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Senate

Statement of Senator Dianne Feinstein

“The Response to Hurricane Katrina”

Mrs. FEINSTEIN: Mr. President, I come to the floor today -- heart-sick -- to speak about the absolute devastation wrought by Hurricane Katrina. This tragedy represents the worst natural disaster in our nation's history.

This hurricane spared nothing. Estimates of damage now run as high as \$200 billion. The cost, in human lives and suffering, is just staggering.

Tragically, it will take weeks and weeks to ascertain the true loss of life. As the recovery proceeds, I pledge to do all in my power to help those in need -- to rebuild cities, communities, and shattered lives and families across the Gulf Coast.

My home state of California knows well the destruction possible from natural disasters. So many times the people of California have been saved by the generosity of the American people.

I have no doubt that the people of my state will now rally to the aid of those in Louisiana, Mississippi, and Alabama. Many already have.

In addition to monetary contributions from residents throughout the state, over 1,500 California first responders are on the scene as well as over 700 California National Guard personnel, 116 California Highway Patrol officers, eight Swiftwater Rescue Teams, eight Urban Search & Rescue Task Forces, and six Disaster Medical Assistance Teams.

On Tuesday, Governor Arnold Schwarzenegger announced that California had accepted a request from FEMA to provide housing and assistance for 1,000 storm victims left homeless by the hurricane. San Diego has made 600 beds available, San Francisco 300, and San Jose 100. And if FEMA asks for more, the state will be ready. Los Angeles has planned accommodations for 2,000 evacuees and Sacramento County is preparing for 300.

Campuses of the University of California and California State University systems as well as private colleges and universities from across the state have opened their doors to college students that were displaced or had their educational plans interrupted by the hurricane.

Hundreds of students have already taken advantage of these opportunities and will be starting classes this fall.

My heart goes out to all those suffering from this catastrophe. I have seen the destruction caused by massive mudslides, major earthquakes, and torrential rains. I have seen the fear and hopelessness that comes when families lose everything except the shirts on their backs. My thoughts and prayers are with those Americans in the pitch dark with no electricity, in shelters with their homes swept away, and with a future that seems without hope.

I'd like to commend all those who have worked literally around the clock in response to the disaster. The emergency responders—from the National Guard and Coast Guard to hospital workers to the local police and fire departments—have been nothing short of heroic. They are risking their lives and deserve our deep gratitude.

The American Red Cross, the Salvation Army, and many other charitable organizations

and religious groups have mobilized thousands of volunteer workers to bring aid and shelter to victims of the devastation.

The American people are already demonstrating their tremendous compassion and magnanimity – contributions exceed \$500 million – with surely much more to come. Nations from around the world have also offered to help. I thank them as well.

But despite the effort and concern of all these individuals, I am shocked at what has gone terribly wrong in preparation for Hurricane Katrina. What we saw in the days following the storm has been a massive failure of government on all levels to anticipate, prepare, and respond. Days before the storm FEMA knew it was coming. It was announced well in advance that Katrina had become a lethal Category 5 storm as it made its way through the Gulf of Mexico.

To see the horrific images of the dead lying in the street unattended, bodies floating aimlessly facedown in the water, and Americans with no choice but to relieve themselves on the field of the Superdome – it boggles the mind that such depraved conditions descended on one of America's great cities.

It was a flat embarrassment to the country. Those who have lost loved ones deserved much better than these appalling conditions.

Senators Collins and Lieberman have launched a Government Affairs Committee oversight investigation to ensure that the requisite support and resources go to those in need. They will also be examining the inadequate preparation and response to this disaster.

Senator Clinton and others have called on President Bush to appoint an independent national commission to review Hurricane Katrina relief efforts modeled after the 9/11 Commission.

I completely support these efforts, and would like to go on record with a few of the serious concerns that I have regarding what has taken place. These are all problems that we must grapple with if we are to truly protect our homeland from disasters of all kinds.

Two days before the storm, a mandatory evacuation order went out for the residents of New Orleans. But didn't federal, state and local authorities know that tens of thousands of city residents lacked the funds and means to depart, and more fundamentally had nowhere to go?

As a result, the poor stayed put: stranded throughout the city, and away from any safe and secure shelter. Clearly there is not an adequate mechanism for removing Americans out of harm's way in the face of a crisis.

Warning systems and evacuation plans, prepositioning of transportation assets and emergency communications

facilities, are all in dire need of an overhaul.

As always in these situations, the first priority is to save lives. Once the storm had passed, emergency responders went to dramatic lengths to save those stranded in houses, in apartments, and on rooftops throughout the region. Through their tireless efforts, thousands have been saved.

But what should have been an immediate and massive delivery of food, water, and medical supplies to evacuees came much too late. Thousands of hurricane victims went for days without anything to eat or drink. Babies went without formula. Diabetics went without insulin. People took refuge on freeways only to bake in the heat without relief or water and nowhere to go.

I realize the unprecedented magnitude of this disaster. But the delay in response was simply inexcusable. It pains me to admit that people died because aid did not arrive fast enough to those in need.

Downtown New Orleans' Charity Hospital went unevacuated for days with no food, clean water, or basic medical supplies. These represent the sickest and neediest of the storm victims and all efforts should have been made for their immediate evacuation – by boat to reach the hospital or at least helicopter airlifts from the roof if possible. Vigilant doctors, nurses, and other hospital workers performed

courageously but did not have the support they needed.

