



(From L to R) People get on a bus from the Superdome; residents are rescued by helicopter; others stay on rooftops with SOS call while hundreds of others wait around the Superdome for evacuation. Alicia Schulz, 94, is wheeled on a hotel luggage cart during evacuation. The National Guard patrols as Louis Jones and Catherine McZeal help each other walk down flooded Poydras Street in New Orleans days after Hurricane Katrina flooded the city. A vast refugee crisis is developing, unbelievably, within US borders, following a mass human exodus from Hurricane Katrina. Grim reality of desperation, deprivation and human agony hit Americans who are used to see those only on their television screens from the world's hotspots.

Global press stunned at hurricane-humbled US

AFP, Paris

The world's press reacted with disbelief yesterday to mayhem overrunning the hurricane disaster zone in the United States, describing the chaos as reminiscent of a Third World crisis and as a humiliating episode for the superpower.

"Here is a superpower that can crush at will a tinpot dictatorship but then becomes so bogged down in the grisly aftermath of war that it finds itself unable to respond to anything like adequately to the plight of tens of thousands of its own citizens engulfed by a natural calamity," said Britain's Daily Mail newspaper.

"President Bush, his ratings already in free-fall, could pay a high price indeed for his military folly," it said.

Gun-toting looters pillaging stores in the streets, bodies floating in the waters, levees unable to hold back the water, and tales of rape and squalor in the main emergency refuge, the New Orleans Superdome, left foreign commentators stunned.

"Young men have not only been looting with impunity but firing on National Guardsmen. And the authorities still have no idea how many people may have died," London's conservative Daily Telegraph said.

"In Louisiana, Mississippi and

Alabama over the past four days, the United States has been struggling to provide the basic necessities of life - food, water and medicine - to the victims of Hurricane Katrina," London's Daily Telegraph said. "Take New Orleans alone. The breached levees remain unrepaired. About 20,000 refugees have been living in appalling squalor in the Superdome sports stadium."

France's Figaro newspaper headlined: "America overwhelmed by catastrophe."

The left-wing Liberation recalled how the Kobe earthquake had humbled a major power.

"But the lesson of New Orleans is even darker," it said.

"A modern city that sinks under the waters and into anarchy is a cruel spectacle for an absolute champion of security like (US President George W.) Bush, who incidentally seems out of his depth," it said.

An apparent lack of preparation for the crisis staggered many papers.

"What really stands out is the clear insufficient investment and contingency measures to protect the population of the Mississippi Delta from a forecast disaster," the paper said.

In Portugal the right-leaning daily Diario de Noticias likened the images of the crisis to a disaster movie or "Liberia or some other Third World nation in trouble."

Hollywood stars shine for US hurricane victims

AFP, Los Angeles

Canadian pop singer Celine Dion donated one million dollars to lead a growing effort by Hollywood music and film stars to aid victims of Hurricane Katrina.

From actors Morgan Freeman and Leonardo DiCaprio to Dion, rap star Usher and rock group Green Day, Hollywood began rolling out its talent and pocketbooks to raise money for the storm's victims.

Three days after the massive storm left possibly thousands dead and hundreds of thousands homeless along the US Gulf Coast, Hollywood is mobilising like an army with charity concerts and telethons scheduled for coming weeks.

DiCaprio, star of "Titanic" and "The Aviator" will highlight an NBC concert-telethon Friday night to raise money for the American Red Cross relief operation.

Dion's million-dollar donation will also go to the Red Cross, her publicist said in a statement from Montreal Thursday.

The show will feature performances by jazz crooner Harry Connick Jr., and country music star Tim McGraw, who both call hurricane-ravaged New Orleans home.

"I haven't slept in days," said Connick, who grew up in the city.

World pledges aid to US

UN appeals for help, Bush welcomes aid offers

AFP, REUTERS, Paris/London

From a French offer of ships, aircraft and supplies to a 25,000-dollar donation by tsunami-pounded Sri Lanka, the world returned the favour to the United States yesterday by offering emergency aid to a superpower in crisis.

The United States, reeling from the death and destruction wrought by Hurricane Katrina, said Thursday it would accept any offers of assistance, as the world community rallied to its aid.

"We are open to all offers of assistance from other nations, and I would expect we would take people up on offers of assistance when it's necessary," said White House spokesman Scott McClellan.

