

Bush postures while hurricane death toll skyrockets

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While President George W. Bush made a show of sympathy and concern for the victims of Hurricane Katrina, in a day of stage-managed public relations appearances in Alabama, Mississippi and Louisiana, the death toll from the worst natural disaster in US history soared. In Mississippi alone, some 180 bodies have been identified, with uncounted hundreds still to be recovered in the rubble. In New Orleans, the death toll is likely to reach many thousands, and no one has even begun to count.

All of Bush's appearances were made under heavy security to protect the president from victims of the hurricane angry over the long delay in any significant government assistance. In Alabama he met only with the Republican governors of Mississippi and Alabama, and a group of uniformed rescue workers. In Biloxi, Mississippi, Bush walked a few yards through the zone of total destruction inflicted by the hurricane's storm surge and hugged several survivors for the television cameras. In New Orleans, however, the epicenter of the disaster, Bush had no contact with the public, flying over downtown in a helicopter and then appearing with a group of Louisiana politicians, Democrats and Republicans, at the New Orleans International Airport.

At the airport, Bush's perfunctory comments to the press added insult to injury. He said that New Orleans would rise again, adding, "I'm not going to forget what I've seen. I understand the devastation requires more than one day's attention." Earlier in the day, asked how the richest country on earth could so fail to meet the basic needs of its people, Bush replied, "I am satisfied with the response. I am not satisfied with all the results."

Congress passed a \$10.5 billion disaster aid package Friday, which Bush was to sign into law when he returned to Washington. The bill, devised by Vice President Richard Cheney and congressional Republican leaders, covers only emergency relief provided by the Federal

Emergency Management Agency and the Department of Defense. There is nothing in the bill for the rebuilding of any of the storm-devastated region, an area of more than 90,000 square miles, the size of Great Britain.

While Bush was conducting his tour, the death toll in New Orleans continued to mount rapidly. Mass evacuations have begun at the Louisiana Superdome, the largest emergency shelter for displaced people, after the arrival of a huge National Guard convoy escorting trucks loaded with food and water and hundreds of buses. But the buses dumped many of the refugees only a few miles away, at a cluster of overpasses on Interstate 10 where thousands of homeless people were gathered in the broiling sun. At least a half dozen deaths were reported among the overpass refugees.

Dozens more deaths took place at the city's hospitals, where hundreds of the sickest and weakest patients were still awaiting evacuation. At Charity Hospital, the city's largest public hospital, so many have died that the flooded morgue was full, and bodies were stacked in a stairwell or simply left in hallways and rooms. The hospital's administrator said that doctors, nurses and other staff were subsisting on intravenous sugar solutions, normally given to patients, because of the lack of safe drinking water and food.

A temporary triage station set up at the airport—only a few hundred yards from Bush's press appearance—was handling a staggering 800 people an hour throughout Friday. Many more deaths were reported there.

In one incident, reported by the *New Orleans Times-Picayune*, up to 100 people died at the Chalmette Slip, among a huge crowd of as many as 1,500 waiting to be ferried up the Mississippi River from the flood zone after being rescued from the rooftops of their homes. Most of the deaths were among elderly people and small children suffering from heatstroke and dehydration for lack of fresh drinking water. Democratic Congressman Charlie

Melancon held FEMA responsible for the deaths, saying, “That is where the buck stops.”

Another 200 people were said to be near death at a Salvation Army facility in the flooded city, awaiting rescue. Salvation Army officials said mass casualties would result if the refugees were not rescued immediately. Beyond the downtown area reachable by the news media were the vast working class sections of the city, where thousands of people were plucked from rooftops and attics by helicopters and taken to safety, but thousands more are believed to have been less fortunate.

More deaths took place among the people “saved” from New Orleans. The *Houston Chronicle* reported five deaths Thursday among the thousands displaced to refugee shelters in the Houston area. In an indication of the barbaric conditions prevailing even 350 miles from the flood zone, the newspaper could not give names for any of the victims, only generic descriptions: “a 90-year-old black female from New Orleans who died Thursday in the Reliant Park parking lot,” a “66-year-old white male from Mandeville, La.,” and so on.

The colossal tragedy unfolding in the flood zone has sparked public criticism of the Bush administration, by local officials, the media, and even some figures in the Republican Party.

New Orleans Mayor Ray Nagin, in an interview Thursday night with a local radio station, denounced federal officials, saying, “They don’t have a clue what’s going on down here.” He cited repeated broken promises of massive aid, and related one discussion which reveals the incompetence and narrow-mindedness of the administration response.

“One of the briefings we had, they were talking about getting public school bus drivers to come down here and bus people out here. I’m like, ‘You got to be kidding me. This is a national disaster. Get every doggone Greyhound bus line in the country and get their asses moving to New Orleans.’” It never occurred to the Bush administration representatives that any demand could be made to commandeer the resources of private, profit-making bus companies to deal with the emergency on the Gulf Coast.

Col. Terry Ebbert, director of homeland security for New Orleans, declared, “It’s criminal within the confines of the United States that within one hour of the hurricane they weren’t force-feeding us. It’s like FEMA has never been to a hurricane.”

Editorial columns in the major newspapers and coverage in on the television networks generally took a more critical tone toward the federal performance. The

Washington Post, a slavish supporter of the Iraq war which had previously praised Bush’s response to the hurricane disaster, asked in an editorial Friday, “How could the government have been so unready for a crisis that was so widely predicted? It is simply not true, as Mr. Bush said yesterday, that nobody ‘anticipated the breach of the levees.’ In fact, experts inside and outside of government have issued repeated warnings for years about the city’s unique topography and vulnerability, and those warnings were loudly and prominently echoed by the media both nationally and in Louisiana. How is it possible that city, state and federal authorities lacked an emergency plan that could be quickly activated?”

Even prominent Republicans joined in the criticism. Former House Speaker Newt Gingrich cited the billions spent on homeland defense since the 9/11 terrorist attacks, and asked, “If we can’t respond faster than this to an event we saw coming across the Gulf for days, then why do we think we’re prepared to respond to a nuclear or biological attack?” Congressman Mark Foley of Florida called for Louisiana and Mississippi National Guard units deployed in Iraq to be returned home to assist in recovery efforts. Massachusetts Governor Mitt Romney called the federal response “an embarrassment.”

One political quarter, however, kept a deafening silence: the congressional leadership of the Democratic Party, and prospective presidential candidates like senators Hillary Clinton and John Kerry. Former president Bill Clinton appeared side-by-side with Bush and Bush’s father, former president George H. W. Bush, and agreed to lead charitable fundraising for disaster recovery efforts. Clinton praised the Bush administration’s response to the hurricane, even as hundreds of thousands of people in Louisiana and Mississippi are becoming increasingly angry and frustrated.

Clinton’s actions amount to a declaration of political solidarity between the former leader of the Democrats and the current leader of the Republicans. In the face of a massive social crisis which threatens to undermine the legitimacy of the profit system in the eyes of the American people, the Democrats and Republicans join hands to defend the existing order.



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