

*CNN Newsroom with Jim Acosta*

10/02/22

4:01:03 p.m.

18 seconds

JIM ACOSTA: Now officials in Lee County where a majority of the deaths have occurred are facing mounting questions about the timing of their mandatory evacuation orders. The first ones were issued less than 24 hours before the Hurricane Ian's landfall despite the county's emergency plan that suggest evacuations should have been happened sooner.

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4:45:37 p.m.

14 minutes and 36 seconds

ACOSTA: I want to quickly go to my colleague, Nadia Romero, who is also covering the aftermath. She is with Florida Governor Ron DeSantis right now, talking to him about the response here to the hurricane. Let's go to her now.

NADIA ROMERO: — Lee County. Why do you stand behind Lee County's decision to not have that mandatory evacuation until the day before the storm?

GOVERNOR RON DESANTIS (R-FL): Well, did you — where was your industry station when the storm hit? Were you guys in Lee County? No, you were in Tampa. So, that's — yeah, they were following the weather track and they had to make decisions based on that. But, you know, 72 hours. They weren't even in the cone. 48 hours, they were on the periphery. So, you've got to make the decisions the best you can. I will say, you know, they delivered the message to people. They had shelters open. You know, everybody had adequate opportunity to at least get to a shelter within the county. But, you know, a lot of the residents did not — did not want to do that. I think probably for various reasons. Some people just don't want to leave their home, period. They're island people or whatever. But I think part of it was so much attention was paid to Tampa, that I think a lot of them probably thought that they wouldn't get the worst of it. So, you know, they — but, you know, they didn't. And I think it's easy to second-guess them. But they were ready for the whole time and made that call when there was justifiable to do so.

ROMERO: Some of their neighboring counties did have mandatory evacuations before Tuesday.

DESANTIS: Well, right, but our neighboring — I mean, if you look at, like, Tuesday morning. They had moved the track down. Models started showing it going to, like, Sarasota. You know, so that's — so they did that. I was in Sarasota that day with them, when they were expanding some of their evacuations. You know, Charlotte, I think did the same thing, either Monday night or Tuesday morning. So, you know, but don't forget. Sunday, 11:00 a.m. advisory. It was going to go to Taylor County in North Florida. And so, you know, that — at some point, you've got to look to see, kind of, where this thing is going. So, yes, no, I mean, I think it — I think that it's easy to say, in hindsight. You know, we had most of our supplies stationed in the Tampa Bay

area. As that track moved, we shifted our response further south as well. Now, we said there would be impacts for sure. And even when it was going to hit North Florida, it's such a big storm. There was going to be impacts in Southwest Florida as well. But the difference between impacts and having the eye go there is much different. And, for most of Sunday-Monday and even into Tuesday, it was 100-150 miles away from them.

ROMERO: Is that one of the things you'll be reviewing, once we get out of the aftermath? People get their power back on, looking at those evacuation orders because even in Lee County, if they had followed their own evacuation orders from what we've reviewed, they should have had that mandatory evacuation order sooner.

DESANTIS: Well, but, you know, the issue though is also that there were a lot of — you know, they informed people and most people did not want to do it. I mean, that's just — that just the reality, so, you know, you're in a situation. Are you going to grab somebody out of their home that doesn't want to? I don't think that's the appropriate use of government. I mean, I think that that takes it a little too far.

ROMERO: And we heard from the FEMA administrator today as well who says that anyone, whether you're in Florida or anywhere else, you're living in water, that you should have flood insurance. Do you agree with that?

DESANTIS: Yeah, I mean, I think that what happens with homeowners is they'll say, you're in a flood plain. You want a mortgage? You have to get flood insurance. So, they do. But what they will say is if you're in a -- oh, you're not in a floodplain. So, people say, hey, I don't need it. The reality is, particularly in Florida, it's a pretty good idea to get it. Fortunately, usually, it's pretty affordable. So, I think that will be something that people see. Because you're going to have people who had total losses who would have bought insurance, if they were told they were at risk. But now, you're in a situation where you're seeing floods like nobody has ever seen before. And that's just something people will, I think, internalize and then want to do something about.

ROMERO: There have been some criticisms about those skyrocketing premiums during your term as governor. What more could you have done, for legislature, to keep that affordable for Floridians?

