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HOMELAND SECURITY COMMITTEE HOLDS KATRINA HEARING, RECEIVES MOVING TESTIMONY FROM FEMA OFFICIAL WHO WAS IN NEW ORLEANS DURING STORM

WASHINGTON, DC—As part of the Homeland Security and Governmental Affairs Committee's investigation into the preparation for and response to Hurricane Katrina, Chairman Susan Collins and Ranking Member Joseph Lieberman today held a hearing where they heard testimony from the first FEMA official in New Orleans before Hurricane Katrina hit the Gulf Coast. Marty Bahamonde, a 12-year career FEMA employee, was in New Orleans before, during, and after the Hurricane and spent two nights in the Superdome along

with evacuees. He provided testimony offering a first-hand account of the horrible conditions in the Superdome, as well as information about his communications between FEMA officials in Washington and outside of New Orleans.

“Senator Lieberman and I first met Mr. Bahamonde during our tour of the Gulf States last month. His assessment of the response to Katrina at all levels of government is sobering. The information that he has provided to the Committee describes a complete disconnect between senior officials and the reality of the situation on the ground. This information will help the committee probe many troubling questions such as how exactly did the local, state, and federal governments react during the 16 hours between the report of the break in the levee and the flood waters in the Superdome,” said Senator Collins. “We are now following the trail that Mr. Bahamonde’s information has blazed.”

Senator Lieberman added, “Marty Bahamonde’s actions in New Orleans are to be honored. His story is powerful, moving, and troubling, and it raises serious questions that this committee must answer. For example, FEMA had days of notice of Katrina’s ferocity and first hand reports from Mr. Bahamonde about terrible conditions at the Superdome before the storm. So why did it take until Tuesday—a full day after the storm—for FEMA to send emergency response teams to the city?” Senator Lieberman added, “This is among central questions that our committee must answer.”

Hearing exhibits include photographs taken by Bahamonde hours after the Hurricane hit New Orleans, which clearly showed a break in the 17th Street Canal levy, and email communications between Bahamonde and other FEMA officials, including former Director Michael Brown . The emails and his testimony illustrate a clear disconnect between what Bahamonde was reporting and the action taken by government officials.

Today’s hearing marked the fourth Hurricane Katrina hearing held by the Committee in conjunction with the investigation.