

Official mismanagement exacerbates Katrina toll

AFP, Washington

Hurricane Katrina's destruction was worsened by a catalogue of official mismanagement, neglect and ineptitude, much of it preventable, critics said Wednesday.

From the failure of New Orleans officials to devise an evacuation plan, to the federal government's preoccupation with terrorism over natural disasters, official negligence made Katrina's impact far worse than it had to be, they said.

"I fear that a storm which could have cost tens of billions of dollars may cost more than 100 billion to repair. A storm that could have cost us hundreds of lives will probably cost us thousands of lives," Democratic senator Tom Carper said Wednesday.

Katrina struck on August 29, devastating the Gulf coast of

Mississippi, Louisiana and Alabama.

Much focus has been put on the decision of President George W. Bush's administration to place the Federal Emergency Management Administration (Fema) under the control of the Department of Homeland Security.

After the September 11, 2001 attacks, Fema was downsized, its budget slashed and its autonomy eroded, as authorities focused more resources on countering potential acts of terror than natural disasters.

The agency's inspector general warned that Fema risked "losing its identity as an agency that is quick to respond to all hazards and disasters" -- a result that Katrina appears to have been borne out.

Disaster management snafus were complicated by a lack of expe-

rience by top Fema officials with little emergency relief experience. Calls have been made for Bush to sack Fema chief Michael Brown.

In New Orleans, levees designed to keep back flood waters were not properly maintained and reinforced, leaving the city vulnerable to a major storm, experts said.

The Republican dominated Congress this year allotted New Orleans only half the 11 million dollars it sought for flood-prevention projects.

Officials appeared to have been caught off-guard by the ferocity of Katrina, but had no excuse for their complacency.

Max Mayfield, director of the National Hurricane Centre, said he warned about the destructive power of the monster category five storm "way before landfall. It's not like this was a surprise," he said.

Critics also said Homeland Security Secretary Michael Chertoff failed to act with sufficient urgency, waiting until August 30, to invoke a "National Response Plan".

State officials and city leaders in New Orleans were also late in issuing evacuation orders, experts said. Similarly, emergency officials in Mississippi issued mandatory evacuations when Katrina was just hours away from landfall.

Federal officials faltered badly when they herded displaced New Orleans residents into a dangerously overcrowded convention centre without adequate supplies or sanitation, critics said.

Many in New Orleans were too old or infirm to make the trip to evacuation points; others refused to be stay in the centres, complaining that they were uncomfortable, filthy and violent.



PHOTO: AFP

Members of the 82nd Airborne Division check on civilians who refuse to leave Wednesday in New Orleans amid a mandatory evacuation order. Some one million residents have been evacuated from the city and the surrounding neighbourhoods in the wake of Hurricane Katrina.

Nursing home horror in New Orleans

AFP, New Orleans

A horrific glimpse of Hurricane Katrina's wrath emerged Thursday, as more than 30 patients were reportedly found dead in a suburban New Orleans nursing home overcome by floods.

At least 32 of the roughly 60 people living in the nursing home died in St. Bernard Parish, southeast of New Orleans, on August 29, when Katrina slammed into the US Gulf Coast, according to The New York Times.

St. Bernard Parish Sheriff Jack Stevens said the bodies were found Wednesday at St. Rita's Nursing Home, while 40 to 50 other people were alive and had been rescued, according to CNN.

Stevens did not provide an exact body count and the number was not added to the official death toll of 83 announced by New Orleans officials on Tuesday.



PHOTO: AFP

Palestinian security men are deployed in the West Bank city of Ramallah yesterday following the assassination of former security chief Mussa Arafat Wednesday in Gaza. With Palestinian security on a state of alert, the interior ministry recognised the assassination as a "serious escalation in the security situation."

Mystery of Arafat death takes new twist Storm bares racial gulf

REUTERS, Jerusalem

French medical records show it is highly unlikely that poisoning or Aids caused the death of Palestinian President Yasser Arafat in a Paris hospital last year, The New York Times reported yesterday.

The newspaper, in a report from Jerusalem, said it obtained the records and they showed Arafat died of a stroke that resulted from a bleeding disorder caused by an unknown ailment.

An independent review of the records, The New York Times said, showed that despite extensive testing, Arafat's doctors could not determine the underlying disease that killed him.

Arafat died on November 11 at the age of 75 after being rushed from his West Bank compound to a French military hospital.

Arafat's gaunt appearance as he emerged from his headquarters and was taken to a helicopter on the start of his final journey to France led to speculation he was suffering from Aids.

But The New York Times said independent experts who reviewed

the medical records at its request determined that the course of Arafat's illness and pattern of his symptoms made Aids highly unlikely.

"They also suggest that poisoning was highly unlikely," the newspaper added, although senior Palestinian officials continue to allege he was indeed poisoned.

According to the New York Times, a senior Palestinian official, who it did not name, gave the medical records to two Israeli journalists who agreed to share them in collaboration with the US newspaper, which did its own investigation.

The newspaper said Arafat did not receive antibiotics until 15 days after the onset of his illness, which was originally diagnosed as a flu. By the time he reached France, it added, it was probably too late to save him.

