

**ADDRESS BY THE HON. ROOSEVELT SKERRIT,
PRIME MINISTER OF THE COMMONWEALTH
OF DOMINICA FRIDAY 28TH AUGUST 2015, IN
THE WAKE OF THE PASSING OF TROPICAL
STORM ERIKA**

It is with a heavy heart that I address you tonight.

You can imagine what hell it has been for me, since I heard of the passing of Tropical Storm Erika and the damage it has done to my dear people and our beloved country, the Commonwealth of Dominica.

But we all have to pull ourselves together and steady ourselves to ensure that we weather this storm and rebound as a nation in rapid time.

Perhaps it was by pure coincidence that I was on my way back home from an International UN Conference on closer cooperation between the countries of the Global South and with countries of the Global North (which in recent history have been the dominant nations of the world) when Tropical Storm Erika struck our beloved country on Wednesday 26th August.

On the other hand it may have been part of the “Great Design”, to send us a wake-up call, to pull together to solve our problems with the help of our global partners.

The theme of the Conference was **“Scaling-Up Global Support for South-South and Triangular cooperation in the Context of Post-2015 Development”**..... And we need that now more than ever before!!

When the bad news broke immediately after this stimulating Conference, I tried to control my emotions. Yes, I was nearly overwhelmed by what happened. But I know that true leaders are those who keep their cool while others lose theirs.

So, as I calmly gathered more and more information on the damage done to Dominica, my depression was lifted by the thought that the sentiments and agreements made at the Conference in Macau, China, clearly indicated that assistance will be forthcoming to help us recover from this natural disaster which has befallen Dominica.

Indeed such help soon materialized when I arrived in St. Lucia, and fully realized that Dominica’s recently extended and renovated Douglas-Charles Airport was closed, due to the severe damage inflicted by Tropical Storm Erika.

How would I get home? Within hours of my arrival, the Honourable Kamla Persad-Bissessar, Prime Minister of Trinidad and Tobago made arrangements for a helicopter to take me directly to Dominica.

Since then, member states of the Organization of Eastern Caribbean States (OECS), neighbouring members of the overseas regions of France, fellow members of the Caribbean Community (CARICOM) and regional organizations like the Caribbean Disaster Emergency Management Agency have responded positively to our plight and made it possible for many of us to fly around the country to gauge the extent of the damage.

Beloved Dominicans, I have been assessing the damage all day. The extent of the devastation is monumental. It is far worse than expected. It is true that many communities like Petite Savanne, Delices and Coulibistrie have been swamped and are still cut off from the rest of Dominica, but nearly every community has been hit.

There is extensive damage across our small island after floods swamped villages, destroyed homes and wiped out roads. Some communities are no longer recognizable.

It was a harrowing experience for me to see suffering on such a grand scale. My heart and soul grieve for you.

Of greatest concern however is the loss of life. So far we can confirm that at least 20 citizens have died, and some are missing.

This is heart wrenching!

I give you my pledge that we shall not cease until contact is made with every community and a full account is given of every single missing person.

I take this opportunity on behalf of my dear wife, Melissa, the Cabinet of Ministers, the Government of Dominica and the Dominica Labour Party to extend to the bereaved, our deepest and most sincere condolences.

We shall rebuild Dominica in honor of those who lost their lives in this particular tragedy.

In the hours and days ahead, respective Parliamentary Representatives will be meeting with families to discuss and formalize arrangements for burial of those who succumbed, as well as to help provide adequate care for the injured.

Local, regional and international agencies have already deployed representatives in the field to assess and evaluate damage and determine the nature of relief and assistance that would be forthcoming.

In a nutshell, to all impacted by this tragedy, help is on the way!

I wish to appeal to citizens and residents to extend brotherly and sisterly love and attention to those who mourn, as well as those impacted by the suffering of others.

We need at this time to show love; to show compassion, to show genuine interest in the welfare and wellbeing of those in mourning.

This is a period of national tragedy and I want for Dominicans on this occasion to put all other considerations aside and reach out to each other as brothers and sisters in Christ.

I am also very concerned tonight about the effect this Tropical Storm will have on our economy. You will recall that in my most recent Budget Address, I informed the nation that Dominica was able to register real growth of 3.4 per cent in 2014.

This was no doubt due to the heavy investments we have been making in infrastructural development since 2000. Most recently we have upgraded the Douglas-Charles Airport, developed the highway leading from this airport to Roseau, and upgraded the Roseau to Portsmouth highway.

Now Tropical Storm Erika has inflicted heavy damage to these key facilities and a range of secondary roads that are essential for efficient communication and boosting our export drive.

Relevant agencies, both local and foreign, are in the process of doing their assessments and I do not wish to pre-empt their reports, but from what I can see, hundreds of homes around the country have been destroyed, or rendered unsafe to occupy.

As I moved around today there is evidence of widespread damage to highways, complete bridges have washed away, motorized access to several communities has been considerably reduced and in some instances has vanished altogether. We have, in essence, to rebuild Dominica!

The visual damage I saw today, I fear, may have set our development process back by 20 years. I will not attempt tonight to affix a dollar value, but it is substantial.

