PASSENGER EMERGENCY SERVICES DURING ATLANTIC HURRICANE SEASON

News / Airlines



Hurricane season in the Americas is set to once again cause disruption and put lives at risk. According to the hurricane forecasting team at Colorado State, this season is likely to be similar in intensity to 2024, one of the worst seasons on record. They predict there will be 4 major hurricanes this season, and 9 in total. This means the services of air charter specialist Chapman Freeborn, and its specialist Aviation Emergency Services team, may well be called into action.

Chapman Freeborn is one of the world's leading providers of emergency and humanitarian aviation services. When hurricanes make landfall, they pose significant threats and present major dangers for people and infrastructure. High winds, storm surges and flooding can pose risk to human life and disable critical infrastructure, leading to knock-on problems that include black outs and shortages of food and medical supplies. Because road and rail infrastructure are often damaged, or travel on them is slow, aviation services are sometimes the only safe and fast way to access hurricane-hit areas.

Chapman Freeborn has over 50 years' experience providing global air charters, including pre-

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planned and rapid response evacuations and charters during emergencies and humanitarian crises.Chapman Freeborn's Passenger team often coordinates dual-use missions. During the Atlantic hurricane season, Chapman Freeborn can rapidly mobilize aircraft and crew to run passenger transport or evacuation missions. Providing this level of responsiveness requires careful pre-planning and full readiness by the Chapman Freeborn team. Chapman Freeborn's AES team is continually finding ways to improve its readiness, including updating its operations technology stack.

Aniko Mersek, Senior Vice President of Sales, Americas at Chapman Freeborn commented: "Over this period, we have been able to deploy many time-sensitive charters for evacuation and aid all over the globe. Once again, we are ready and prepared for the Next Atlantic hurricane season. Our passenger division focuses on getting people out of harm’s way and to safety as quickly as possible, along with bringing in specialists who may be needed. For example, a client might use us to evacuate tourists stranded on a Caribbean island. On the other hand, we might be employed by a government agency or NGO to bring in specialists like search and rescue teams, engineers and medical workers, who can help bring the situation on the ground under control in the immediate aftermath of a hurricane. In all cases, time is of the essence and every minute matters.

We might have medical teams, humanitarian responders and critical aid flying alongside essential supplies. Flexibility and immediate response is key during these complex emergency charters. It is our job as aviation advisors and mission planners to ensure our charter solutions are aligned with the often complex logistical needs of our partners. Therefore, we maintain strong relationships with the Federal Emergency Management Association (FEMA), private security providers, corporate risk teams, and all our suppliers. Having long-term, trust-based relationships makes fast approvals and clear communication easier, and both are critical during rapid hurricane responses.

In many cases, we are able to confirm a request in a couple hours or less. In previous years we have arranged for personnel to be sent to the east coast to help out in the front lines in terms of power outages. We have also been able to arrange evacuation from many global natural disasters in a short time window. Each year, we assess high-risk regions and position our teams and aircraft partners for rapid response. With our global reach, we have access to a significantly large pool of vetted suppliers and aircraft," continues Mersek. "We go over our emergency protocols, make standby arrangements, and we ensure that there is 24/7 coverage. During peak months, we are sure to always be tracking the latest weather developments, especially in high-risk regions. With our global reach, we have access to many aircrafts."

"This year, we have integrated faster aircraft availability mapping tools into our operations platform and added real-time weather overlays. These tools will help us to respond in minutes, not hours. They will also support us in making smarter routing decisions in unpredictable and evolving conditions."

This advanced technology is paired with extensive know-how and years of experience flying evacuation and passenger transport missions. Chapman Freeborn's global disaster relief work has seen it fly passenger and cargo charters to remote and challenging locations including Pakistan, Haiti, Nepal, Yemen, Darfur, South Sudan and the Democratic Republic of Congo. "In our over 50 years in business, we have been able to deploy many time-sensitive charters for evacuations and aid missions all over the world," explains Aniko. "We did this during Hurricane Ian in 2022, for example."

Hurricane Ian was the 5th strongest hurricane on record to make landfall on the mainland USA and brought catastrophic storm surges and high winds. "We arranged urgent passenger flights out of Florida for executives, diplomats and medical patients," explains Mersek. "In some cases,

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airports were set to close within hours of our charters. We had to coordinate landing slots, customs, and handling services, and to do this all in record time."

As the evacuation mission during Hurricane Ian indicates, there are a range of challenges to successfully executing these missions. "The greatest of these challenges are access and timing," comments Aniko. "Airports close at short notice and there is airspace congestion. At the same time there is high demand for evacuation or repatriation."

Under these conditions, a delicate balancing act is required between, on the one hand, acting quickly and decisively, and on the other, ensuring personnel and clients are kept safe. If in doubt, it is clear where Chapman Freeborn's priorities lie. "Safety is our prime concern," says Aniko.

Having these plans in place is one thing. Having the mental preparedness to execute them is another. According to Aniko, there is an ongoing focus on preparing the Passenger team mentally for the stresses and intensity of hurricane season. "We are always having discussions," she explains. "There is regular training, and we can always count on our experienced leadership to provide support."

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