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Bush: Congress 'Shortchanged' New Orleans

Touring Gulf Coast, President Calls for Restoration of \$1.5 Billion for Levee Repairs

By [Michael A. Fletcher and Spencer S. Hsu](#)

Washington Post Staff Writers

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NEW ORLEANS, March 8 -- President Bush, on a Gulf Coast inspection tour that included his first visit to this city's storm-shattered Lower Ninth Ward, bluntly accused Congress on Wednesday of underfunding the repairs and called for speedy action to make good on federal commitments.

The president said Congress has been slow to provide funding to rebuild housing destroyed by Hurricane Katrina and, while pledging to make New Orleans's levees "equal or better than they were before" the storm, attacked a congressional decision last year to redirect \$1.5 billion from his request to repair the region's flood-protection system to projects in other storm-affected states.

As Bush was taking issue with the Congress, lawmakers from his own party were delivering a powerful rebuff to the president, joining with Democrats in an effort to kill the administration's plan to turn over management of some operations at six U.S. ports to Dubai Ports World -- a company owned by Dubai, which is part of the United Arab Emirates. The House Appropriations Committee voted 62 to 2 to scuttle the plan, with just one Republican siding with the administration.

The juxtaposition of the president's words and the House committee action provided a telling example of the state of relations between the White House and the Republican-controlled Congress, a relationship that could deteriorate further as lawmakers worry about what Bush's low approval ratings could mean to them as they try to maintain their majorities in both houses in November.

The president's Gulf Coast trip was his 10th since Katrina devastated the region in August. "Congress heard our message about improving the levees, but they shortchanged the process by about \$1.5 billion," Bush said, calling for the money to be restored.

A \$19 billion measure pending before the House -- and expected to win approval -- would restore the \$1.5 billion for levee rebuilding. It would include \$4.2 billion for grants to help residents rebuild their homes or relocate but would spread the money to other states hit by Katrina -- not just Louisiana as Bush requested.

"I fully understand -- and I hope our country understands -- the pain and agony that the people of New Orleans and Louisiana and the parishes surrounding New Orleans went through," he said. "But I think people would be impressed by the desire for the people in this part of the country to pick up and move on and rebuild."

His inspection came as his administration's response to the disaster continued to come under fire from congressional Democrats. In recent weeks, the federal government's sluggish response to the disaster has been roundly criticized in reports produced both by House Republicans and the White House itself.

Also, independent experts have criticized the levee repair work, saying that it is being done with substandard materials and designs -- which the administration disputes.

"How can the nation have any confidence that the administration is capable of getting the recovery right?" said Sen. Edward M. Kennedy (D-Mass.). "Congress has an obligation to monitor the federal role with special vigilance, to be sure the rebuilding effort is as effective as possible as quickly as possible. The long-suffering people of New Orleans and other victims of Katrina deserve no less."

In Washington, a Senate investigative panel held its final hearing into the government's response before releasing its report later this month. Chairman Susan Collins (R-Maine) said the Federal Emergency Management Agency should not be pulled out of the Department of Homeland Security and restored to independent, Cabinet-level status, but she pushed for other changes.

"If you still have poor leadership and inadequate resources, you're going to have the same results," Collins said.

David M. Walker, head of Congress's Government Accountability Office, and Richard L. Skinner, inspector general at the Department of Homeland Security, agreed.

Removing FEMA from the department "in my opinion would be a major mistake," Skinner said. "We would only be transferring the problems."

Walker said: "The quality of FEMA's leadership . . . as well as the adequacy of FEMA's resources will probably have more to do with their ultimate success than whether or not they are part of the Department of Homeland Security."



President Bush meets pupils at College Park Elementary School in Gautier, Miss., during his 10th post-Katrina tour of the Gulf Coast region. (By Christy Pritchett -- Mississippi Press Via Associated Press)

VIDEO | Bush Visits Gulf Coast for Progress Report

TRANSCRIPT

Before visiting the Industrial Canal levee, where the Army Corps of Engineers is building 15-foot-high concrete flood walls to replace barriers damaged by Katrina, Bush toured the Lower Ninth Ward, a largely black, working-class community virtually obliterated by the storm.

Throughout the neighborhood, there are flattened homes, hundreds of ruined and rusting cars, and huge piles of debris. Bush, who has been criticized by some civil rights leaders and others for not getting a more personal view of the devastation in New Orleans, walked through an abandoned block in the neighborhood accompanied by New Orleans Mayor C. Ray Nagin and Louisiana Gov. Kathleen Babineaux Blanco, both Democrats.

The trio watched as bulldozers piled rubble and loaded it onto a huge dump truck. Bush chatted and shook hands with workers, and at one point he reached into a pile of rubble and grabbed a piece of metal, which he quickly discarded.

Meanwhile, Nagin wandered into an empty, wood-frame home and called out to Bush, "You ought to come see this." Bush then ventured inside. The president reappeared quickly and talked to other workers before returning to his motorcade, which moved through block after block of devastation.

Later, Bush stopped at a small eatery, one of the few businesses operating in the area. There, he sat at the small counter and ordered red beans and rice, cornbread, sausage, and salad, which he carried in a foam takeout container to his waiting sport-utility vehicle.

He shook hands with the family that runs the restaurant and posed for photos with Kim Stewart, 45, who boasted that she prepared the president's meal.

"Katrina knocked us down, but it's not going to keep us there," Stewart said.

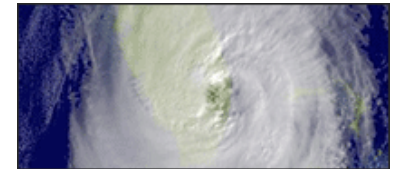
After leaving New Orleans, Bush flew by helicopter to nearby Gautier, Miss., a small, working-class town hard hit by Katrina, where he and his wife, Laura, visited an elementary school.

There, the first lady touted her foundation's plans to raise money to help restore storm-damaged libraries in 1,121 of the region's schools. "Some schools should receive awards by late April or early May," Laura Bush said. "Additional grants will be distributed through the year as more schools are rebuilt."

[Transcript: Remarks by The President and Mrs. Bush in Visit to New Orleans Area](#)

Industrial Levee Canal New Orleans, Louisiana
10:33 A.M. CST

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