Government: Response to Katrina

*Written by Debarshi Chaudhuri*

The federal government had been making preparations for a large scale disaster in New Orleans since 2002. The director of FEMA at the time, Joe Allbaugh, ordered an examination of the possibility of a hurricane hitting the city that year (USC Annenberg 2005). In June of 2004, FEMA conducted the “Hurricane Pam” drill, which simulated a storm in which New Orleans was almost completely devastated. The drill was followed by more government preparation for a storm like Hurricane Katrina (FEMA 2004).

Before Hurricane Katrina made landfall, Governor Katherine Babineaux Blanco declared a state of emergency in Louisiana on August 26, 2005, and asked President Bush to do the same at the federal level the next day, a request with which he complied. This authorized FEMA to organize and mobilize resources as it saw fit to help the residents of New Orleans (Office of the Press Secretary 2005). The same day, the mayor of New Orleans, C. Ray Nagin, declared a voluntary evacuation of the city. This evacuation became mandatory the very next day, August 28, the day before the hurricane hit the city. Many residents did not have the ability to leave the city, so the Superdome was opened as a site for residents to weather the storm (USC Annenberg 2005).

The hurricane hit on August 29th. As a direct response, FEMA mobilized 1,000 Homeland Security workers to provide assistance to the city (USC Annenberg 2005). In an effort to organize the response, FEMA also asked that no firefighters or ambulance crew respond to areas hit by Hurricane Katrina without being first mobilized by local and state authorities, a declaration that undoubtedly slowed response to the disaster (FEMA 2005). FEMA seemed almost unwilling to accept help from non-government organizations. For example, the American Red Cross was not allowed into New Orleans following the disaster and was unable to supplement the government’s response (American Red Cross 2005). By August 30th, the Superdome was packed past capacity, with at least 20,000 people residing in the building. The situation in the Superdome eventually became so bad that it had to be evacuated the next day (USC Annenberg 2005).

As the situation unfolded, it became clear that the government’s response was inadequate and inefficient. The federal government did not have adequate information concerning the true devastation that the hurricane had caused (White House). Despite the quantity of government workers in the area, the effects of the hurricane continued to wreak havoc on the city with people still stranded in New Orleans and looters robbing stores left and right. Firefighters from around the country were called to the region to help with the federal government’s response. Many of these firefighters were not able to put their skills to use in rescue operations, but instead had to spend time handing out flyers for FEMA to residents of New Orleans (USC Annenberg 2005). The organizations in charge of search and rescue, the Urban Search and Rescue and the Civil Search and Rescue, did not coordinate their efforts and lacked a strategy for their mission (White House). The government’s response to natural disasters is certainly something that can be improved.