

Bush rules out significant federal aid to hurricane victims

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Only hours after reports that the death toll from Hurricane Katrina may number in the thousands, President Bush delivered perfunctory remarks that offered little except condescending sympathy to the victims of the worst natural disaster in American history.

Nothing in his words, facial expression, or body language indicated that Bush either comprehended or was even concerned about the monumental catastrophe that has struck hundreds of thousands of people in one of the United States' greatest and most historic cities.

Rather, with a smirk on his face, he allowed that "the days seem awfully dark for those affected"—a phrase that could only have been uttered in these terrible circumstances by someone who did not count himself among those unfortunates. This from the President of the United States!

And yet, this was not merely a poor choice of words. For the Bush administration, the tragedy of New Orleans is not particularly important and requires no major effort on the part of the United States.

In a brief nine-minute speech, Bush made no statement committing the federal government to a significant or sustained effort to aid the citizens of New Orleans and other areas that have been shattered by the hurricane.

The president said he had instructed his cabinet "to work closely with state and local officials, as well as with the private sector, to ensure that we're helping, not hindering, recovery efforts."

In the course of his brief remarks, he repeated multiple times that the federal government would be working with "local officials." The government would be "assisting local officials in New Orleans" to evacuate remaining citizens; the Coast Guard was "working alongside local officials, local assets" to conduct search and rescue missions; the National Guard would "assist governors and local officials" with disaster response efforts; the cabinet would "work with local folks, local officials, to develop a comprehensive strategy to rebuild the communities affected."

The process of recovery, Bush said, would take "years." This is not a timetable that indicates any exceptional level of

urgency.

This language was chosen by Bush's handlers to convey a definite message: the administration will not allow the disaster to entangle the federal government in significant financial commitments.

Beyond the most immediate and basic rescue efforts, the immense human problems arising from the hurricane will be left largely in the hands of local authorities, who have no access to the tens of billions of dollars required to meet the needs of those affected, particularly in New Orleans.

Bush avoided any concrete commitment of financial resources. In the course of his speech, money was mentioned only once, at the end, when he declared, "At this stage in the recovery efforts, it's important for those who want to contribute, to contribute cash." He expressed thanks to "the American Red Cross and the Salvation Army and the Catholic Charities, and all other members of the armies of compassion."

The meaning of these words is clear: relief efforts will be organized through private charities and religious institutions, just as the administration has sought to promote "faith-based" initiatives to replace government guaranteed social welfare programs. The American Red Cross hopes to raise \$135 million to provide hurricane relief, a figure that is dwarfed by estimated damage—much of it uninsured—in the tens of billions of dollars.

Bush waited more than two days before reacting to the hurricane. He has so far refused to visit the region. Instead, he used Air Force One for a stunt, evidently meant to convey compassion and concern, to fly over the area so he could see "how devastating the sights were."

For days, the entire country has focused with growing horror on the utter destruction caused by the hurricane, but Bush, in his demeanor, tone and actions, cannot help but convey a sense of indifference. Nothing in the way he spoke on Wednesday gave any indication that he was speaking about one of the worst catastrophes ever to hit the American people.

Bush made clear that he would do nothing to halt brazen

price-gouging by the energy industry, which has seized on the disaster to hike up gasoline prices all across the country, boosting already swollen corporate profits. Gas prices were raised literally overnight anywhere from 30 to 75 cents a gallon, and are now above \$3 in most of the country. There is talk of gasoline soaring toward \$5 a gallon in the coming weeks or months.

This is placing new strains on the American population, which has already been hard hit by a combination of stagnating wages and accelerating inflation. But Bush merely declared piously that “our citizens must understand this storm has disrupted the capacity to make gasoline and distribute gasoline.”

In other words, no serious measures will be taken to stop wild profiteering by Bush’s former business associates and cronies in the oil industry.

Against the background of the catastrophe that has struck the southern states, the immense loss of life and terrible suffering, Bush’s response reflects the callous indifference to human life that is a hallmark of his administration. Even as the White House, with the support of the Democratic Party, squanders nearly \$6 billion a month on a war to subjugate the people of Iraq and grab control of the country’s oil—with the toll in Iraqi and American deaths rising every day—it has no interest in providing the resources necessary to address the crisis in Louisiana.

New Orleans is drowning: the water level rising to 15 or 20 feet in some areas. Almost the entire metropolitan area, once home to over one million people, is underwater. Storm surges caused by the hurricane simply overpowered the inadequate system of levees and pumps.

On Wednesday, the city’s mayor warned that the number of people killed in New Orleans could number in the thousands. Hundreds more have been killed in Mississippi and Alabama.

Tens of thousands remain trapped in New Orleans, hemmed in by the flood waters surrounding houses, apartment buildings and hospitals.

Homes numbering in the tens of thousands have been destroyed or damaged beyond repair. A million people have been turned into refugees, unable to return home for weeks or months, if ever. These individuals have no source of income.

New Orleans is a flooded plain resembling the topography prior to its settlement in 1718. As the New Orleans *Times-Picayune* wrote on Wednesday, “the only dry land was a narrow band from the French Quarter and parts of Uptown, the same small strip that was settled by [Jean-Baptiste Le Moyne de] Bienville amid the swamps... With solid water from the lake to the French Quarter, the inundation and depopulation of an entire American city was at hand.”

This disaster requires the immediate commitment of tens of billions of dollars to meet the needs for rescue operations and the care, housing and feeding of the displaced and dispossessed, and the mammoth challenges of rebuilding and recovery. The people who, through no fault of their own, have lost loved ones, homes, employment and a lifetime’s worth of belongings, must be made whole.

The utter lack of preparation for the hurricane and the gross inadequacy of the New Orleans’ levee system constitute an indictment of a social and economic system—capitalism—which subordinates all human needs to the requirements of corporate profit and the accumulation of personal wealth.

The archaic and reactionary economic principles which left New Orleans defenseless—and which are being upheld by Bush, regardless of the human consequences—must not be allowed to dictate how the catastrophe will be dealt with.

Working people should demand the organization of a massive national relief effort, utilizing all necessary resources, to rebuild the devastated areas and restore the lives of the survivors.

Those who are now refugees require an influx of funds to secure shelter, food and other necessities until they are able to relocate and stabilize their living conditions.

People who have lost their homes and their possessions must be provided with the resources they need to relocate, rebuild, and, so far as possible, recover fully from the disaster that has befallen them.

The rebuilding New Orleans will be an enormous task, but it is one that can and must be carried out. Not only must homes and buildings be rebuilt, restored or replaced, but a new and much improved levee system must be put in place, and serious efforts undertaken to implement a longer-term response to the hurricane threat.



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