

## **FEEDBACK FROM THE FIELD**

### **Katrina: Did Federal Priorities Lead to a Slow Response?**

**Scott Somers**

[scott.somers@asu.edu](mailto:scott.somers@asu.edu)

When a disaster occurs in the United States, citizens expect the federal government to support state and local agencies in responding quickly to mitigate the effects and to ensure the immediate safety and welfare of the community. But, in the weeks following Hurricane Katrina that is not how it has worked out. The reason may be a focus by the federal government on preventing terrorist events through crisis management while under-funding preparedness to handle the consequences of all types of disasters. A solution may be to separate FEMA into a cabinet-level agency tasked specifically with emergency preparedness and response.

#### **Response to Katrina**

Generally, emergency management operations following a natural disaster are an intergovernmental affair with a combination of local, state, and federal responses. Yet, Katrina was so devastating that it left many local governments literally under water or simply a debris field. State governments found themselves incapacitated by statewide damage to infrastructure and a number of their National Guard units stretched thin with overseas deployments. Thus, it fell to the federal government to come to the aid of thousands of victims in Louisiana, Mississippi, and Alabama.

Days after the storm struck, significant numbers of victims remained stranded on rooftops awaiting rescue by helicopter. Thousands more awaited evacuation from downtown New Orleans. Most were without food, water, or medicine. During this time, Urban Search and Rescue (USAR) teams from across the country were

being driven to the affected region by bus thus delaying the arrival of critical technical rescue, hazardous materials, and emergency medical expertise. In past disasters, including September 11, 2001, USAR members have been flown in on military C-130s.

Emergency management professionals watched to see the much touted National Response Plan and National Incident Management System implemented. Instead they saw only classic mistakes—slow decision making, misdirection of resources, incorrect technical decisions. Citizens are asking: What went wrong? How were federal response agencies—agencies that had successfully responded to such incidents in the past—caught so ill-prepared for Katrina? The answer to such questions may lie in the organization of the Department of Homeland Security and the federal priority of preventing terrorist attacks.

### **Crisis versus Consequence**

After the events of September 11, 2001, the federal government began in earnest to reorganize the federal emergency response system to better prepare to address the threat of terrorist attacks on U.S. soil. Toward this end, the President signed Executive Order 13234 creating the Department of Homeland Security (DHS). This organization effectively realigned the existing patchwork of government activities into a single department whose primary mission was to protect the homeland.

This approach has attempted to blend consequence management with crisis management. Yet, an exploration of the definitions of these terms finds that they are very different concepts that involve organizations with unique structures depending on their mission: emergency response versus law enforcement.

Consequence management focuses on post-impact measures to protect public health and safety, restore essential government services, and provide emergency relief to governments, businesses, and individuals affected by the consequences of natural, technological or human-caused disasters, including terrorism. FEMA is the lead Federal agency tasked with orchestrating intergovernmental action to mitigate an event. In contrast, crisis management is the law enforcement phase of the incident that involves measures to identify,

acquire, and plan the resources needed to anticipate, prevent, and/or resolve a threat of terrorism. The FBI leads the crisis management efforts at the federal level.

Former FEMA director James Lee Witt—the only Director in FEMA history who was a professional emergency manager—was opposed to the reorganization of the agency under DHS. He reasoned that FEMA’s “all hazards” response capacity would be severely diminished by the new agency’s slant toward preventing terrorist attacks. In comments regarding the draft of the National Response Plan, state and local emergency managers warned: “We know that the possibility for natural disasters and emergencies to occur far exceeds the possibility for terrorist events.”

For decades before 9/11, emergency managers had been supporting the “all-hazards” approach to emergency preparedness. Rather than planning and preparing for different types of events individually, “all-hazards” planning focuses on the functions of emergency management: prevention, preparedness, response, and recovery. The approach is generic covering all hazards collectively. The unique characteristics of different types of events, such as terrorist or WMD incidents, are covered in more detail in hazard-specific appendices ensuring that all hazards are covered adequately.

### **The Focus on Terror**

FEMA’s agonizingly slow response to Hurricane Katrina may very well be a symptom of the federal pre-occupation with crisis management and prevention of terrorist events. Three policies are evidence of this preference. First, an examination of the 05/06 National Exercise Schedule (NEXS) shows that the majority of intergovernmental drills involve a terrorist scenario. Where natural disaster drills are organized, it is not unusual to find a concurrent terrorist-WMD component. A government report dated July 2004 secured by MSNBC shows the magnitude of the shift in federal focus toward terrorist-specific preparedness. The unidentified document showed 222 planned exercises of which only 2 were for hurricanes.

Second, federal funding through grants has been reorganized. Under an “all-hazards” framework, fire departments received

federal grant funding through the Firefighter Investment and Response Enhancement (FIRE) Act. Administered by the U.S. Fire Administration, the FIRE Act was the first legislation designed to provide federal funds directly to local fire departments for the purpose of training, equipping and preparing firefighters to respond to all types of emergencies including natural disasters. Under opposition from the fire service, this grant was consolidated into the Office of Homeland Defense where money is funneled through the state offices along with other homeland security funding. This creates a situation where search and rescue agencies are competing for grant money with law enforcement organizations and other state and local agencies in an environment that favors crisis management programs.

