cooperation for them to be able to create the stability that the country requires to move forward."

On Venezuela, he noted that a number of Caricom countries have received a "meaningful number of Venezuelans," and the outflow from the South American nation has become one of the measures of displacement of populations in the world.

"It is very important that the international community increases the support to Venezuela outside of the country and to the countries that are hosting them," Guterres said.

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