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Press Briefing on Gulf Coast Rebuilding

Warren Easton Senior High School
New Orleans, Louisiana

 [In Focus: Hurricane Katrina](#)

PARTICIPANTS

Don Powell, Federal Coordinator for Gulf Coast Rebuilding
Admiral Thad Allen, Commandant of the Coast Guard

2:00 P.M. CDT

MR. JONES: Okay, everyone, we're going to go ahead and get started. Obviously, with us today is Chairman Powell, who is, as you all know, the Federal Coordinator for Gulf Coast Rebuilding; and Coast Guard Commandant Admiral Thad Allen. They're here to discuss today federal recovery efforts and 2006 hurricane season preparedness.

Chairman Powell is going to begin with a couple minutes of remarks. Then Admiral Allen will, and then we'll turn it over for questions for about a half an hour. And I think we're going to try to wrap things up around 2:45 p.m., because then we have some other appointments to get to today.

So, with that, I'll turn it over to Chairman Powell.

CHAIRMAN POWELL: Thank you.

As you know, we've been traveling with the President for the last couple of days. We've spent time in Mississippi yesterday, and the President had an opportunity to visit with community leaders, elected officials, and made a couple of tours. One was a manufacturing plant in Mississippi; the other was a neighborhood in Biloxi that he had, when he first came down here, had toured, visited with some homeowners and some citizens that day. Then we came over to New Orleans and he, again, met with some elected officials -- parish presidents, the Governor, the Mayor, members of the LRA -- heard from them about some of their issues that they have concern with about rebuilding.

He then toured a couple of -- had a couple of tours this morning. One was a breakfast and visited with some citizens; had another meeting with the Mayor. They went to this school site and had a roundtable with some educators, and talked about public education, about the opportunities there. Then, as you know, he made his speech, and he went to a neighborhood and toured a neighborhood on his way back.

I think it's been a couple of very productive days in that he heard and saw a lot. The same thing is true for me. I'm down here -- I must spend approximately 70 percent of my time. When I come down here and I think about a year, I very quickly reflect upon the magnitude of this terrible storm, and I'm reminded that the Gulf of Mississippi was literally wiped out, and that there was more debris in the three counties in Mississippi, more debris in those three

counties in Mississippi than all of Hurricane Andrew and the World Trade Center combined. And that took two years to clean up.

So people often ask me about the speed of recovery, and I -- there's not a point of reference. I mean, we've never had anything as large as this that we can say, well, here is comparable data. So you say, compared to what? So those three counties in Mississippi, again, more debris than all of Hurricane Andrew and the World Trade Center, and that took two years to clean. When you think and reflect that 1 million 500 thousand people were affected -- that's the city of Philadelphia. That's the city of Phoenix. New Orleans was underwater 57 days, an area that is seven times larger than Manhattan.

So when you think about the size and scope of the storm and reflect on that and the time frame, I think it's important to reflect and look back. I think there's been lots of progress. I come down here and I have points of reference I will look at. I generally come through the same way. I land at the airport, I take the route downtown. When I'm in Mississippi, I usually go along the entire Gulf, and I look for signs of progress. I look for signs of progress. And the first thing I look for, obviously, is debris. And I'm comforted by the fact that 98 percent, almost 100 percent of all the dry debris is gone in this city. I think that's remarkable. And 75 percent of the debris is gone in Louisiana. I, too, think that's very remarkable when you take into consideration the tremendous storm.

Schools are open. Hospitals are open. In New Orleans, I often reflect that if it were a country, Admiral, it's gross national product would be the port, energy, tourism. The port is back Pre-K. More ship calls into port than pre-K. Tonnage is the same. And that's terribly important not only to New Orleans, but it creates, directly or indirectly, 356,000 jobs in America. It touches 33 states, affects 62 percent of all the consumers in America.

Energy -- we saw how important energy was. Twenty-five percent of the oil and gas domestic production comes from this area. It's all up, producing.

Tourism -- 80 percent of the hotels are open; 62 percent of all the restaurants are open. So there's been lots of progress. As the President says, there's a lot more to go, and we're going to continue down the path -- the path of recovery until the job is done.

Thank you.

Admiral.

