No winners when tragedy strikes

by Marc_H._Morial

There are no winners or losers in tragedy - just victims.

Everyone suffers - from the people displaced to the people left remaining. There's this haughty view out there that New Orleans in the aftermath of Hurricanes Katrina and Rita has mountains and valleys, high ground and low ground. In south Louisiana, we know it's all low ground.

That President George W. Bush failed to mention Hurricanes Katrina and Rita in his 2007 State of the Union and that the Democrats didn't address the tragedy in their 100-hour plan indicated that there was some kind of amnesia going on around the nation's capital. But it appears that pressure applied to the powers that be as a result of their sleight is helping produce progress on Capitol Hill. Or so it seems. In addition, the city of New Orleans, tired of federal and state inaction, has announced that it will pursue its own rebuilding plan.

In the past year or so, there hadn't been a substantial additional piece of legislation passed related to fixing the utter devastation left in the wake of Katrina and Rita. There had been no provision, no funding to restore the levees and the wetlands. No real power given to recovery czar - Donald Powell - to give orders, take names, speak loudly and carry a big stick.

A recent action by the U.S. Congress has given me hope that our nation may be ready to address its Katrina and Rita shame. Earlier this month, the U.S. House of Representatives by a sizable margin passed the Gulf Coast Hurricane Housing Recovery Act designed to provide $1.2 billion in immediate relief and to resolve the affordable housing crisis that has plagued the region since Hurricanes Katrina and Rita hit.

All I can say is that it's about time Congress did something to spur the recovery that has been brought to a standstill by bureaucracy, miscommunication and incompetence on so many levels by so many parties.

The legislation requires the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development to reopen public housing and to provide 4,500 new affordable housing vouchers for seniors, the disabled and homeless, among other provisions. It expressly forbids the Federal Emergency Management Administration from holding up $1.175 billion of previously allocated aid for Louisiana because of concerns over the state's embattled Road Home program.

The bill's prospects of becoming law are uncertain - to say the least. The U.S. Senate has incorporated provisions of the House-passed bill into legislation concerning the withdrawal of troops from Iraq, a lightening rod for the Bush administration, which has vowed to veto it. That is why I am urging the Senate to rethink this strategy and pass the measure as a stand-alone bill.

But even if the legislation is eventually signed into law, the full restoration of the Gulf Coast to its previous brilliance is still years - probably decades - off. We must remain diligent in getting what's right for the region's residents and its evacuees still spread out across the nation wanting to eventually return home.

Make no mistake. It's struggling. It's suffering. I am not asking for special treatment for the Gulf Coast. I am demanding that the region be treated the same as any other community in this nation struck by natural disaster. That's the standard, and that's all we ask and that's all we want.

As a native son and former mayor of New Orleans, it is obvious why I would feel so passionately about restoring the Gulf Coast region. I've got a very personal stake here. I witnessed my own family, friends and former constituents suffer very personal tragedies - some of them broadcast on national and international television.

Why are we concerned about it at the National Urban League? We're concerned about it because we're concerned about urban communities. We're concerned about people who live in urban communities. We're concerned about fairness in public policy.

It's not just New Orleans. It's the people in St. Bernard Parish and Plaquemines Parish. It's the people in Biloxi, Gulfport and Pass Christian, Miss. But it doesn't end there. This is a call to action for all communities nationwide that could be vulnerable to natural disasters.

All Americans should have a stake in the recovery of the Gulf Coast region because they could very well be the next faces broadcast over the world airwaves as victims of the latest natural disaster.

Hurricanes Katrina and Rita exposed our dirty little secret - extreme poverty for all the world to see. The pictures of a devastated New Orleans broadcast across the international airwaves made Americans not only feel for the victims but wince in embarrassment. The United States looked like a Third World nation. And the incompetence of governments on the local, state and national levels magnified that shame by 100 percent.

The Katrina and Rita tragedies represented events in our nation's history that we would rather forget but certainly shouldn't. How we bring the Gulf Coast back to life will be permanently etched into the annals of world history. The world will not forget that fateful day when the broadcast airwaves revealed what should be America's greatest shame.

The ghosts of Hurricanes Katrina and Rita and their victims will continue to haunt us no matter how much we try to ignore them. They won't go away. It's about time our national lawmakers took steps toward restoring the region to its former greatness. But I must urge the U.S. Senate to not allow the Gulf Coast recovery be held hostage by a debate over the Iraq War. A failure by our nation to follow through on the Gulf Coast recovery will not only represent a huge loss for the region but for the nation as a whole.

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