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HURRICANE KATRINA

Bush vows to rebuild devastated Gulf Coast

Reconstruction effort, assistance for victims outlined by president

By Terence Hunt
ASSOCIATED PRESS

September 16, 2005

NEW ORLEANS – President Bush promised last night that the government will pay most of the costs of rebuilding the hurricane-ravaged Gulf Coast in one of the largest reconstruction projects the world has ever seen. "There is no way to imagine America without New Orleans, and this great city will rise again," he said.

Standing in Jackson Square in the heart of the French Quarter, Bush acknowledged his administration had failed to respond adequately to Hurricane Katrina, which killed hundreds of people in five states.

ency," he said. When the government fails to meet such an obligation, Bush said, "I as president am responsible for the problem, and for the solution."

Bush ordered his Cabinet secretaries to join in a comprehensive review of the government's faulty response.

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He told the Department of Homeland Security to undertake an immediate review of emergency plans in every major city in America.

A disaster on the scale of Katrina requires greater federal authority and a broader role for the armed forces, he said.

Bush delivered his speech, carried live by the major television networks, in the city's darkened French Quarter, where Army troops from the 82nd Airborne Division were on patrol. The Bush White House provided its own generators for the lighting and communications equipment.



JOE RAEDLE / Getty Images

John Wade, a resident of the French Quarter, used a generator that allowed him to watch President Bush's address on Hurricane Katrina last night. Bush spoke from the heart of New Orleans in his fourth visit to the Gulf Coast since the storm.

Elsewhere in the city, workers were still pumping out flooded neighborhoods and collecting bodies left behind in the frantic evacuation.

Bush proposed establishment of worker recovery accounts providing up to \$5,000 for job training, education and child care during victims' search for employment. He urged legislation to provide education, small-business help and health care. He proposed the creation of a Gulf Opportunity Zone in Louisiana, Mississippi and Alabama offering tax breaks to encourage businesses to stay in the devastated region and new businesses to open.

In the speech that lasted about 20 minutes, Bush said he would ask Congress to approve an Urban Homesteading Act in which surplus federal property would be turned over to low-income residents via a lottery to build homes, with mortgages or assistance from charitable organizations.

Other proposals, according to congressional officials briefed by the White House, include:

- **A 100 percent reimbursement to states to cover their costs of health care for treating many evacuees through the end of next year.**
- **\$1.9 billion to reimburse states for educating displaced students, including some money that could go to religious schools.**

▪ **Six-month forgiveness on student loan interest for affected areas, at an estimated cost of \$100 million.**

Bush repeated a hot line number, 1 (877) 568-3317, for people to call to help reunite relatives separated because of the hurricane.

Moments later, Sen. John Kerry, D-Mass., criticized Bush, saying "Leadership isn't a speech or a toll-free number."

In San Diego County, some people who left flooded Gulf Coast homes or are caring for evacuees listened to Bush's speech with skepticism.

George Harris, 25, said he was interested when the president spoke of how the government would set up personal accounts people could draw from for job training and day care.

He is staying in a Mission Valley hotel with girlfriend, Renee Pierce, 23, and their 2-year-old son, Bruisa Pierce, and his brother, Tremain Lawson, 17. The Red Cross is paying for the hotel room.

"It sounds nice, everything he said," Harris said. "But he can say what he wants on TV. It doesn't mean he's coming to my house to give me a job. I still don't know what's going to happen to us."

Paradise Hills resident Diana Brown has eight relatives from New Orleans staying with her family of five. She originally took in 17 people.

She didn't expect much from Bush.

"I speak from our experience," Brown said, adding that her calls to local agencies went unanswered for five days before her group of 17 evacuees went to the local Red Cross office and refused to leave. Since then, the agency opened a center for evacuated families.

"How I'm feeling right now, it's just more broken promises," she said.

Bush described the hurricane's aftermath as "days of sorrow and outrage," and he said the nation had "witnessed the kind



SUSAN WALSH / Associated Press

In a nationally televised speech last night from Jackson Square in New Orleans, President Bush told the country of his administration's plans to rebuild the city and other Gulf Coast areas devastated by Hurricane Katrina 18 days ago. He called it one of the largest reconstruction projects in history.

of desperation no citizen of this great and generous nation should ever have to know." He deplored scenes of victims calling out for food and water, criminals who had no mercy and bodies of the dead lying uncovered in the street.

He said the suffering was tempered by acts of courage and kindness. To the hundreds of thousands of people forced from their homes, Bush said, "You need to know that our whole nation cares about you – and in the journey ahead you are not alone."

Promising better days ahead, Bush said, "The streets of Biloxi and Gulfport will again be filled with lovely homes and the sound of children playing. The churches of Alabama will have their broken steeples mended and their congregations whole.

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"And here in New Orleans, the streetcars will once again rumble down St. Charles, and the passionate soul of a great city will return."

Bush faced the nation at a vulnerable point in his presidency. Most Americans disapprove of his handling of Katrina, and his job-approval rating has been dragged down to the lowest point of his presidency also because of dissatisfaction with the Iraq war and high gas prices. He has struggled to demonstrate the same take-charge leadership he displayed after the Sept. 11, 2001, terror attacks.

Faulting the government's response, Bush said Katrina "was not a normal hurricane – and the normal disaster relief system was not equal to it." State officials have blamed the federal government for failing to respond more quickly, and federal officials have pointed fingers at state and local officials.

Responding to charges that help would have been sent more quickly if most victims had not been poor and black, Bush noted that the persistent poverty, rooted deep in the Gulf Coast region, was broadcast for all Americans to see.

"That poverty has roots in a history of racial discrimination, which cut off generations from the opportunity of America,"

Bush said. "We have a duty to confront this poverty with bold action."

Bush said the goal is to get evacuees out of shelters by mid-October and into apartments and other homes, with assistance from the government. He said he would work with Congress to ensure that states are reimbursed for the cost of caring for evacuees.

Bush called for new measures to protect New Orleans from flooding and said the Army Corps of Engineers would work with state and local officials. "Protecting a city that sits lower than the water around it is not easy, but it can and has been done," he said.

"The work that has begun in the Gulf Coast region will be one of the largest reconstruction efforts the world has ever seen," Bush said. He praised Americans for giving generously for disaster relief, saying the fund led by former Presidents Bush and Clinton had received pledges of more than \$100 million.

Rebuilding across the devastated region is expected to cost \$200 billion or more in the near term. The final tab could approach the more than \$300 billion spent thus far on U.S. wars in Iraq and Afghanistan. Congress has approved \$62 billion for the disaster, but that is expected to run out next month.

House Speaker Dennis Hastert, R-Ill., speaking after the president's address, said the recovery programs would add to the nation's debt. GOP leaders are open to suggestions from lawmakers to cut government spending elsewhere, he said.

■ Staff writer Elena Gaona contributed to this report.

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