

**The  
BLACK  
C o m m e n t a t o r**  
Commentary, analysis and investigations  
on issues affecting African Americans  
www.blackcommentator.com

*Issue 151 – September 22, 2005*

***A Pitiabile Response to Katrina:  
Citizens Swept Aside by Government  
by Rep. Bennie G. Thompson***

(Use the back button on your browser to return to the previous page)

Printer Friendly Version



Copyright © 2002 - 2005  
www.BlackCommentator.com  
All Rights Reserved

A few short weeks ago, America was shocked, stunned and spellbound by the specter of a flooded city, desperate people wading through water to find food and shelter, and children being airlifted by helicopters to escape the certain death and destruction of Hurricane Katrina's flood waters. As many sat transfixed in front of their televisions watching this tragedy unfold, many of us were not amazed that the faces of those left behind were predominantly and overwhelmingly African American. Meanwhile, those running the relief efforts from Washington, D.C. were overwhelmingly not.

And as I called the Department of Homeland Security about the destruction that Katrina had left in Mississippi, I wondered what this pitiabile response to a predicted occurrence meant for our lack of preparedness for an unforeseen event like a terrorist attack.

As I heard the promises that the federal response would come through like the Cavalry of another era, I couldn't help but wonder, like many have wondered, whether the slowness of the response was due to the same kind of governmental neglect that has trapped many poor and minority citizens of this country in the ongoing tsunami of a second-class economic status for very long time.

And as the heart-wrenching rescues unfolded over several days, I was somewhat gladdened by the knowledge that so many people all over this country were opening the hearts and their wallets to provide real relief for the victims of this tragedy. I heartily applaud the efforts that have been made by churches groups, school children and private individuals who have opened their homes and hearts to reach out those who have lost everything to the winds and water of Katrina.

But as a federal elected official I know individual efforts, no matter how generous can not do this alone. I know that the true test of America's commitment to restore the ravaged lives torn apart by this natural disaster will be shown through the governmental commitment to step forward and enact policies, programs and provide funding for the survivors of this disaster to restore and rebuild their lives.

I have heard many statements from the Bush administration about promises to spend whatever it takes to

## The Black Commentator – A Pitiable Response to Katrina

restore and rebuild the people and the places devastated by this disaster. But so far, I have seen and heard little that would give me a sense of certainty that the \$62 billion that the Congress has appropriated would be spent in a way that would measurably improve the lives of these survivors in the short term or the long term.

At this point, the entire benefit package (food, housing and relocation) that the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) provides for heads of households is valued at approximately \$26,000. Clearly this is not enough for a family to get a fresh start and rebuild their lives. And when you compare that small amount to the almost \$250 million contract that FEMA has signed to lease a cruise ship to house contractors and first responders, it would not be cynical to ask hard questions about true level of commitment to these survivors. That is why I have been actively working to make sure that the people who have been swept under by Katrina are not swept aside by this government. Or by other organizations, who under the guise of charity, are doling out relief based on race and class. I have heard too many stories of evacuees being forced to travel across town for services because organizations are “scared” or “unwilling” to set up shop where the folks in need are located. This is shameful and uncharitable.

I believe that we must assure that we provide temporary housing assistance provides a transition to permanent housing. No one should have to call a camper home. We must assure not only that the local residents can get the jobs and the contracts for rebuilding that are being handed out, but we must make sure that a prevailing wage is being paid for these jobs. It would add insult to injury to pay the victims slave wages to rebuild a city that they are too poor to afford. We must make sure that contracts and disaster assistance benefits are distributed on a non-discriminatory basis and if we find that discrimination has infected this process, we must take strong and unyielding measures to weed it out.

But most of all, we who have opened our hearts to care must not lose interest or lose hope. I know that the process of rebuilding will take a long time. I know that there will be many missteps and mistakes along the way. But I also know that if we are vigilant and diligent, this disaster can be a part of a different kind of changing tide in America – one in which we finally re-orient our national priorities and once again remember the poor and left-behind.

*Bennie G. Thompson (D-MS) is the ranking Democrat on the House Homeland Security Committee.*