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Bush's New Orleans Visit Frustrates City's Devastated Neighbors

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By Victor Epstein

Sept. 12 (Bloomberg) -- As President George W. Bush today surveys the damage wrought by Hurricane Katrina in the New Orleans area, officials in perhaps the hardest-hit parish say they are seething about inattention from the U.S. government.

St. Bernard Parish, a largely rural community east of New Orleans, was on its own for the first five days after the storm, when local rescue workers on jet skis had to dodge streetlights as they raced to pull people from the floodwaters. Two towns in the community were obliterated and officials fear as many as 500 residents are dead.

Parish leaders, almost all of them now homeless, were incensed when Vice President Dick Cheney told reporters on Sept. 8 that he wasn't aware of the situation in St. Bernard. And officials who spoke to Federal Emergency Management Agency Director Mike Brown and Homeland Security Director Michael Chertoff say they have failed to keep a promise to cut through red tape and expedite the area's assistance requests.

"They told me they were going to bend the rules for us," said Alan Abadie, special counsel to the parish president. "They told me our situation here was something special and the regular rules wouldn't apply, but I have not seen any change in the attitude of the bureaucrats."

The first FEMA official showed up in St. Bernard on "Day 8" in local parlance, as civil disobedience in New Orleans siphoned resources that might otherwise have come to the parish. The devastation discovered since includes the decomposing bodies of 18 patients in a nursing home.

Officials at FEMA in Washington didn't immediately return a phone call seeking comment.

Helping One Another

The stories out of St. Bernard prompted reporters to ask Cheney on Sept. 8 about the delay in federal help. The vice president was meeting soldiers and construction workers repairing a levee break in New Orleans.

"I'm not familiar with that situation," Cheney said. "These are the kind of questions that will be asked in the after-action review and should be asked."

Parish President Henry "Junior" Rodriguez said he was stunned by the comment.

"Shame on Vice President Cheney," he said. "To say they still don't know what happened here after all this time is an outrage. I'd like him to come down here. I can familiarize him with what's left of St. Bernard Parish."

Old School

Rodriguez, 70, is an old-school Southern leader who has been leaning more heavily on his gold-topped cane with each passing day. He underwent surgery for a perforated intestine two months ago and has been working 20-hours days since Katrina hit Aug. 29. His 282-pound body is feeling the fatigue, exertion and sustained stress.

Still, Rodriguez managed to lumber up to the roof of the emergency operations center in 95-degree heat on Sept. 10 after being summoned by a presidential helicopter. He said he thought he was in for a long-awaited meeting with Bush or Cheney. Instead, the presidential helicopter contained junior staffers.

"I climbed three flights of stairs for nothing," Rodriguez said. "That's about par for the course with them through this whole thing."

St. Bernard officials say insurance claims illustrate what they call a bureaucratic mess.

"FEMA won't make payments to anyone who lost a home that was covered by insurance and the insurance companies are refusing to pay claims until after they

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inspect the property," Abadie said. ``Meanwhile, this parish is closed to non-emergency personnel for the next six weeks because it's a biological nightmare. Claim adjustors can't get in here."

Black Mold

FEMA investigators have been finding something they call ``black mold" growing in many homes, especially those near the Murphy Oil Corp. refinery that spilled 250,000 gallons, parish leaders said.

Evacuees from St. Bernard are also running into problems with auto claims, Abadie said. Some insurers won't pay claims until adjusters have examined damaged vehicles, he said. That's in a community where only five of the 200 Sheriff's Department vehicles are still running.

``I actually had one adjustor tell my wife to open the windows and let our car air out," said Parish Councilman Craig Taffaro. ``We're hearing the same thing over and over."

Transition

The parishes of St. Bernard and Orleans are starting to make the transition from the rapid burst of energy that characterized searches for trapped civilians to the marathon pace needed to finish the lengthy period of cleanup and repair.

Exhausted local rescue teams are leaving in small groups to reunite with their families. Some are leaving to restart their lives elsewhere as soldiers and repair workers come in.

Traumatized workers now have supplies in the quantities required at the height of the crisis, after going without when they had hundreds to feed. A handful of government employees meander through rations for several hundred inside the St. Bernard Courthouse. They say the stacks are reassuring.

Outside the building, dozens of boats are still beached. At the height of the storm, rescuers could cruise right into the lobby to drop off victims.

Captains Mark Poche and John Guitierrez of the St. Bernard Sheriff's Department say their 40-member unit saved lives in both St. Bernard and the Lower Ninth Ward of neighboring New Orleans.

In one effort, they pulled 120 patients from the second floor of the flooded St. Maurice's Nursing Home, with the help of neighboring residents and the Drug Enforcement Agency on Day 5. The patients had been abandoned, Poche said.

Both men said they were stung by Cheney's remarks.

``That's why I told him six months ago, when we were sitting in the bar, that he should have voted Democrat," Guitierrez said, pressing a hand against two cracked ribs. They were injured when his motorboat hit a submerged tractor-trailer on St. Bernard Highway and slammed him against the console. That was on Day 1.

``You won that argument," said Poche, a staunch Republican and Bush admirer.

``Won it the hard way," Guitierrez said.

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