I am grateful for the independent assessments that are being carried out by several regional and international agencies. I look to them to inform this country and the world the magnitude of the rebuilding process that will be necessary to return Dominica to normalcy.

Ladies and gentlemen, there is no need to indulge in blaming others for what has happened in Dominica. On Wednesday, based on information received from local and international sources tracking weather movements across the Atlantic, no one expected that such damage would be inflicted on the countries of the Windward Islands.

The focus was on the storm's passage towards the larger islands of the Caribbean and Florida.

The fundamental problem is that small islands around the world have become vulnerable to the vagaries of Climate Change. They are liable to suffer immensely from rising sea levels, from tsunamis or from the disturbance of the other natural resources they so have preserved.

In the case of Dominica, we are renowned as **"The Nature Island"** because of our careful preservation and management of our forests and abundant supplies of fresh water that include 365 rivers, several lakes and waterfalls.

What happened is that the excessive rain brought by Tropical Storm Erika caused many of our waterways to overflow, to create mudslides, landslides and to swamp communities across the island.

I would therefore like to take this opportunity to reassure all Dominicans that we are not alone. I know that help will be forthcoming from various sources.

Already friends of Dominica are calling me to offer their help to start a campaign to raise funds and make donations to bring immediate relief to those who have been drastically affected by this storm.

I want to make it clear that this is a national tragedy that requires us to forget political affiliation and other differences that divide us and to make a united effort to relieve suffering and rebuild Dominica.

I would therefore like to make a special appeal to every Dominican to reach out to your neighbours, find out what their needs are, and share whatever resources you have with them.

I would also like to reach out to members of the Dominican Diaspora to make a special effort to raise funds to send to relatives and friends at home, as soon as possible. Having such money circulating in Dominica is guaranteed to boost the local economy.

I also want to make a national appeal to member nations of the OECS and CARICOM, friends of Dominica across the World, as well as regional and international donor agencies to help in whatever way they can.

Fellow Dominicans, let us turn this disaster into an opportunity to rebuild Dominica and to continue on the unique and impressive path of sustainable development that we have been creating since 2000.

Ladies and gentlemen, I want to remind you that we are a resilient people. We have experienced national disasters on many occasions during the last 400 years of our history. The lessons we have learnt from that experience is that when we pull together as one nation, nothing can stop us.

I therefore want your assistance in making the national response to this disaster **“A New Beginning for Dominica”**, to pull the nation out of the sluggish recession that started in 2008.

Let us consider this disaster as a test of our ability to respond collectively, patriotically and imaginatively to the peculiar challenges of Globalization and Climate Change that have been intensifying since the start of the 21st century.

Let us treat the devastation of Tropical Storm Erika as a wake-up call to do things differently.

As the Prime Minister of the Commonwealth of Dominica I want to start the process of reconciliation for reconstruction. I cannot do this alone! My Ministers and Parliamentary Colleagues cannot do this alone. We need to unite, my brothers and sisters.

Accordingly, I have invited all 21 Elected Parliamentarians to attend a special meeting of the Cabinet of Ministers tomorrow morning at 8 o'clock at Cabinet room in the Financial Centre Building.

The voters of Dominica elected 21 persons to represent their best interests and it is those 21 individuals who shall form the national reconstruction advisory committee.

I want for Prime Minister, Opposition Leader and all other Members of Cabinet and of Parliament to sit, beginning tomorrow, and input on the path forward for the recovery of Dominica from this terrible disaster.

Tomorrow, I want us to sit as patriots to draw up a strategy for relieving immediate suffering, rebuilding our homes and infrastructure, diversifying our economy, and generating the wealth to improve the standard of living and quality of life of our people. Dominicans we can do this!

Dominicans, we must do this! Dominicans we shall rebuild Dominica!!

I know there is pain and suffering across the nation tonight. I am aware that some communities have not as yet been visited by Relief Teams or impacted by relief efforts.

I want you to know tonight that we are coming your way. I flew over and stopped in some areas today. As Prime Minister I intend to visit every single constituency in the days ahead.

As Parliamentary Representatives we shall all sit around the table, as of tomorrow, and formulate strategies for relieving your pain and anxiety.

I want to thank those public officers who responded first thing this morning with a positive and determined effort to minimize human suffering. I want to thank our regional partners for their swift responses.

I want to thank the local, regional and international media for their relatively accurate accounts of what is happening here in Dominica. With this local, regional and international support and solidarity I am confident tonight that Dominica shall rebound.

My dear people, this has been a long, physically and mentally taxing day for all of us. Let us tonight, reaffirm our faith in Almighty God. He has promised never to give us more than we can bear.

I am confident that Almighty God has a plan for Dominica. Let us be strong in our faith and let us demonstrate brotherly and sisterly love, one for the other.

I shall continue assessments and we shall intensify efforts, with the help of friends from abroad, to relieve the suffering of Dominicans.

Rest assured, my brothers and sisters, you are not alone in your period of mourning; in your period of pain, in your period of suffering and anxiety. We are in this together and help is coming your way.

May Almighty God continue to Bless and Guide us all. May He strengthen us and give us courage to face another day.

I thank you for listening.

Good night.