Returning to the scene of the crime: Bush visits New Orleans

Jerry Isaacs
10 March 2006

President Bush visited New Orleans Wednesday six months after Hurricane Katrina laid waste to much of the city. The president's appearance was aimed at deflecting criticisms of his administration's inept and indifferent response to the disaster—criticisms that have been revived by the release of evidence that Bush was warned the day before the hurricane hit the city that the levees would not be able to withstand the storm.

Most damning is a video of the Sunday, August 28, teleconference between Bush and other federal authorities as the storm bore down on New Orleans. In it the National Hurricane Center's Max Mayfield tells Bush and others that the levees could be topped, calling it a "very, very grave concern." FEMA chief Michael Brown tells the president Katrina was, "to put it mildly, the big one."

Bush—who was vacationing at his Crawford ranch—asked no questions and left before the teleconference ended. The next day, Monday, August 29, shortly after the storm's landfall, the president embarked on a previously scheduled two-day trip to Arizona and California. Three days later, after Katrina destroyed much of the city, President Bush appeared on television September 1, declaring, "I don't think anybody anticipated the breach of the levees."

Despite the hopes of Bush's handlers that the trip might shore up his record-low approval ratings, the president's visit only reinforced the widely held perception that from the beginning the president has basically been disinterested about the fate of tens of thousands of working people who were the victims of last summer's disaster. A recent *Washington Post* poll showed more than six out of ten Americans disapprove of the way Bush handled Katrina.

Following a helicopter tour of the area the president's motorcade stopped in the Lower 9th Ward—the impoverished and largely minority neighborhood that was devastated by floodwaters when the city's levees broke. Standing amidst the wreckage of hundreds of homes Bush declared that great "progress" had been made in rebuilding the city and then suggested that the remaining piles of smashed houses and debris were chiefly the responsibility of displaced homeowners who had failed to give authorities permission to demolish their homes and haul away what remained of their wrecked belongings.

Bush claimed his administration was doing everything to provide assistance to those who lost their homes. He referred to his request for $4.2 billion in housing assistance that had still not been approved by Congress. Representatives of several Gulf States are still competing for a piece of the woefully inadequate sum, while a large section of the Republican Party, in particular, opposes in principle any significant public spending. One Republican Senator, Christopher Bond of Missouri, opposed any additional money for the recovery, saying "planning and accountability" was needed, "not a request for a higher bar tab."

Bush said the levees being rebuilt by the Army Corps of Engineers would be ready for the new hurricane season and would "equal or better than what they were before Katrina." Even if this were true—and there is more than a little doubt—it would be cold comfort for anyone considering rebuilding their home, given the fact that the old levees were only designed for a "standard" hurricane, not the most severe.

According to the *Los Angeles Times*, an investigation by the National Science Foundation has found evidence that the levees protecting St. Bernard Parish might have failed before the full brunt of Katrina struck the coastline, the result of waves pounding the weak sandy fill material in the levees. Until now, it was thought those levees failed because the surge ran over their tops, the newspaper reported.

The scientific experts studying why the levees broke have accused the Army Corps of Engineers with ignoring

© World Socialist Web Site

their findings and proceeding to repair the levees with the same inferior materials. In a letter to the Corps commander made public the day before Bush's trip, Raymond B. Seed, a University of California Berkeley professor heading up a National Science Foundation investigation, said the Army was using weak sand, the consistency of "toothpaste," which would quickly erode in storms, to rebuild about 12 miles of damaged levees.

In a radio interview, Berkeley scientist Robert Bea denounced the Corps decision to cover the levees with a coat of clay instead of reinforcing them with concrete, heavy rocks and other materials, a safety feature known as armoring. The current plan, Bea said, was like "putting frosting on a weak cake," saying the thin layer of clay would crack apart as it dried.

Bea also denounced the rush to complete the repairs before hurricane season begins in June. "To think that we can get it done by the first of June in 2006, I think is potentially seriously misleading people into this false sense of confidence regarding the level of protection that they've actually got. My personal opinion is that the level of protection is not adequate to confront the kinds of severe storms that can turn this area back into a soup bowl filled with water and people's lives."

With Louisiana Governor Kathleen Blanco and New Orleans Mayor Ray Nagin at his side Bush said the rebuilding of the levees were part of the commitment by government authorities to provide whatever assistance was necessary to give displaced city residents the "confidence and the help necessary so that people...can come home."

In fact tens of billions of dollars promised for the recovery have never reached the needy. Far from providing the assistance necessary to bring residents back to the city the Bush administration and local authorities have pursued policies that have produced the opposite result. This is not only a result of neglect but, no doubt, design. In the days following the hurricane there was no lack of reactionary statements by wealthy New Orleans businessmen, right-wing politicians and news commentators suggesting that the city might be better off—with less crime, teenage pregnancies, and decaying schools—if many of the poorest residents never returned.

Since the August 29 hurricane, which drove some 400,000 people out of the city, more than two-thirds of the former residents have not returned. Interviews conducted with many of the refugees of the storm cite the lack of jobs, housing and any serious commitment to help them by the government as the main reasons they have not returned. Some experts predict as many as half of the people displaced from New Orleans may never return.

Three weeks ago the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) cut off funding for the hotel rooms used by thousands of hurricane survivors in Louisiana, Texas, Mississippi and other states, forcing them either to leave their temporary homes or pay for the hotel rooms. Most of the 8,000 individuals fortunate to enough to have received extensions will be evicted by March 15.

Much of New Orleans—one of the country's major cultural and economic centers—remains in shambles six months after Hurricane Katrina. "It's a shame to call this America," Briscoe Brazella told Reuters News Service, as he was pulling waterlogged belongings from his home in the Lower 9th Ward. "If this was America as God intended ... every home here would just about be rebuilt by now."

The dead bodies of the storm's victims continue to be found in the city, although their identification has been made more difficult by the recent closing of the Federal Emergency Management Agency's morgue. To date the bodies of 1,300 victims in the Gulf States have been recovered, including nearly 1,100 in Louisiana. Some 2,000 residents remain unaccounted for. The Louisiana medical examiner said the number of dead may never be known because many victims were probably washed into the Gulf of Mexico, Lake Pontchartrain, or alligator-infested swamps, drowned when their fishing boats sank, or were buried under crushed homes.

The human tragedy produced by Hurricane Katrina was in large measure preventable. It is a clear that the Bush administration ignored dire warnings before the storm hit and had nothing in place to deal with a disaster—even though the potential for levee failure and catastrophic flooding in New Orleans had long been predicted. The response of both the Democratic and Republican parties in the six months since the disaster only underscores the fact that the social needs of the vast majority of the population are incompatible with a government whose major preoccupation is securing the interests of the wealthy elite.

To contact the WSWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact

© World Socialist Web Site