There seemed to be no plan in place for providing shelter once the storm was over. Ad hoc decisions appeared to cause widespread confusion as desperate evacuees did not know where to find basic needs. Rumors swirled of food here, and fuel there, forcing victims to scavenge in search of the basic necessities of life.

As regional evacuation centers filled there was no effective plan for long or even short-term shelter and care of displaced residents. With nowhere for storm victims to go, evacuation centers turned to squalor. Serious reports of abuse and assault have come out of these shelters.

Other cities graciously volunteered to open facilities to evacuees. For that I offer them my sincere gratitude. But now even they have reached capacity – the Houston Astrodome, for example. We were just not prepared to handle an evacuation of this magnitude.

We were quickly and brutally reminded that an effective response to this type of tragedy cannot happen until a reasonably safe situation exists on the ground. This is nothing new. It is a given in these types of situations.

Yet days passed before adequate National Guard troops arrived. Meanwhile, thugs, miscreants and ruthless pillagers terrorized the streets and thwarted rescue and aid.

Command and control breakdowns have been rampant. Throughout the region complaints abound that no one seems to be in charge. This is a recipe for chaos, which only works to hamper relief efforts and put innocent people in serious danger. Again, this points to the fact that we do not have adequate plans and mechanisms for dealing with serious disasters.

Regrettably, I could go on, but the time for dealing with the faults in preparation and response has not yet come. Right now, the victims of Hurricane Katrina need our help. Entire communities have been destroyed. Families have been torn apart. Many are still missing. Tens of thousands remain homeless. We must find a way to help bring some stability and hope back into their lives.

Congress has made a start by keeping FEMA operations running through an immediate \$10.5 billion appropriation last week. And the President has asked for \$51.8 billion more, which Congress will surely approve soon. But even this will not be enough -- we have just begun the effort to rebuild these cities and communities.

This is a process that will take years to accomplish and require a great deal of commitment on our part. I call on all Americans to do what they can to assist in the recovery efforts. There are countless opportunities and help is vitally needed.

As we move forward together as a nation, we also

need to focus on concrete solutions for improving our preparedness for calamities that engulf any part of the country.

In close cooperation with state and federal emergency agencies, each city in this country absolutely must have an effective emergency plan in place.

These plans need to include professional and skilled emergency operations directors, clear lines of authority, practical evacuation strategies, and previously determined command centers that can be up and running on a moment's notice with satellite connections and powered by their own generators.

Key department heads should carry two-way radios with extra battery packs at all times.

The plans also must have mechanisms to immediately call for and facilitate the delivery of food, water, and medical supplies to areas in need.

But it is not enough to just have a plan in place. These plans must be rehearsed and drilled until they become second nature for the public agencies, emergency responders, and communities involved. When disaster strikes, there can be no confusion as to what must happen.

Unfortunately, even when effective and rehearsed plans exist, large-scale catastrophic events such as Hurricane Katrina can quickly overwhelm local jurisdictions.

In these cases, we need a system in place that allows the federal government to come in immediately with the full force of its resources and assume primary responsibility for response and relief.

The U.S. Conference of Mayors should convene a national intercity effort to share information and assist in emergency preparation efforts.

In emergency situations such as this, communications capabilities are essential. Emergency responders must have the equipment that will allow essential communications efforts to continue in case of the major damage to infrastructure we have seen in New Orleans.

Clearly, the Federal Emergency Management Agency needs to change. We need to look at whether the tasks charged to FEMA are too large to be included with 21 other agencies under the Department of Homeland Security.

Let's seriously consider professionalizing FEMA from top to bottom – some have called for the current Director Michael Brown's resignation, whose credentials as an emergency manager have been widely questioned.

FEMA needs to be devoid of political appointees and employ only the highest trained professionals with expertise in transportation, emergency medical aid, communications, and providing federal disaster assistance.

Funds Congress appropriates for FEMA from this point forward ought to be prioritized for disaster preparation, and we need to intensively review programmatic appropriations for the Department of Homeland Security which, some critics point out, has received funds diverted from the levee project in New Orleans.

We have a Strategic Petroleum Reserve, but shouldn't we have a Strategic Food & Water Reserve too, that can, within hours, be airlifted into directly and brutally hit areas such as New Orleans?

We need pre-planned, carefully thought out means for moving National Guardsmen and other military forces and particularly assets, such as high-water vehicles and Chinook transport helicopters, swiftly into place to prevent urban areas from sinking into anarchy – as was so painfully evident at the Convention Center in New Orleans and throughout the city.

The Army Corps of Engineers, the Administration and Congress knew for years about New Orleans' vulnerable topography and the inherent weaknesses of the 350 mile city levee system but limited funding for flood control work nonetheless – why?

The Administration and Congress need to conduct a nationwide assessment to determine the other most vulnerable areas and have federal disaster assistance resources pre-positioned if possible so no time is lost in the

aftermath of another future tragedy.

These are just a few ideas to consider. President Bush was conveniently understating the case last Thursday when he said that federal efforts were “not acceptable”. Americans have an obligation to come together, now, with their resources, money, and can do spirit to save New Orleanians, their great city, and all those suffering down the Gulf Coast.

Nothing less is acceptable.