But asked whether this was a request for foreign aid, McClellan sharply replied: "No." The signal by the United States, the world's only superpower, marks an extraordinary reversal of roles for the country that is more used to coming to the assistance of others.

Offers - some merely to show sympathy for an ally in trouble - streamed in after the United States, the world's biggest single aid donor, said it would be open to assistance even though it was not making an appeal for foreign aid.

The world has watched amazed as the planet's only superpower struggles with the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina,

with some saying the chaos has exposed flaws and deep divisions in American society.

World leaders and ordinary citizens have expressed sympathy with the people of the southern United States whose lives were devastated by the hurricane and the flooding that followed.

But many have also been shocked by the images of disorder beamed around the world - looters roaming the debris-strewn streets and thousands of people gathered in New Orleans waiting for the authorities fail to provide food, water and other aid.

UN Secretary General Kofi Annan on Thursday urged the world to offer assistance to the United States after the devastation wrought by Hurricane Katrina which he described as a "huge disaster".

"The damage is far worse than any of us imagined at first," Annan said in a statement released by his office.

"The American people who have always been the most generous in responding to disasters in other parts of the world have now themselves suffered a grievous blow," he added.

Scenes of chaos - explosions and fires erupting in New Orleans, looters on the rampage, bodies in the streets, and refugees crammed into a stinking squalor in the city's Superdome - prompted an outpouring of shock, and sympathy.

"Whatever they ask for, it will be

given, from reserves of oil...to any other thing that they may need," European Union foreign policy chief Javier Solana said in Newport Wales, during a meeting of the 25-nation bloc.

The North Atlantic Treaty Organisation chief, Jaap de Hoop Scheffer, said Nato stood ready to contribute.

"Whenever and wherever our Nato partner and important friend - the United States of America - asks (for) assistance, Nato stands ready to answer those calls," Scheffer told a press conference during a visit to Sofia.

Among the major allies:

- The French foreign ministry offered eight aircraft and two ships, with 600 tents and 1,000 camp beds also available at the United States' request.

- Prime Minister Tony Blair said he had spoken to President George W. Bush, and Britain was ready to help "in anyway that we can."

- German Chancellor Gerhard Schroeder was personally working out the details of a relief package, a government spokesman said. Berlin could provide assistance on water treatment or shelter for people left homeless, a government spokesman said.

- Japan said offered 200,000 dollars for the American Red Cross and up to 300,000 dollars worth of tents, blankets, power generators and water tanks. Toyota offered five million dollar, Nissan 500,000 dollars.

- Australia promised 10 million Australian dollars (7.5 million US) through the American Red Cross.

- Canadian Defence Minister Bill Graham said his country was preparing a package, including an offer of military assets.

- The Netherlands, a low-lying country that depends on its system of levees, or dams, has offered to send a team of experts to help plan the reconstruction of New Orleans.

More poignant were offers from the needy.

Sri Lanka - still recovering from the December 26 tsunami which devastated the island's coastlines and killed 31,000 people - said it had donated 25,000 dollars and asked doctors to help the relief effort.

Somalia, too, offered sympathy. "New Orleans looks like Mogadishu when the war started," said bus driver Aden Mohamud in Somalia's war-shattered capital.

He said he was troubled by television images that showed most of the some 300,000 desperate people still trapped in New Orleans were black.

"Maybe some whites are also starving but the African Americans are who I have seen," Mohamud said. "I am sorry they are poor like us."

Katrina losses may top \$100b

AFP, Washington

The economic loss from Hurricane Katrina and subsequent flooding is likely to top 100 billion dollars, the consulting firm Risk Management Solutions (RMS) said yesterday.

RMS said at least 50 percent of economic loss is expected to come from flooding in New Orleans, hurricane losses from wind and coastal surge, infrastructure damage and indirect economic impacts.

The estimate is separate from estimates of insured losses. RMS has projected up to 25 billion dollars in losses covered by insurance, and other estimates have varied.

RMS, a consultant for insurers, reinsurers and other financial institutions, said the New Orleans flood "has developed into the most damaging flood in US history."

It said at least 150,000 properties have been flooded, topping the previous US record from flooding and levee failures on the lower Mississippi River in 1927, which affected 137,000 properties.

"The economic and insurance consequences of the 2005 Great New Orleans Flood will depend highly on how quickly authorities can respond to the event," said Laurie Johnson, vice president of technical marketing at RMS.

