

## **OPENING STATEMENT OF SEN JOE LIEBERMAN**

Thank you Madame Chairman. Today we are holding the first in our Committee's investigative hearings, and we are starting with someone who bears personal witness to the tragedy we all saw unfold in New Orleans almost two months ago.

It will take some time for this Committee to piece together all of the parts of the complicated and disturbing events following Hurricane Katrina. But Mr. Bahamonde's testimony today gives us a powerful start.

Mr. Bahamonde was the first and – it seems for far too long, nearly the only – FEMA employee on the ground in downtown New Orleans. He arrived before the storm hit, rode it out in the city's emergency operations center, and then ended up being just one of a handful of FEMA workers in downtown New Orleans for a full three days after the storm.

During that time, Mr. Bahamonde offered invaluable first-hand information to his FEMA superiors in Washington about the storm's effects, and gave immeasurable assistance to the people stuck in horrific conditions at the Superdome.

His personal story is a remarkable reminder that – regardless of what we ultimately conclude about the quality of the response by FEMA and other federal agencies – we owe a tremendous debt of gratitude to those individuals who worked for those agencies and responded to the storm at great risk to themselves.

Mr. Bahamonde's presence in New Orleans and his experience during the storm's immediate aftermath are all the more remarkable, because Mr. Bahamonde is not even an operations expert. He is a public affairs officer, whose mission was to provide information to Under Secretary Michael Brown about what was happening in New Orleans and to advance the Under Secretary's expected trip to the city.

Yet this accidental operator remarkably remained FEMA's only presence on the

ground in downtown New Orleans for almost a full day after Katrina hit New Orleans. He then stayed on as part of FEMA's small, yet vital life line for the tens of thousands of people living at the SuperDome.

Mr. Bahamonde's story is powerful, and I will leave it to him to tell it. But it is also disturbing, and raises many, many questions that demand investigation.

Mr. Bahamonde reported to FEMA officials on Sunday – the day before the storm hit – of the swelling crowds and significant medical needs at the Superdome. Yet, even with this information and with days of notice that a horrible storm was approaching the city, FEMA did not get a medical team in place at the Superdome until early Tuesday morning. Even then, FEMA was able to place just one, roughly 35-person medical team to tend to the thousands suffering there. Just two days later, Mr. Bahamonde tells us, FEMA's only medical team in the Superdome was evacuated in a rush, leaving patients on the tables.

Just as troubling, the only FEMA operations team Mr. Bahamonde knew of in all of downtown New Orleans for the first few days after the storm, other than those doing search and rescue, was the small – four person team – that arrived at the Superdome on early Tuesday afternoon. And they also evacuated the city on Thursday morning, leaving the thousands at the Superdome, according to Mr. Bahamonde, seemingly without any FEMA presence there.

Despite days of dire predictions and tens of hours of wretched reality, why was there such a minimal FEMA presence on the ground in downtown New Orleans, a full three days after the storm passed?

Another troubling aspect of Mr. Bahamonde's testimony is the fact that he told his FEMA superiors midday Monday that he had heard a report about levee breaches and

flooding – a report a witness tells us made its way to Under Secretary Brown.

Later that afternoon, Mr. Bahamonde then flew over the city and gave his eye witness account directly that evening to Under Secretary Brown and to FEMA's top Katrina response officials. He told them that he saw a hundred yard break in the levee on the 17<sup>th</sup> Street Canal and 80 percent of the city flooded.

Yet, despite this first-hand report, our top federal officials say they didn't know about the catastrophic flooding until sometime later. Secretary Chertoff, for example, was still saying several days later that he believed the levees didn't break until "overnight Monday to Tuesday" and that he wasn't aware until midday Tuesday that Lake Pontchartrain was draining into the city. Just yesterday, he said that he learned only on Tuesday morning that the response challenge would be compounded by flooding as a result of a breach of the levees

This disconnect is beyond disturbing. It's staggering. Our investigation must find out what was done with Mr. Bahamonde's first-hand account and with other reports that were apparently coming in at the time. How was this information received and distributed within the Administration? Why did our top people still not seem to know the true situation? And what were the consequences of this lack of knowledge? Was this part of the reason for the delayed response by FEMA?

Mr. Bahamonde's testimony leaves us much better informed, but also much more troubled about the federal response to Hurricane Katrina. I thank him for his work during and after the storm and for his testimony today as we seek answers.

And we will demand answers in hearings to come to the painful questions Mr. Bahamonde's testimony will surely raise.