



United States Senate
Committee on Homeland Security and Governmental Affairs
Senator Susan M. Collins, Chairman

Opening Statement of
Senator Susan M. Collins
Chairman, Committee on Homeland Security and Governmental Affairs
Hurricane Katrina: The Homeland Security Department's Preparation and Response
February 15, 2006

Today marks our twentieth hearing on Hurricane Katrina. The Committee will examine how the Department of Homeland Security led the federal preparations for and response to the most devastating natural disaster in our nation's history.

Five months ago, this Committee held our first hearing on the failures across all levels of government that turned a terrible natural disaster into a worse man-made debacle. As this inquiry nears its end, we turn our focus to that component of the federal government that bears ultimate responsibility for a quick and effective response to disaster, the Department of Homeland Security. Our witness is Secretary Michael Chertoff, who today marks his first anniversary as head of DHS.

One of the fundamental responsibilities of the Department of Homeland Security, to quote directly from its mission statement, is "preparing for natural disasters and terrorist attacks through planning, technology, and coordinated efforts. In the event of a natural or man-made disaster, DHS will be the first federal department to utilize a full range of state, local, and private partnerships to alleviate the effects of a potential disaster."

Clearly, that mission was not accomplished. The federal department that was supposed to lead, direct, and coordinate the federal response to Katrina was, time and again, late, uncertain, and ineffective. A central purpose of this hearing is to learn why, in a crisis that called for decisive and speedy action, DHS was plagued by indecision and delay. If our government failed so utterly in preparing for and responding to a disaster that was long predicted and imminent for days, we must wonder how much more profound the failure would be if a disaster were to take us completely by surprise, such as a terrorist attack.

The delays in DHS's response are both alarming and unacceptable. The chasm Katrina exposed between DHS and FEMA, one of its most important components, clearly presented one of the most significant impediments to a coordinated, swift federal response. Concerns about this disconnect were expressed long before Katrina, and our investigation has revealed disturbing conflicts over resources, roles, and responsibilities.

But the problems within DHS go beyond its relationship with FEMA. The Department's overall lack of preparedness for this catastrophe prevented both decisive action before the storm hit and an effective response in the immediate aftermath. After landfall, the Department seemed frozen with indecision and nearly paralyzed by ineffective communications. Key decisions were either delayed or based on faulty assumptions. As a result, the suffering of Katrina's victims was exacerbated and prolonged.

This lack of preparedness is evident throughout the response to Katrina. On August 30th, the day after Katrina made landfall, Secretary Chertoff named then-FEMA Director Michael Brown as the Principal Federal Official for the response effort. He did so despite Mr. Brown's hostility to the concept of a PFO and disdain for the National Response Plan.

In addition to questioning the appointment of Mr. Brown, I wonder why a PFO was not designated before Katrina made landfall when it was already evident that we were facing a looming disaster that would require a direct link between federal operations on the ground and DHS headquarters. The effect of this delay was much like having the general show up after the battle had begun.

From that evident lack of readiness comes a great many issues we will explore today. Among them are:

Why was situational awareness at DHS so severely lacking throughout the Katrina response? While people throughout the nation and around the world merely had to turn on their televisions to learn of the levee failures and the dire need for food and water at the Superdome and the Convention Center, DHS was consistently behind the curve. The delays in response to these crises were the direct result of poor communications.

Why weren't the tremendous resources of the Department of Defense deployed sooner? The delay in bringing these assets to bear not only prolonged the suffering of the victims, but also made the work of the first responders even more difficult and dangerous.

The failure to resolve obvious issues beforehand led to numerous other problems, from the poor information flow between DHS and the White House to the difficulties DHS encountered in assigning missions to other federal agencies to the unnecessary disputes with overwhelmed State and local officials.

The examples are legion: the failure to order the buses Michael Brown promised on Monday until Wednesday. The failure to deliver essential commodities for victims at the Convention Center until two days after Michael Brown apparently became aware of their plight. The failure to quickly process requests for vital commodities throughout Louisiana and Mississippi, and to track their delivery. The failure to field more Search and Rescue and emergency medical teams at the onset of the flooding. The failure to respond rapidly to devastated telecommunications systems. The failure to appoint a single Senior Law Enforcement Officer as soon as the need became apparent. The failure to invoke the Catastrophic Incident Annex to the NRP, which would have permitted DHS to be more pro-active. The list of critical tasks done late or not at all is staggering.

And, perhaps most crucial to addressing the failures of Katrina, did FEMA have adequate leadership and resources to respond to a disaster of this magnitude? Why, despite longstanding concerns, such as those raised in the MITRE study about FEMA, was nothing done to address them?

As I said at our hearing last Friday, FEMA's response to Katrina has to be judged a failure. As a consequence, the response of DHS must be judged a failure as well, despite the outstanding performance of the Coast Guard and of individual DHS employees.

As the third anniversary of the Department of Homeland Security approaches, it is past time for the Department to carry out its vital mission and meet its responsibilities to the American people.