

NEWS ALERT



U.S. HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES

Homeland Security Committee

Rep. Bennie G. Thompson, Chairman



**FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE**

## **Statement of Chairman Bennie G. Thompson “Reforming FEMA: Are We Making Progress?”**

February 28, 2007 (WASHINGTON) – Today, Committee on Homeland Security Chairman Bennie G. Thompson (D-MS) delivered the following prepared remarks for the joint hearing with the Subcommittee on Emergency Communication, Preparedness, and Response and the Subcommittee on Management, Investigations, and Oversight entitled “Reforming FEMA: Are We Making Progress?”:

“You know, over the past week, I had the opportunity to look over Stephen Flynn’s new book on homeland security. I agree wholeheartedly with a point that appears early in the introduction that ‘what makes a disaster a true catastrophe has more to do with our acts of omission or commission than with the forces that lie beyond our control.’

FEMA’s actions or, rather, inactions during Katrina unfortunately prove this point rather well. While we could not have controlled the hurricane winds and waters of Katrina, we certainly could have controlled how our government responded.

The true catastrophe of the storm was not the storm itself but the failure of our government – at all levels. That failure is what has left thousands of Gulf Coast residents displaced and unable to go home.

That failure is why we are here today.

And we must absolutely assure that FEMA is being reformed and reborn into an entity that can provide a cohesive preparedness, response, mitigation and recovery plan. Last year, Congress passed comprehensive legislation to reform FEMA and give it the tools it needs to respond to disasters, both large and small. At the core of these reforms were the recommendations of a February 2006 report several Democrats on this Committee released which recommended specific reforms for federal emergency management. The most basic recommendation was that the person who runs FEMA should be required to have experience in emergency management. While the current leadership team at FEMA is very experienced, we need to guarantee that FEMA never again becomes a dumping ground for political cronies.

Shockingly, the President doesn’t agree. In his signing statement for the Katrina Reform Bill he asserted that he will not be bound by these requirements in the legislation. Essentially, his signing statement reserved the right to appoint another Brownie to head FEMA.

The American people deserve better.

One recommendation NOT included in the reform legislation last year was the

inclusion of US-VISIT in a new National Protection and Programs Directorate. US-Visit is a critical exit-entry program designed to assist our border security efforts. Why it is being coupled with cybersecurity and the protection of infrastructures such as chemical plants and the electric grid is puzzling to many of us on this dais.

I must say I am troubled by reports I've received that the decision to move the program to the Directorate was driven by personalities and personnel, rather than by sound policy.

I plan to hold a Full Committee hearing in the coming month to more extensively review this decision by the Department.

Mr. Paulison, let me say that while I believe that you are taking some big steps to fix FEMA, you still have your work cut out for you. There are huge gaps in FEMA's logistics capabilities, contracting practices and their ability to provide mass care and housing programs for a large amount of disaster victims.

I recognize that these problems won't be solved overnight. However, we must move more swiftly because the next Hurricane Katrina or 9/11 could be right around the corner."

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