ADMIRAL ALLEN: Good afternoon. My slant on the trip was slightly different than the Chairman's. On the 5th of September, 2005, at about 10:00 a.m. in the morning, Secretary Chertoff called me in and asked me if I would go down and lead the response effort in New Orleans. By 7:00 p.m. that night, I was in Baton Rouge. And by about 7:00 a.m. in the morning on the 6th of September, I was in New Orleans.

Later that week, on Friday, I relieved Mike Brown as the Principal Federal Official for the response. I was relieved of my Principal Federal Official duties on the 1st of February, and went back to being the Chief of Staff of the Coast Guard, and most recently, following nomination by the President, I was confirmed to be the Commandant of the Coast Guard, which is my job now.

My trip back here with the President was more reflective, to see where we've gone in the last year regarding preparedness for the next hurricane, and kind of assess the situation of our operations down here regarding what the Coast Guard has been doing.

We spent a lot of time with the President in the last two days. We walked the neighborhoods. He was as engaged as he's ever been, talking to individuals, trying to get a sense for, I think, more of the psyche of the people than anything else. He got a lot of feedback from the mayors, the congressional delegations, and the governors about the psychological impact of this that far exceeds maybe the scope of the physical impact that we see and how we need to work through that. And he mentioned that in his remarks today.

I, like Chairman Powell, look for benchmarks when I return here, and I've been back several times since I finished my PFO duties. We flew in by helicopter from Mississippi, went down US 90. It's amazing to see, the shrubbery and the green grass has grown up where there just used to be lots and debris. It almost looks like greenspace over there now. It's almost a surreal effect in Mississippi. The debris is almost gone, as Chairman Powell said. And they're ready to go to work and they are -- and Governor Barbour has got a terrific commission set up over there and they're working very, very hard.

One slight spin for the Coast Guard in all this is, for the first time in our history, we've been mission-assigned by FEMA to do marine debris removal. In this case, we're looking at the Mississippi Sound, the area off the coast, from, roughly, Biloxi down to Waveland and Bay St. Louis. A lot of debris was sucked back into the Gulf, and we are going to be working over the next year to identify obstacles, debris that's under the water, and dealing with contractors to move that out. That will take another year longer than dry debris removal. And, again, this is something that new for the Coast Guard, but we're working very closely with the state of Mississippi.

I was struck in flying in on the helicopter with the President today -- we did a circle around the city before we landed -- at the large amount of construction that's been going on on the levees. Over 300 miles of levee construction has been going on. They've been working feverishly for the last year. The most notable change I saw were the new pumping stations at the mouth of the 17th Street Canal -- and so forth, where those pumping stations have been moved up, together with flood gates. They create a barrier at the mouth of these canals at Lake Pontchartrain, which is the same as they have in Jefferson Parish. And as you know, water coming back into those canals were contributory to the levee failures.

The debris removal in Louisiana is not going as fast as Mississippi because it's a more difficult area to operate in. It's a densely populated city; the structures are different and we don't have, finally, demolition decisions by the city. They're moving forward on that. That will all proceed apace. I think as both the President and Chairman Powell have said, debris kind of paces everything else; you got to get the debris out of the way before you can move on. I think they're poised to release a significant amount of money in terms of reimbursements to homeowners so they can proceed. And I think the flood gates are about ready to open on that.

Just a couple of comments on the response last year and our preparations for this year. I walked into a rather extraordinary circumstance last year on the 5th of September. For a week we had been flowing resources into New Orleans. There were search and rescue teams, disaster medical assist teams; Louisiana Fish and Wildlife had resources in here. One of the problems we had when Katrina came ashore -- and I've said this several times over the last year -- in my view, this was a hybrid event, it was a very devastating hurricane. But when the levees were breached and the city flooded, in what turned out the equivalent of a weapon of mass effect being used on the city of New Orleans without criminality. And it significantly complicated the operation, and basically, we had a loss of continuity of government in the city of New Orleans in terms of having the infrastructure available to receive the resources the federal government was providing and to do something with them. And when I got to New Orleans it was clear that we had resources on the ground, but they weren't being directed in a coherent manner.

