

# CONFERENCE REPORT

## U.S. - Cuban Cooperation in Defending Against Hurricanes

Biloxi, Mississippi

July 21, 2011

A Report by Fiorella Mejia

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On July 21, 2011, the Center for International Policy (CIP) and the Association of Gulf Coast Emergency Managers hosted the half-day conference, “U.S.-Cuban Cooperation in Defending Against Hurricanes” at the IP Casino and Resort in Biloxi, Mississippi. Sponsored by the Ford Foundation, the conference gathered local emergency managers, meteorologists and medical professionals with their Cuban counterparts to compare the American and Cuban models of hurricane preparation and to identify possible areas of cooperation. Since 2007, CIP Senior Fellow and Director of the Cuba Project Wayne S. Smith has led five delegations to Cuba to investigate their method of battling hurricanes, the most recent occurring this past May. During this visit, Cuban civil defense leaders and U.S. Special Interests Office officials briefed the delegation and revealed that education and preparation at the local level remains the key in Cuba to successfully mitigating the damage from natural disasters.

Organized by Ret. Brigadier-General and former Director of Emergency Management for Harrison County, MS, Joe Spraggins, the conference served as a forum for these delegates to share their general observations from their trip to the 35 participants attending. Also, two Cuban officials, meteorologist Dr. Jose Rubiera and Dr. Guillermo Mesa Ridel, who met with the delegation in Havana, also spoke at the conference to elaborate on the country’s hurricane defense system.

In his opening remarks, Spraggins warmly welcomed the participants and touched upon successes of previous conferences on hurricane preparation in Monterrey, New Orleans, Mobile and Galveston. Following Spraggins, Linda Atterberry, the former police chief of Biloxi, welcomed the panelists and participants to Biloxi on behalf of the Mayor’s Office. After the destruction of Hurricane Katrina and the BP Oil Spill, Atterberry believed that Biloxi will benefit from this “spirit of cooperation” between the two countries. She went on to praise the panelists who she recognized as the “finest example of a group of people, with no agenda that have gotten together in a horrific time and become a team.”

The first panel revolved around the CIP delegation’s May visit to Havana and featured four participants from the trip. Smith moderated the panel and began by expressing his discontent over the current state of U.S.-Cuban relations. Smith noted that the “Cold War is over” and therefore, “there is no reason not to discuss differences and resolve them in a more efficient way.” Smith then recounted that after Hurricane Katrina, Cuba offered 1400 fully-equipped medical personnel and although the U.S. ultimately declined, Smith sees the gesture as a sign of the Cubans’ willingness to help. Smith believes that with open dialogue, the two governments can finally see that they share concerns including the threat of hurricanes and the responsibility to protect the maritime environment. He said that despite the political distance between the two governments, both Cubans and Americans have responded positively to conferences and delegations, aimed at bringing them together.

During their hour-long discussion, the panel expressed their changed perceptions and attitudes towards the island. For most of his life, Spraggins viewed Cuba as “a threat,” but from the moment “he stepped off the plane, [he] saw Cuba as a great asset to help us during a time of disaster.” Director of Emergency Management for

Harrison County, MS, Rupert Lacy, reiterated that thought and said he “was trained” to think negatively of Cuba but now that he had the opportunity to visit, “he discovered something altogether different.” The panel said that the Cubans they met, including the President of the National Assembly, Ricardo Alarcon, were happy to see them all and were open to dialogue, a sentiment that Director of Emergency Management in St. Tammany Parish, LA, Dexter Accardo said, made him realize that Cubans “have the same desire” as Americans--to improve their standard of living. Due to the open and informative conversations with Cubans, Spraggins declared the May delegation “the greatest” of the CIP delegations to date. They also realized that Cuba and the Gulf region confront similar obstacles including an aging population, disintegrating historical buildings and threatening hurricanes. District 5 Country Supervisor Connie Rocko believed that “there are so many things that if the US could sit down in Cuba, we could see that we have the same issues they’re facing.” She lamented that “Cuba is a fascinating place, and it’s unfortunate that [Americans] cannot visit freely.”