"The speed at which existing pumps are reactivated and additional pumping capacity is added will determine how rapidly the floodwaters are removed."



Islamists fume as Pak PM defends talks with Israel

REUTERS, Islamabad

Pakistan's Prime Minister Shaukat Aziz defended talks held with Israel a day earlier as Muslim clerics denounced the shift in policy in fiery sermons during Juma (Friday) prayers, but planned street protests fell flat.

The meeting between Foreign Minister Khurshid Mehmood Kasuri and his Israeli counterpart Silvan Shalom in Istanbul on Thursday was the first publicly acknowledged high-level contact Pakistan has held with the Jewish state.

"There is no harm in having talks," Aziz told the lower house of the National Assembly, where opposition Islamist legislators walked out in token protest.

"If we have met somebody this does not mean we agree with them. We may be able to change their stand."

A staunch supporter of the Palestinian cause, Pakistan has stressed that it will not recognise

Israel until a Palestinian state is established.

The government's decision to open talks was prompted by Israel's withdrawal of settlers and military from Gaza.

Foreign Minister Kasuri, talking to reporters in Dubai during a stop-over before returning home, said the move would give Pakistan "diplomatic space."

"Frankly (secret) contacts have been going on for decades, but we wanted to send a signal to the Israeli government and people that the assumption that Islamic countries cannot live in peace with the Jewish state is not correct, if Israel were to vacate occupied territory," Kasuri said.

But President Pervez Musharraf's policy shift sparked outbursts in mosques.

"General Musharraf is an agent of Jews. His agenda is to sell Pakistan and Pakistani Muslims to Jews and the Jews' ally," the cleric told his congregation at Islamabad's Red Mosque.

Video fuels debate on UK role in Iraq

AFP, London

An al-Qaeda video claiming credit for the deadly London bombings upset people close to the victims and fuelled the row over whether Britain's military role in Iraq had increased the risk of terror.

The British government, reportedly trying to avoid playing into the hands of the extremists, refused to comment on the video that was aired Thursday on the Arabic television station Al-Jazeera.

In footage accompanied by a separate message by al-Qaeda's number two Ayman al-Zawahiri, a man identified as Mohammad Sidique Khan told viewers that Western atrocities against Muslims drove him to bomb a subway train.

The police have identified Sidique Khan, a British Muslim of Pakistani origin, as one of the four men who blew up three subway trains and a double-decker bus on July 7, killing 52 commuters and themselves.

Gous Ali, a Muslim whose Hindu girlfriend Neetu Jain died in the bus blast, objected to giving publicity to people he denounced as un-Islamic.

"You can't hurt a living human being - it's wrong - and if they are doing that they are not Muslims," Ali said.

Sectarian tension boils in Iraq

AFP, Baghdad

One man was killed and four wounded in a drive-by shooting on two Sunni mosques as tension escalated between Iraqi Sunni and Shia communities in the aftermath of a deadly stampede that killed nearly 1,000 Shia pilgrims.

The drive-by shooting occurred early Friday in Zubair, some 20km southwest of the mainly Shia southern city of Basra, according to a spokesman for the Iraqi Islamic Party, the main Sunni group.

The attack fuelled fears of a new round of tit-for-tat sectarian killings between majority Shias, who control the government, and Sunni Arabs, dominant under ousted dictator Saddam Hussein and who today provide the backbone to the current insurgency.

Top government officials have blamed insurgents for triggering

Wednesday's mass stampede on a Baghdad bridge, which led to nearly 1,000 Shia pilgrims being trampled to death or drowning in the Tigris River. Over 800 were wounded.

Hundreds of thousands of Shias had descended upon the Baghdad neighbourhood of Kadhmiya for a religious commemoration, crowding the bridge which was bottlenecked by tight security measures aimed at vetting pilgrims.

Shouts claiming that suicide bombers were present in the crowd sent panicked pilgrims - many of them women and children - stampeding in every direction.

Suicide bombings are usually blamed on the insurgency and Sunni extremists foreigners, who infiltrate into Iraq seeking a battleground with the West, and with Shias, whom they perceive as heretics.



President of Nepali Congress (NC) political party Girija Prasad Koirala (C) together with Central Committee colleagues waves to party workers at the end of the NC General Convention in Kathmandu yesterday. Koirala, four time Nepalese prime minister after restoration of democracy in 1990, has been re-elected as NC President for the third time at the party's 11th General Convention.

PHOTO: AFP