Some 10 days after Arafat's death, his nephew, current Palestinian Foreign Minister Nasser al-Kidwa, said medical records he received from the French Defence Ministry showed no trace of known poisons in the late Palestinian leader.

REUTERS, Washington

The gaping racial divide in the United States was laid bare by Hurricane Katrina, but many social policy experts say the disaster is unlikely to prompt any sustained effort to combat black urban poverty.

In the chaotic aftermath of the hurricane that destroyed New Orleans it became obvious that the overwhelming majority of people trapped in the drowned city, waiting desperately for help or succumbing to the storm, were poor blacks.

"It was pretty stark looking at the pictures and the data. Black people in New Orleans and elsewhere live together in the most fragile neighbourhoods and it's not an accident -- it's the result of decades of segregation and discrimination," said Myron Orfield, a law professor at the

University of Minnesota and former state legislator.

Some see the tragedy as the latest manifestation of America's "original sin" -- its treatment of the descendants of the millions of Africans brought here as slaves.

That legacy is reflected in a thousand different ways. For example: in 1998, the average life expectancy at birth was 71.3 years for blacks and 77.3 years for whites. Infant mortality for blacks was more than double the white rate.

A report in June for the Alternative Schools Network found that in 2002 one in every four black men in the United States was permanently unemployed, a rate double that of white men and 70 percent higher than among Asian and Hispanic men. In the course of their lives, black males have a one in three chance of

spending time behind bars.

Blacks are routinely charged higher interest rates than whites for mortgages and car loans. A recent Vanderbilt University study found black customers paid an additional \$972 over the life of an auto loan.

In New Orleans, a city that was more than two-thirds black, over 30 percent of the population lived below the poverty level. When it came time to evacuate, hundreds of thousands of blacks had no cars and could not leave.

The tragedy, said Illinois Sen. Barack Obama, showed "how little inner-city African Americans have to fall back on. They could not load up their families in a van, fill it up with \$100 of gasoline, throw some bottled water in the back and check into a hotel with a credit card."

UN probe paints Annan's son as big-spending liar

REUTERS, United Nations

You can choose your friends but not your family.

UN Secretary General Kofi Annan escaped charges of corruption in a report on the Iraqi oil-for-food program released on Wednesday, but evidence was presented that his son Kojo brandished his father's name to avoid paying taxes on a luxury car and lied repeatedly while under investigation.

Kofi Annan said the report was "deeply embarrassing." One of the most embarrassing points for the soft-spoken Nobel Peace Prize winner from Ghana must be the role of his own son.

Kojo Annan, now 31, was a consultant for the Swiss firm Cotecna S.A. that won a lucrative UN contract in Iraq and, contrary to his repeated denials, was closely involved in the 1998 bidding process.

Saddam did not confess to mass killings: Lawyer

REUTERS, AFP, Amman/ London

Saddam Hussein's chief attorney denied yesterday that the ousted leader had confessed to ordering executions and waging a campaign against Kurds in which thousands of people are said to have been killed.

"There was no confession by the president and all the investigations in this case do not implicate him at all," Khalil Dulaimi said in a statement sent to Reuters.

Iraqi President Jalal Talabani told state television on Tuesday that an investigator who questioned Saddam told him he had extracted important confessions from him and that the ousted leader had signed them.

But Talabani did not say if

Saddam had actually admitted to committing any crimes or merely acknowledged that he was head of state and commander in chief of the army at the time of various military operations.

Dulaimi last saw Saddam on Monday, only days after the government said the former leader's trial on a single charge of mass killings in reprisal for a 1982 assassination attempt would begin on October 19.

Meanwhile, the long wait for the start of former Iraqi dictator Saddam Hussein's trial has increased instability in the country, Iraq's Foreign Minister Hoshiyar Zebari said in an interview published yesterday.

Israeli troops await order to leave Gaza

AFP, Jerusalem

Israel sealed off the main crossing out of the Gaza Strip yesterday as the army awaited final orders to leave the territory it has occupied for the past 38 years.

Israeli security sources said the army should have removed the last of its equipment by Friday as Palestinian leader Mahmud Abbas cancelled a trip to the UN General Assembly to monitor the pullout.

Troops had not been scheduled to leave until September 15 but Defence Minister Shaul Mofaz recommended the pullout be moved up three days, a move expected to be approved by cabinet on Sunday.

"All the infrastructure and belongings will be out (of Gaza) by tomorrow," an Israeli military source

told AFP as the army was pulling down the last of its watchtowers in southern Gaza, one of the main symbols of the occupation.

The Israeli military closed the Rafah border crossing between Gaza and neighbouring Egypt from the morning but Palestinian officials said troops had been turning away travellers since Wednesday afternoon.

A senior Palestinian official said that Israel had already informed Abbas's government that it would withdraw its troops from Gaza as of Monday.

"The Israelis have informed us that the withdrawal and the transfer will begin on Monday", the secretary general of the Palestinian cabinet, Samir Hleieh, told AFP.



PHOTO: AFP

A group of Thai Muslims pray for peace at a gathering organised against the ongoing violence in Thailand's southern Narathiwat province yesterday.