I assumed the role as PFO in order to have a more rational approach to that and unify the effort, especially with Lieutenant General Russ Honor 's DOD forces. That was a pretty unusual role for a Principal Federal Official to do. We may never see that again in a natural hurricane -- natural disaster response. But in the situation last year, the situation cried out for unifying the effort here in New Orleans, and I took that on as a major task that I had to do. If you remember, I said I was trying to cut through the red tape and increase the velocity of the response, and specifically referred to unwatering the city, finish up the search and rescue operations, doing it in as such a dignified manner as we could with the remains removal process, doing the block-by-block sweeps of the city, and ultimately establishing a morgue and then doing the family reconciliation that was attendant to that.

I can tell you, moving into this year, our PFOs have never been more prepared. They are pre-assigned for every piece of shoreline on the East Coast that can be impacted by a hurricane. We have trained with our FEMA counterparts. We have conducted drills on evacuation plans. We have pre-deployed to the states and met with the state and local responders, and, as we speak right now, we are prepared and are reacting as necessary in Florida to Hurricane Ernesto.

I think the Coast Guard is a much better agency, being in the Department of Homeland Security with FEMA; and I think FEMA is a much better agency being in the Department of Homeland Security with the United States Coast Guard.

And we'd be happy to take questions.

Q Admiral, can you tell us definitely what the state of the levees is, what category hurricane could it withstand? And how did you get Ernesto to change course? (Laughter.)

ADMIRAL ALLEN: Well, first of all, I would leave the technical answers on the levee performance to the Corps of Engineers. They own that responsibility. But I think the Corps has said on several occasions that the levees are being rebuilt to pre-Katrina authorized levels.

The Corps of Engineers only builds levees as authorized by Congress with funds appropriated, and that is described in the legislation. So the goal for this hurricane season was to build them to pre-Katrina levels, and make sure they had the integrity of those levees to that height. Any further height than that, as I understand it, would be pursuant to a study that's underway right now, and that study is also to include what type of levee protection would be needed to raise it in two variants. One would be to the 100-year flood plane that's used for determining the National Flood Insurance Program base elevations for FEMA; and secondarily, what it might take to go to a category five storm. But those are studies that are currently underway, they're not finished.

I'd let Chairman Powell offer comment, if he'd like.

CHAIRMAN POWELL: I think you said it well. I think that the Corps has done extraordinary work in a very short period of time. The one thing I would add to what Admiral Allen said is that they repaired all the breaches. They worked on 230 miles of levees, and they are back to pre-Katrina level. We're on our way. We're on our way to -- in the year 2010, having better and stronger levees than we've ever had in New Orleans.

But I would caution to add that, just as we've said before, that an evacuation plan is terribly important and that you cannot protect against all kinds of risk. And it's important that people heed the evacuation plans, listen to the elected officials, and act accordingly. I can't stress that more: Take personal responsibility for those evacuation plans. But the Corps has done unbelievable work.

Q If a storm the size of Katrina were to strike this area again, what would happen?

CHAIRMAN POWELL: If a storm the size of Katrina were to strike this area again, there would be -- that would depend upon the nature and where the storm hit. But should there be overtopping, there very well could be some flooding, but it would not be catastrophic type flooding.

Q The President, in his remarks at the school today, talked about opportunity scholarships just briefly. Can you tell a little bit more about what's in the plan for vouchers and public schools?

CHAIRMAN POWELL: The President obviously has been very excited about what he's seen in New Orleans as it relates to K through 12. The citizens of New Orleans have been committed to making the school system of New Orleans the best in the country, where other parts of the country would aspire to be like New Orleans.

As you know, there's something like 53 schools that will be open, and about 60 percent of those are charter schools. I can't tell you how impressed I am with that component of recovery. And what the President wants to do is look at ways to enhance that commitment by the local people, and thus he described that program this morning.

I think the Secretary of Education -- I was with the Secretary of Education this week. They have committed approximately \$1.8 billion to K through 12 in New Orleans.

I might also quickly add that all of the institutions of higher education, they're all open in New Orleans. Every one of them are open. I think that's remarkable, too, because they -- everyone suffered a substantial amount of physical loss and some other concerns that they had.

Great, we're done. Thank you, very much.

END 2:15 P.M. CDT