Third, among the recommendations of the 9/11 Commission made after the terrorist attacks on New York and Washington, D.C. was that “Homeland security assistance should be based strictly on an assessment of risks and vulnerabilities”. Allocation of funding was to be based on factors such as “population, population density, vulnerability, and the presence of critical infrastructure within the state”. The Department of Homeland Security Act of 2004 provides \$750 million for discretionary grants for use in “high-threat, high-density urban areas” through the Urban Areas Security Initiative (UASI). The UASI mission is specifically to reduce vulnerability and prevent WMD and terrorist incidents; no consideration is given to natural hazards risks.

### **Re-Organize for Effectiveness**

This is not to say that a focus on the prevention of terrorist/WMD events is not of national importance. Ben Franklin, founder of the American Fire Service, reminded all that “an ounce of prevention is worth a pound of cure”. But the inadequate response to Katrina demonstrates the need for significant improvements in FEMA’s ability to respond to non-preventable events such as hurricanes. State and local first response agencies also need better federal funding in order to more adequately prepare to handle the critical first few hours or days of an event.

In the aftermath of Katrina, it is important to consider whether the country is best served by continuing to subsume FEMA under

the umbrella of DHS. One option worthy of serious consideration is for the federal government to make FEMA an independent, cabinet-level agency and combine it with the U.S. Fire Administration, which administers programs and training for America's first responders. DHS would continue to focus on crisis management and the prevention of terrorist-related incidents. FEMA would concentrate on an "all-hazards" approach to disaster preparedness. Both agencies would administer their own grant programs within the guidelines of their very different missions. In the end, the country may be better prepared for all types of hazards.

**About the Author.** Scott Somers is a member of the Phoenix Fire Department and a PhD student in public administration at Arizona State University. He may be contacted at [scott.somers@asu.edu](mailto:scott.somers@asu.edu).

## **FEEDBACK FROM THE FIELD**

### **International Seminar Organized by the University of Falcon, Punto Fijo, Venezuela.**

**Juan Murria**

Director, UDEFA, Risk Research Center (CIR)  
murrias@cantv.net

The Centro de Investigacion de Riesgos *Risk Research Center* (CIR), was created in 2004 at the Universidad de Falcón by a group of Venezuelan professionals from various fields with wide experience in the different aspects of disaster management, crisis management, environmental studies, and preparation of contingency plans. The *Risk Research Center* (CIR) has set the following objectives:

Natural, technological and human-made disaster research;

- The research of crises of different origins at the regional and national level;
- The preparation of environmental studies and the research of environmental and ecological crises;
- Preparation of the community to face disasters and crises by means of adequate information and public awareness programs;
- The preparation of contingency plans both for communities and for industrial facilities; and
- The education and training of students in the areas of crisis management and disaster risk reduction.

As one of its first activities, The Universidad de Falcón—UDEFA—and its “Centro de Investigacion de Riesgos” (Risk Research Center) (CIR) successfully organized the Seminar “Involving the Community in Disaster Risk Reduction Programs.” The Seminar took place between October 18-20, 2005 in the city of Punto Fijo, Paraguana in western Venezuela, within the framework of the United Nations disaster risk reduction program.

The Seminar was attended by more than 300 participants, about 150 of them being students from several Venezuelan Universities. Invited lecturers from Venezuela, Mexico, Colombia, the Netherlands, Japan and Mexico were also present.

The invited lecture was delivered by Dr. Nuris Orihuela, Deputy Minister for Technology and Innovation in the Ministry of Science and Technology, and former President of the Venezuelan Foundation for Seismological Research (FUNVISIS). Colonel Antonio Rivero, National Civil Protection Director, also participated in the event as a Special Guest and gave a full briefing on the activities of National Civil Protection as well as future plans for the institution that include the creation of a “National System of Risk Management and Civil Protection.”

Venezuelan and international experts who were invited to deliver lectures included: Mr. Yukio Aoshima, former Head of the Coastal Protection System of the city of Osaka, Japan who delivered an interesting paper on the “Coastal Defense System for the City of Osaka, Japan;” Dr. Ir. Prof. Hugo Velsink, retired Professor of Delft Technological University gave a paper on the development of coastal engineering in Holland, highlighting some state-of-the-art projects such as the closing of the Eastern Schelde and the movable barrier of the Rotterdam estuary; Professor Omar Dario Cardona, internationally known Colombian expert and recipient of the 2004 Sasakawa Award; and Dr. Virginia Garcia Acosta, Director of CIESAS, Mexico. In addition, more than twenty Venezuelan experts discussed communities’ involvement in disaster risk reduction activities. The technological, social, political economic and cultural perspectives of this involvement were discussed in the presented papers.

One of the salient activities of the Seminar was the round table discussion “Hurricane Katrina as seen from a Venezuelan perspective.” This activity analyzed Katrina from the engineering, disaster management, social, political, and media coverage aspects.

In the closing ceremonies of the Seminar, Ing. Juan Murria, Director of UDEFA’s Risk Research Center (CIR) was honored with a commemorative plaque for being the only Latin American to receive the Global Alliance for Disaster Reduction Medal given by GADR-UNESCO for the year 2005 at Charlotte, N.C. on the occasion of INCEED 2005 International Conference held in July, 2005.