

The PRESIDING OFFICER. Without objection, it is so ordered.

LEGISLATIVE SESSION

Mr. MCCONNELL. Mr. President, I ask unanimous consent that the Senate resume legislative session.

The PRESIDING OFFICER. Without objection, it is so ordered.

NATIONAL DEFENSE AUTHORIZATION ACT FOR FISCAL YEAR 2018—MOTION TO PROCEED—Continued

The PRESIDING OFFICER (Mr. JOHNSON). The Senator from New Jersey.

PUERTO RICO AND U.S. VIRGIN ISLANDS RECOVERY EFFORT

Mr. BOOKER. Mr. President, I appreciate the words from all the colleagues I have seen. It is great to see bipartisan sentiments about dealing with the most powerful hurricanes in recorded history. These hurricanes have left thousands of families homeless, destroying infrastructure, and leaving most people without power for the foreseeable future. There are thousands of individual stories of loss of life, of loss of possessions, of everything people own, devastated by this storm.

What is important to me now is that we turn these words into action. I am grateful for the leadership we are seeing from the State of Texas and the State of Florida, but I want to focus in on what is happening in Puerto Rico and the Virgin Islands. We know, right now, close to 31.5 million American citizens on these islands are on the brink of a humanitarian catastrophe, including the 3.4 million people who live in Puerto Rico and over 100,000 Americans on the U.S. Virgin Islands. The American citizens living in Puerto Rico are part of a population that is bigger than the States of Wyoming, Vermont, North Dakota, and Alaska combined, but they don't have eight Senators representing them in this body—working for them, fighting for them.

When Superstorm Sandy hit New Jersey, I know the constant work Senator MENENDEZ, I, and my predecessor Senator Frank Lautenberg put into working on making sure our communities could recover. We don't have direct Senators representing this incredible population of Americans. They don't have folks here every single day who are pressing for the interests of these Americans, for their safety, their security, their lives. We have to—the 100 of us—step up to make sure that we are focusing on the interests of our fellow Americans after what has been one of the worst storms in recorded history.

The Americans in Puerto Rico pay taxes. They love this country. They serve in the military. In fact, they serve in the military at a rate almost twice as high as the general U.S. population. These are patriots. They are our

brothers and our sisters. These Americans deserve action from this body and from the President of the United States.

Puerto Rico's Governor has spoken directly to this crisis, noting that just 40 percent of the residents of Puerto Rico have access to drinking water—meaning that 2 million American citizens right now in Puerto Rico do not have access to clean drinking water. This is a serious crisis.

More than this, we know the vast majority of Puerto Rican residents still don't have electricity. They are struggling to access food. They do not have basic means of communications on the island, even to family here. They can't access bank accounts. Their sanitation systems have come to a complete standstill. Access to basic medications—often urgently needed medication and healthcare—is under threat.

It is estimated that it is going to take months before power comes back, and recovery and rebuilding will take years for the islands. The next few weeks of recovery are critically important in the effort to save lives.

I saw in Superstorm Sandy how it wasn't just the hurricane itself that took lives; in fact, in my city, it was in the hours and days after that people lost lives. We know that right now in Puerto Rico, every minute, every hour, every day we wait to get critical aid—necessary aid—our failure to act could mean the difference between life and death or between grave suffering and relieving that suffering for hundreds of thousands of people in Puerto Rico, as well as the U.S. Virgin Islands.

We cannot afford to wait any longer to better mobilize support and resources and help our fellow Americans in Puerto Rico and the Virgin Islands right now. I hope that over time we are able to develop larger and more comprehensive aid packages, such as those being discussed for survivors of the hurricanes in Florida and Texas. The urgency we have in Puerto Rico right now, the urgency we have to provide vital security, energy, food, and health needs—we must answer that urgency with action.

Puerto Rico needs U.S. military, disaster, and humanitarian assistance to maintain order and provide security, water, food, and fuel. Puerto Rico needs additional first responders, and they need generators, emergency vehicles, and fuel. Also, Puerto Rico needs to see that its government—the U.S. Government—will respond the way we have for other disasters.

There cannot be a double standard when it comes to Americans. We are one country. We are one Nation. Whether it was Hurricane Sandy in New Jersey and New York or Hurricanes Harvey and Irma that ravaged Texas and Florida, when our Nation sees a natural disaster destroy the homes of thousands, take lives, knock down power—when a challenge like that comes to the United States of

America, we must be there for our citizens. Yet I have read so many heart-breaking stories. This shows the lack of urgency, the lack of being present, the lack of being there when we are needed.

The Washington Post reported that when journalists were looking to go and provide coverage—somehow journalists are making it there to report on the extent of the damage—they were in a remote area of Puerto Rico when local residents saw them. Their first response was simply to ask: Are you FEMA? Are you our government? Are you coming to address the crisis?

Right now Americans are suffering. Right now Americans are facing devastation and potentially death in these hours and these days.

I worry about this body now heading toward Thursday or Friday. How can we in good conscience go back to our homes this weekend, knowing that hundreds of thousands of American citizens in Puerto Rico and the Virgin Islands may be homeless, may not have shelter, may not have food, and may not have water? We cannot allow our fellow Americans to fall deeper into this crisis.

Nosotros somos gente de esperanza; somos gente de fe. Pero nuestra historia siempre ha sido una que conecta oraciones y palabras con acciones. Necesitamos actuar ahora.

We are a people of hope; we are a people of faith. But our history has always been one of matching prayers and words with actions. We must act now.

I yield the floor.

I suggest the absence of a quorum.

The PRESIDING OFFICER. The clerk will call the roll.

The senior assistant legislative clerk proceeded to call the roll.

Ms. STABENOW. Mr. President, I ask unanimous consent that the order for the quorum call be rescinded.

The PRESIDING OFFICER. Without objection, it is so ordered.

HEALTHCARE

Ms. STABENOW. Mr. President, first of all, I rise with a sigh of relief that the decision has been made not to go forward with a vote on a very divisive healthcare bill.

More importantly today, I rise to say this is really an opportunity for us to work together to get something done—something very positive—as it relates to healthcare costs and healthcare coverage for the people whom we all represent in our States and the people across the country. I am hopeful we will see action soon, and I am hopeful it will be this week when we can come together around very good work that is being done in the Health, Education, Labor, and Pensions Committee with our two great leaders—Senator ALEXANDER and Senator MURRAY.

They have been holding a number of committee meetings and forums, and I am very pleased to have participated in those. We have had great bipartisan participation in focusing on how to stabilize the current insurance marketplace. We know that has to be step one