

WEDNESDAY, FEBRUARY 1, 2006

NEW ORLEANS MAYOR TESTIFIES AT HEARING TO EXAMINE PUBLIC OFFICIALS' RESPONSIBILITIES & RESPONSE TO KATRINA

Senators Susan Collins (R-ME) and Joseph Lieberman (D-CT), the Chairman and Ranking Member respectively of the Senate Homeland Security and Governmental Affairs Committee, today held a hearing to examine the roles, responsibilities, and actions of public officials in preparing for and managing the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina. New Orleans Mayor Ray Nagin testified at today's hearing. In response to questioning, Mayor Nagin stated that the city still faces significant challenges to recovery and in its current state is not prepared for the 2006 hurricane season. Today's session was the 14th in a series of ongoing hearings that are part of the Committee's investigation into the preparation for and response to Hurricane Katrina by all levels of government.

The Committee questioned Mayor Nagin about the city's responsibilities in preparing for and responding to the hurricane and the adequacy of state and federal support. The Committee focused on questions that included: whether the resources the city devoted to emergency preparedness prior to Katrina matched the known risks; why the Mayor did not issue a mandatory evacuation order earlier than the day before the storm; why the Mayor opened the Convention Center to thousands of displaced residents without ensuring that

food and water would be provided to them; whether the city had an effective emergency command and control structure; whether plans for pre-landfall evacuation of people without vehicles were made and how well those plans were understood and carried out; why plans for post-landfall care or evacuation of people left in the city were incomplete; and what the city is doing to improve its emergency planning and response system.

“Citizens expected concerted, coordinated action. For the most part, they got confusion, conflict, and chaos,” said Senator Collins. “This crisis displayed failures of leadership, planning, preparation, and execution at all levels of government. We must take to heart the lessons that will better protect our citizens when disaster strikes.”

“The only tragedy greater than what happened to New Orleans would be to learn nothing and watch it all happen again when the next disaster hits ,” Senator Lieberman said. “Hurricane season is now just four months away. Nature takes no sabbaticals. And time is not our friend. We must investigate, educate, and reform with a sense of urgency missing in the years, months, and days before Katrina.”

The Committee released documents that show Mayor Nagin was aware there no supplies of food or water available at the Convention Center following his decision to open that site for people stranded by Hurricane Katrina. The Committee also released documents that show the federal government had been aware for years of the crisis New Orleans would face if a Category 3 hurricane struck, that 100,000 New Orleanians had no means to evacuate and that the city didn’t have the resources to evacuate them.

Other witnesses who testified at today’s hearing were: Brigadier General Mark A. Graham, Deputy Commanding General, Fifth U.S. Army; Vince Pearce, National Response Program Manager, U.S. Department of Transportation; and Dwight Brashear, Chief Executive Officer and General Manager, Capital Area Transit System, Baton Rouge, Louisiana.