

The Hurricane Katrina Aftermath

By Rep. Neil Abercrombie

I have witnessed destruction before, some caused by humankind and some by nature. But nothing I've seen prepared me for the scale of devastation in New Orleans and along the Gulf Coast of Mississippi. It looked like a neutron bomb had detonated, leaving the shells of dwellings standing in forlorn rows, virtually devoid of human presence.

One year after Hurricane Katrina, the area remains a terrible, twisted portrait of lives and families and whole communities washed away; home by home, block by block, neighborhood by neighborhood. One year after President Bush viewed the destruction from 40-thousand feet as he flew back to Washington from his vacation; one year after he vowed—"We will do what it takes," promises of timely federal assistance to help the people of the region rebuild are as empty as the endless square miles where homes and businesses once stood.

Twenty five of my Congressional colleagues and I spent two full days on a battlefield in the war between the Bush Administration and America's middle class. Make no mistake: post-Katrina is class warfare with a vengeance. Black or White doesn't matter. The Bush Administration is an equal opportunity purveyor of indifference.

Infrastructure and Public Services

The City of New Orleans is still struggling to provide basic municipal services. Nearly 60 percent of homes and businesses still have no electricity, heating gas or a dependable supply of potable water. In fact, the lower 9th Ward has been without safe drinking water since Katrina struck. New Orleans neighborhoods had to wait 11 months for mail delivery. Major traffic arteries critical to Louisiana and the nation still suffer from major delays in reconstruction.

Housing

Hurricanes Katrina and Rita created the greatest housing crisis in our nation since the Great Depression— more than 650,000 people displaced. Only 35 percent of New Orleans' housing units are occupied according to a recent city estimate, and thousands of homes will have to be razed. The Mississippi Gulf Coast has vast landscapes that were once neighborhoods—but the houses have vanished. Driveway after driveway leads to an empty lot. Homeowners have become slab owners.

Rather than providing housing vouchers that quickly and effectively provided emergency shelter in previous disasters, FEMA threw together a \$10 billion housing program that wasted vast sums of money and left thousands of victims without a roof over their heads. FEMA spent \$860 million to buy 20-thousand trailers, nearly half of them still parked at an airfield in Arkansas, with a \$250,000 a month storage bill. Yet, 7,500 families in New Orleans alone are still waiting for trailers.

Health Care

There are shortages of doctors, nurses, and hospital beds, and medical costs are rising to staggering levels. Depression and mental health challenges, as well as physical injuries, are rampant. Yet, in New Orleans Parish, only three of ten hospitals have re-opened, leaving the most vulnerable—the uninsured—with even fewer options for care. New Orleans may have lost as many as half its physicians. Local health care providers are also short nearly 1,000 nurses. The lack of hospital facilities further strains paramedics, already working 80-hour weeks.

Small Business And Government Contracting

One year after Hurricane Katrina, 80 percent of the small business owners with approved Katrina loans from the U.S. Small Business Administration are still waiting for the funds. Congressional hearings into FEMA's contracting procedures have found massive fraud, mismanagement and gross incompetence; The ten largest contracts were no-bid and went to politically connected firms from outside the Gulf Coast region. Those same firms are now being audited by the Department of Homeland Security (DHS) over questions of possible cost inflation and misspending.

Mississippi And Gulf Coast

These same kinds of conditions pervade the Mississippi Gulf Coast, in smaller numbers perhaps, but just as starkly. The refusal of insurance companies to pay claims is now a principal cause of homelessness in the area, and in many cases, insurance company actions are scandalous — even fraudulent. The settlement of many of insurance controversies hinges on whether people's homes were swept away by wind or water. In either case, people are out on the street, but if the insurance company determines that the home was destroyed by water, the policy owner is simply out of luck.

Conclusion

The federal government's treatment of lower income areas in one of the country's most unique and historic cities, and nearly all the Mississippi Gulf Coast region, are a national disgrace. Yet, beyond the Gulf Coast, there is no outrage.

The Army Corps of Engineers has only begun to raise sinking levees and deal with unfinished hurricane protection and flood prevention projects. But, they're only rebuilding the levees to withstand a Category 3 storm, Katrina's level. Prudent planning and common sense would dictate that they be raised to Category 5 levels.

DHS waited eight months to even begin a review of its response to Hurricane Katrina, and now three months later, it refuses to make the results public.

Congress has been a mute witness, forsaking once again its Constitutional oversight responsibilities. But, one year after the most destructive natural catastrophe to strike the United States, the "federal response" is still not effective. It is high time the Legislative Branch got engaged.

1. FEMA must be restored to independence from DHS, with a legislative mandate to rebuild now.
2. Hospital and community clinic construction must begin now. Non-profit health and human service agencies need immediate funding and contractual support.
3. Legislative action to cut through the insurance standoff over availability and cost in New Orleans, and more particularly, on the Mississippi Gulf Coast, must be taken now.

4. DHS has failed miserably to coordinate hurricane evacuation and emergency communication capacity. A desperate lack of emergency services leaves an already vulnerable and battered city and Gulf Coast even further in harm's way. This must be remedied now.

History will judge the Bush Administration. The Pentagon has just announced a new czar for infrastructure construction in Iraq. The American people should demand that the federal government's post-Katrina priorities reflect an equal and urgent commitment to the infrastructure of the United States.