DESANTIS: Well, the — no, the flood insurance is a federal program. So, that's not ours. That's a separate program. Most of the claims for this are going to be under the National Flood Insurance program. You know, the homeowners insurance are wind claims. And the reason why that market's been is for two reasons. One, 15 years ago, they drove all the insurers out, all the big ones out. And then, more recently, with Irma and some of those other storms, you had massive litigation and a lot of scams. So, we've dialed back some of that. We provided a fund to stabilize. A lot of them would have gone out of business this summer already. But you need to get rid of the scams and the litigation. And I'm willing to do that. The legislature has not been willing thus far, but I'm confident after the election, they will.

UNIDENTIFIED REPORTER #1: Governor, what is the talk at the state level of taking into

account global warming climate change if we rebuild these areas that we see the sea level rise? Are we having those talks at this level right now?

DESANTIS: Well, I think if you guys — I don't know if you're based in Florida. But, I mean, I created a program, called Resilient Florida, that we put a billion dollars into over the last two years. And local communities are able to get money that's matched by the state to be able to make improvements and harden some of their infrastructure. I mean, I think if you look at Southwest Florida, I think it's probably going to be shown that some of what they did has worked. Because I think that the damage could have been much more extensive in some of their underlying infrastructure. So, I think we're the only state that's ever done that, and that's made a big difference. And, I mean, it's made a big difference and that's available. It's a two-year-old program, so they haven't completed it. But that's a lot of money to be putting in the system.

ROMERO: Governor, we expect to see the death toll rise now. And there are a lot of people who can't still get in contact with their loved ones, especially those who are in some of the barrier islands. What's your message to people, as we see that number go up and up each day?

DESANTIS: Well, look, I mean, I think, you know, this is a — basically a category-five storm that also had flooding like we've never seen. I mean, if you think of Hurricane Michael, it was like a tornado that went through Northwest Florida, very damaging. But you were in Panama City, you could potentially have lost everything. If you were in Panama City Beach, you pretty much had nothing because it was relatively focused. This storm, you had that in places like Fort Myers Beach, which packed a big punch. But you also had this massive event that's caused flooding throughout the state. And So, it's just a massive impact. And, you know, unfortunately, you know, you have -- you have destruction of homes. You have fatalities. And it's a difficult thing to deal with for sure.

ROMERO: Your message, though, to those people who can't get in contact with their loved ones who are reeling right now on day four?

DESANTIS: Well, so, what — I mean, what we've done, we're bringing to here. We brought them to Southwest Florida and other parts. Yes, we're bringing the Elon Musk satellite receivers. And so, people will be able to get online at these pods, to be able to let people know that they're okay. Obviously, you know, we — the telecom companies are doing what they can. I know they bring in towers and stuff like that. Some of them suffered extensive damages. But I think on the internet, to be able to come here, get what you need, you will be able to — if we bring to the pods, you will be able to — to log on. So, that'll be — that'll be comfort for a lot of people.

ROMERO: How would you describe your relationship with the Biden administration?

UNIDENTIFIED REPORTER #2: What can we do together to get this thing moving forward?

DESANTIS: Well, look, I don't think you've ever seen a state spring into action like we've seen here. If you look at these pods — usually, the pods are not set up until 96 hours after the storm leaves. We had pods set up Saturday, when the storm left on Thursday night. We had a lot of

stuff pre-staged and then, you had all of these private groups that are coming in to help. You have all of these other agencies throughout the state coming in to help. You know, a lot of these agencies, like Southwest Florida, they were all preparing to go help Tampa and St. Pete three — you know, a week ago, when this stuff — on Monday, they were making preparations to actually do that. Well, things change and so, now, you have people from, like, Tampa. You have people from the panhandle coming down to this part of Florida. And so, I think people have really pulled together. I think that they've done a really good job. I mean, there's a lot of work ahead, obviously. But I think the resilience has been great. Friday morning, in Cape Coral, which is very close to ground zero where the hurricane hit, you had Publix open, Wawa — I mean, things are springing back. I — I doubt you would have seen that in some of these other major storms that we've seen over the past 20, 30 years in this country and so, I think the spirit is great and I do think people have pulled together well. All right, we're going to head back over to the —

ACOSTA: And that was my colleague, Nadia Romero, speaking with Governor Ron DeSantis there, asking questions about the response to Hurricane Ian. I don't know if Nadia is still with me. Nadia, if you're there, I just want to ask you —

ROMERO: Yes.

ACOSTA: — what were — what were your thoughts as you heard there from the governor. Obviously, it sounds like he's very supportive of the decisions that were made, in terms of when these evacuation orders were issued. That residents are, frankly, asking a lot of questions about.

