

FEMA Made Inoperative By Bush/Cheney Agenda

by Mary Jane Freeman

New Orleans emergency official Terry Ebert called the Bush Administration's response to Hurricane Katrina's assault "a national disgrace." On the morning of Aug. 31, at the New Orleans Superdome, he warned that the slow evacuation there had become an "incredibly explosive situation," and he complained bitterly that the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) was not offering enough help: "This is a national emergency. This is a national disgrace. FEMA has been here three days, yet there is no command and control. . . ."

A day earlier, on Aug. 30, more than 150 newspapers carried an op-ed titled "Destroying FEMA" by Eric Holdeman, who served as the director of the state of Washington's Office of Emergency Management in King County from 1996 to the present.

Holdeman, who served as a career U.S. Army infantry officer before he joined Washington State's Emergency Management Office, stated bluntly that FEMA, which has been swallowed up by the Department of Homeland Security (DHS), "is being, in effect, systematically downgraded and all but dismantled."

He elaborated: "This year it was announced that FEMA is to 'officially' lose the disaster preparedness function that it has had since its creation . . . FEMA employees have been directed not to become involved in disaster . . . functions, since a new directorate (yet to be established) will have that mission."

FEMA's disaster preparedness mission has been in a "take-down" mode virtually since George W. Bush took office in 2001. The pro-active, pre-disaster-event mitigation planning and implementation has all but been shelved since the post-9/11 creation of DHS, which diverted nearly all FEMA money and efforts to terrorism planning.

Mark Ghilarducci, a California-based emergency preparedness specialist, confirmed Holdeman's assertion. "The pre-disaster mitigation aspect . . . in reality . . . almost 100% of the money, and 100% of the effort is being pushed towards terrorism preparedness." Ironically, he said, it was FEMA that worked *before* and *after* 9/11. (See accompanying interview.)

The deadly consequences of such short-sightedness is writ large in the unfolding catastrophe of Hurricane Katrina's wake.

Under the direction of James Lee Witt from 1993 to

early 2001, FEMA was rescued from its past inertia and failures by Witt's launching of "catastrophic disasters" planning, among other initiatives. Four to five regions, prone to catastrophic disaster, such as the Louisiana coastline of Los Angeles basin (for earthquakes), were selected, which would require infrastructure inputs *prior* to a catastrophe, in order to mitigate the devastation that could be anticipated. Resources were then deployed to begin implementation and training of staff in those areas.

In his op-ed, Holdeman gave as an example Witt's "Project Impact," a Federally funded emergency preparedness and mitigation program at the local level, that provided funds to retrofit homes, schools, and hospitals in the Puget Sound area so that when earthquake Nisqually hit, on Feb. 28, 2001, damage was minimal. Ironically, it was also that day "the then-new President chose to announce" the end of Project Impact, Holdeman wrote.

FEMA Dismantled

In mid-July 2005, DHS Secretary Michael Chertoff, in Congressional testimony, unveiled his "Second Stage review" of the reorganized government agencies under his control. He made it clear that he will end FEMA's role of mitigation planning and implementation, saying, "it [FEMA] will now focus on its historic and vital mission of response and recovery." That is, it was intended to take FEMA back to the time when it merely responded to disasters *after the fact*.

It was that legacy from which Witt rescued FEMA, and gave new life to the agency, which had been created by the Stafford Act in 1974. Chertoff's claim of an "umbrella of greater security" strategy to promote "freedom, prosperity, mobility, and individual privacy" blew away in Katrina's winds and with the countless lives needlessly lost.

Despite the fact that Chertoff used all the right buzzwords, alleging that DHS is an "all hazards" agency, Holdeman told *EIR* in an interview: "A lot of folks took issue with his announcement. The traditional role has been disaster *planning, preparedness, mitigation, response, and recovery*." "An ounce of prevention, isn't a pound of cure in this situation; it is a ton of cure," Holdeman said.

A fatally flawed aspect of the DHS regime has been the lack of coordination between DHS headquarters and state and local government officials responsible for disaster planning (and this is expected to get worse under the Stage 2 plan). "DHS doesn't have regional offices," Holdeman said. "There's nobody on the ground to work with here, or nationally."

"I'm not against change. I think change, many times is good. There is a philosophy, 'if it is not broke, break it.' I feel in this case that is what DHS is doing." Holdeman said that DHS doesn't respect the opinion of FEMA people with years of expertise and experience. "Their opinion doesn't count. It has not counted to date. Hopefully it will count in the future."