

## Hurricane KATRINA

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First, that in spite of the fact that it had been known for years that the levees which protect New Orleans would be inadequate in the event of a severe storm, and in spite of the recommendations of the US corps of army engineers (responsible for maintaining the levees) that they needed improvement, there was actually a recent reduction in funding. In other words, nothing has been done to deal with a catastrophe waiting to happen (see for example <http://www.guardian.co.uk/usa/story/0,12271,1560351,00.html>)

Secondly, although the Mayor of New Orleans issued an 'order' to evacuate the city several days before the hurricane actually hit, no information appeared to be given to people about where they should go or what they should take with them. Nor was there any mechanism for checking that people had obeyed the order, or helping those who would have found it difficult because of age, infirmity or poverty (contrary to popular opinion, not every American has a car) to do so.

Thirdly, once the worst had happened, there appeared to be no contingency plans in place. The National Guard was only sent in today, and their primary role seems to be to maintain law and order (which had clearly broken down). Even CNN yesterday was reporting that 'none seems to be in charge'.

In a state which has over the last few years taken unprecedented measures and spent unprecedented amounts of money on 'Homeland Security', such situations are incredible, made even more so by the fact that the Department of Homeland Security is responsible not only for dealing with terrorism, but also with natural disasters.

The pictures show clearly that, as usual in such situations, it is the poorest and most vulnerable people who are hardest hit. Where are people to go who cannot afford hotels? How are they to go anywhere without transport? People are now dying from lack of food, water and sanitation. What is to happen to those whose entire property has been lost?

The deplorable situation in the Gulf contrasts sharply with parallel coverage by the BBC (I have not seen it on any US TV networks) of the threatened hurricane in the area of Taiwan and Japan. Here we see people being mobilised, buses organised to move people in large numbers – in other words, there are plans in place and they are put into operation. Similarly, we know that of all the countries in the Gulf of Mexico which are vulnerable to hurricanes, it is Cuba which has the lowest death rate. Why? Because they have well worked out evacuation plans, they have shelters for people. It seems the US needs to learn much from that, and to do so urgently. This year's hurricane season in the Gulf of Mexico has only just begun.