ROMERO: Yes, he seemed frustrated, when I started asking him questions about Lee County and their mandatory evacuation. You can see the governor now, I want you to take a look, as he loads up on a boat here and heads to the other side of Highway 70. That's where he's going to have another press conference. He really came on this side to shake the hands of some National Guards' member and some people here who have been stranded, because of the floodwaters. But when I asked him about Lee County not having that mandatory evacuation until the day before the storm, he fired back and said, well, where did you think the storm was going to land? And that cone, the eye of the storm, was not set towards Fort Myers and Lee County until later on. And so, he doubled down, again, saying that he stands by what happened in Lee County. And saying that hindsight is 20/20. And we can look at it now and say what should have been done. But he says that he believes they did what they thought was best, based on the track of the storm. Now, we know, from reviewing the documents, that Lee County's own records show that they should have that mandatory evacuation order, or they could have had that as soon as Sunday. So, when I asked the governor about that, he doubled down again and said they did the best that they could. And that he felt like their evacuation order was put in in a timely manner. That is not what we're hearing from others, who are criticizing Lee County. I followed up and asked him, well, the surrounding counties around Lee County did have mandatory evacuation orders before Tuesday. And the governor said, listen, everyone did the best that they could. The bigger issue here is that people in Florida did not heed those mandatory evacuations. Even when people were told, you need to leave. The storm is coming. They didn't leave. And he said that he didn't want to see the government removing people from their homes. And so, this is simply what happened in this particular case.

ACOSTA: Yeah and I just want to tell our viewers right now that, over my shoulder, the cleanup continues. I just want to show this, because it's happening right now. This pickup truck is pulling this boat out of a pile of wreckage and trying to mount it on top of this trailer. This has just been happening over the last several seconds and it's making a heck of a racket behind us. But, again, this is just some of the, you know, latest examples of the brute force unleashed by Hurricane Ian. And, of course, it's backed up some traffic here and the cars are now coming through again. But, Nadia Romero, let me go back to you and ask you a bit more about your interview with Governor DeSantis. Because one of the other questions that you asked, and I thought it was an important one, is what is the message to people in this area who are wondering about relatives, who are wondering about the missing? You know, they're very reluctant to get into these questions about whether or not the number of dead will go higher, and whether we are dealing with a situation right now where there are just missing people unaccounted for. And I — and I know he talked to you about that. What were your thoughts on that?

ROMERO: Yes, Jim, he basically said that, listen, this was a storm of epic magnitude. Even here in Desoto County here in Arcadia, this is what people are calling historic flooding blocking this highway. And he says that, basically, they're going to door-to-door searching for people. They're trying to get people in contact with their loved ones. And they're trying to get those cell towers up. They're trying to make sure that people can call folks, and let them know that they're okay. But it wasn't a clear answer as to what I asked him. I said, what would you say to someone grieving right now, because they haven't been able to speak to their loved ones since the storm hit on Wednesday? We're talking day four. So, imagine four days without speaking to your spouse, speaking to a relative, your mother, your kids, your grandparents. And he says, we're working on it. We're working on it. This has been a massive storm, almost a category five. We're getting there. Well, on day four, with people who don't have power, people who are struggling to have food and water, pampers, basic necessities, and not being able to use their cells, it is lagging on for many people who are in pain and who are suffering, Jim.

ACOSTA: And you were just mentioning, a few moments ago, that the governor was hopping on a boat to go look at some of the — these hard-hit areas. Where are those areas that he's heading off to? I guess it's going to be some of these areas where you have to travel by boat now. And we've been emphasizing this to the viewers at home. There are areas of this — of this region that are just cut off right now, because of all the storm damage. And it sounds like the governor is heading in that direction.

ROMERO: Yes, Jim, I really look at this storm as a two-fold problem. You have the issue where you are, in Fort Myers and Naples, where there's just destruction. And on those barrier islands where people lost everything. And we're seeing the number of dead rise day by day by day and then, you have places like where I am in Arcadia, Florida which is kind of in between Sarasota and Fort Myers. And this is low-lying areas, swampy areas. It generally floods here, but not like what we're seeing here on Highway 70 and so, all of these areas are used to having a bit of flooding. They expect that. But they're not used to being completely cut off from the rest of humanity and society. On this side of the highway is where a lot of people live. There's a mobile home park behind me. If you look over here, that's where the town is. That's where the gas station is and the Wal-Mart. So, that's where the governor is likely going to be headed. We know that

two personnel from FEMA are on — are here as well. We spoke with a local man who is going to be taking them by boat to go door by door to check on folks. It is a painstakingly slow process as government officials make their way here. And there seems to be a lot of confusion and a lot of disorganization as well, Jim.

ACOSTA: Nadia Romero, thank you so much for that report. We appreciate it. Terrific work, as always.