

Hurricane Andrew blows away myth of the 'recovery'

by EIR's Economics Staff

On Sept. 1, Homestead Hospital reopened for full service in Dade County, southern Florida, which had been ravaged by Hurricane Andrew on Aug. 24. The head doctor praised his staff, most of whom, he said, have been working almost round the clock—not only because they are dedicated, but because they have no homes to go to, which “hasn't sunk in yet.”

It will “sink in” soon enough. If one compares the heroic and split-second performance of the United States during the Berlin Airlift, with the too little, too late efforts in Florida since the disaster struck, it is apparent that not only is the leadership in Washington unfit, but the productive and infrastructural base of the country has been appallingly eroded.

There was ample warning

The storm which swept from southern Florida, across the Gulf of Mexico to southern Louisiana, was one of the largest on record. (The largest hurricanes in the United States were during the 1930s, although Andrew is definitely the most expensive in terms of damage.) Hurricanes are rated on an “F” scale, which measures winds. For example, Hurricane Hugo, which hit South Carolina in 1989, was considered an F3, with winds measuring 111-130 mph. Hurricane Andrew was certainly near the top, rated as a strong F4 (winds at 131-155 mph) or even a weak F5.

Such a large storm was not difficult to see coming, and the Pentagon had been tracking Andrew for a good one to two weeks prior to its arrival in Florida. With such forewarning, setting up contingency staging points and supply routes for loading ships and cargo planes for speedy response, would have been the obvious thing to do. But there is no evidence that this was done. The Pentagon, rather, demurs that it received no requests nor authorization from either the Presi-

dent or the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) until late on Aug. 27.

Indeed, the first convoys didn't arrive until Aug. 31, eight days after the hurricane struck. They consisted of merely four ships, and they carried only 2,000 tons of mixed cargo, ranging from paper plates to tents. Pound for pound, 2,000 tons is only 16 pounds per person affected by the storm. Planes flew in sporadically, with constant revisions as to how many personnel were actually required. Over a week later, the 20,000 troops were still not all in place.

In effect, there was no contingency action despite the advanced warning. Typically, in the first few days, there was only political recrimination-as-usual. Soon after the storm, President George Bush went to visit in person, and Gov. Lawton Chiles went in person; then they exchanged charges and countercharges. Finally, by Aug. 27, they made a pact to stop.

On Sept. 1, Bush again flew to Florida, taking along wife Barbara and camera crews, and that evening he gave an Oval Office TV broadcast to the nation, calling for the “spirit” to move Americans to muster the donated resources for the aid effort. Meanwhile, serious plans for reconstruction are not on the President's agenda. He announced a toll-free phone line for call-in contributions.

It didn't have to happen

The real story of what a pathetic job has been done by the current administration is demonstrated by looking at the scale of what is needed in Florida. The impoverished state of the U.S. economy has been the deliberate result of the lack of economic infrastructure and other development for the past 30 years. As independent presidential candidate Lyndon

LaRouche pointed out in a release on Hurricane Andrew's damage on Aug. 25: "People didn't have to live that poorly. They didn't have to have houses that were that vulnerable to that kind of windstorm. . . . We didn't have to bleed our government down to the point that the emergency relief capabilities are a pitiful drop in the bucket against the magnitude of a storm of this type. That didn't have to happen."

Look at what the 30-year slide into the "post-industrial society" means for real emergency preparedness:

- **Stockpiles.** In recent years, the practice of "just-in-time" warehousing has come into vogue, which is a euphemism for drawing down stocks of all types, including those which should be maintained for natural disasters. Portable generators, fasteners, emergency lighting equipment, pipes and valves for sanitation restoration, electrical distribution equipment, such as transformers, switch gears, cables, and towers are no longer stockpiled in sufficient quantity to deal with an emergency of this magnitude.

- **Power.** The power grid of the country has been systematically retarded, to the point that reserve margins are so low that "brown-outs" have become quite common. During the 1960s, the utility industry was adding approximately 20,000 megawatts per year to the national power grid, which supported an average growth rate of 7% per year of electricity demand in that period.

As of 1990, capacity was being added at only one-fourth the level of the 1960s. Through 1995, less than 5,000 MW per year will be added. Meanwhile, electricity demand growth rates, which had been depressed to less than 3% per year through the earlier 1980s, have now climbed up to 4-10%, depending upon the region of the country. Already in 1988, four of the nine U.S. power grid regions had capacity margins below the 17% minimum considered necessary to deliver reliable electric power.

- **Food reserves.** As of June, the United States Department of Agriculture, which has a liaison to FEMA for emergencies, began running out of reserve food stockpiles. The USDA ceased distributing relief food stocks from its Atlanta warehouse, because national reserves for food relief had run so low. Over the past year, surplus rations from Operation Desert Storm were given out at domestic soup kitchens, so now even that military stockpile is all but used up.

The food rations for the needy in Florida that are being publicized by the Bush administration add up to very little indeed, compared to what is required. For example, on Aug. 28 it was announced that the Pentagon was sending 1 million military Meals Ready to Eat (MREs). When you divide that by 250,000 homeless in Florida, you get one meal per person per day for four days!

There are also 34 mobile kitchens promised. But even the efforts that are being made have fallen victim to the poor logistics. One hurricane victim, completely dependent on these giveaways for food and water, described it this way: "Nothing is really organized here yet. I asked for water yes-

terday, and one person told me it was in one spot. When I got there, I was told it had been moved. It would be nice if they stayed in one spot, so we could know where they are."

- **Health care.** Florida and Louisiana storm victims are in need of vaccines and other public health measures to prevent the outbreak of epidemics. Concern is very high among health officials as to potential outbreaks of cholera, tuberculosis, salmonella, and hepatitis, not to mention typhoid and tetanus. Vitamins, anti-dehydration salts doses, and penicillin are in great demand. But recent years' cutbacks of production of vaccines, as well as tuberculosis and other medications, do not bode well for the medical community's ability to handle any possible epidemics.

- **Water.** Emergency supplies have not been provided for hundreds of thousands of people, and the numbers of tank trucks, mobile desalination plants for the coastal waters, and temporary purification systems and chemicals are insufficient for the job, due to the 1980s budget cuts. The "streamlining" of the past decade has resulted in the present situation of people roaming in search of safe water; bags and blocks of ice are bringing fantastic prices. Because of electricity breakdown and lack of bottled gas, thousands have no means to boil water.

- **Housing.** Thousands of homes in Florida lost their roofs because the new ones did not meet the building codes—a widespread occurrence around the country, as real estate developers cut costs to meet debt service. Roofs are lost most often because eddies of wind lift them off. The building codes specify how to minimize this, and many 50-year-old homes remained intact while the new ones were destroyed. Furthermore, staples were used instead of the fasteners specified in the codes. Increasing numbers of households nationally, burdened by financial constraints, have been forced to resort to mobile homes, or lath and staple houses, because they can afford nothing better. Instead, these are the structures that should be available for emergency use and the construction of temporary towns.

The media have played up the Navy's new tent city, erected Sept. 1 from equipment taken from ships. Gallant as these efforts may be, they are not even close to adequate. Three tent cities are being planned to house the dislocated population, which includes many elderly. But each tent city will only provide for 5,000 people, while the number of homeless is estimated at 250,000.

'Totally busted'

Last but not least, is the \$50 billion question of who is going to foot the bill on whatever reconstruction does occur. President Bush can make all the pre-election promises he wants, but people needn't bother to read his lips. The federal budget deficit is close to \$500 billion, and the state government isn't faring any better. As Governor Chiles bluntly told NBC, any idea that Florida will foot the bill means it "will be totally, totally busted."