More importantly, the group was impressed by Cuba’s civil defense program. The Cuban civil defense is built on year-long planning and education. In Cuba, the government provides shelters for personal belongings in case of evacuations and fully equips local hospitals and shelters, which makes the decision to evacuate much easier for Cubans. From an early age, children learn what they need to do in emergencies, culminating in a National Day of Exercise, a staged rehearsal of evacuation drills. Accardo greatly advocates the Cuban focus on “teaching children on what should be done, rather than telling them what to do” at the moment of danger. This group agreed that this focus on education is “lacking” in the United States, and they fear that this leads to complacency, especially in the once-destroyed Gulf region. The group supports the widespread implementation of school programs that will instruct children on the hazards, and in turn, they can then relay this information to their families. Outside the formal classroom, the Cuban government makes sure that all people are aware of the dangers. Lacy notes that Cuba looks to natural disasters around the world as a learning opportunity. According to Spraggins, the Cubans, as a result, “know how to take care of themselves and are not dependent on the government.” Rocko further underlined this argument, saying that “Americans remain governed by the up-down [...] while Cubans get their information and act accordingly.”

The group hopes that U.S. citizens will one day look to Cuba as a viable model during natural disasters and achieve their level of self-reliance in emergency situations. While Rocko hoped that the days of “fire drills and hurricane preparedness” could come back, Lacy believed that the two countries need to “bridge the [political] gap for the sake of education.” Spraggins sums up the panel’s general attitudes by commenting that “we do not need to learn twice about Katrina; we need to find a way to do what [the Cubans] do” in emergency situations.

A last-minute addition to the conference, Sabine Prokscha, a German journalist and Political Science Ph.D candidate at the Freie Universität (Free University) in Berlin, presented her research work, the “American-Cuban Learning Process in Disaster Management” during the next panel. She became interested in the interchange between the two nations after spending a year at Tulane University in New Orleans during the immediate aftermath of Hurricane Katrina in 2006. She sought to put the conference in an academic framework and raised the notion of policy transfer among states. While policy transfers usually occur between two politically or socioeconomically “similar” or “equal” countries, this conference highlights a unique transfer in which the relatively poorer country serves as the learning model for the richer one. A year prior to Hurricane Katrina, the United Nations declared the Cuban model of hurricane relief as the exemplary model for the entire region. She also provided a startling statistic regarding the likelihood of death and natural disasters from the 2004 UN Report “Reducing Disaster Risk” that stated that one is fifteen times more likely to die in a hurricane in the United States than in Cuba due to the country’s extensive preparation. In the future, Prokscha hopes to understand where these conversations regarding hurricane preparedness can lead the two countries, and she ended her talk by saying that given the history of political enmity between the U.S. and Cuba, the “conference is definitely a unique and momentous occasion.”

After working overnight to attain the Cubans’ visas, moderator Spraggins, was proud to introduce Cuba’s “weather superstar,” Dr. Jose Rubiera of the Cuban Meteorological Institute in Havana, for the next panel focusing on meteorology. Joining Rubiera on the panel were Mike Reader, Chief Meteorologist of local WLOX-TV MS, and Kenneth Graham, Meteorologist-in-Charge at the National Weather Service in New Orleans and Baton Rouge.

Rubiera first alluded to his late-night visa troubles, “hurricanes do not need a visa to arrive here.” He went on to describe the “natural cooperation” between the meteorological centers in Havana and in the U.S., a relationship that dated back to the late nineteenth century. Even at the height of the Cold War, the two centers regularly exchanged information regarding hurricane threats and other weather data. Today, the Cuban Meteorological Institute and the National Hurricane Center in Miami frequently call each other to exchange information; in fact, Rubiera is close friends with the American chairman of the National Hurricane Center. Thanks to the internet and social media boom, the two centers now enjoy instant access to radar data and satellite images that then is shared to the wider network, the World Meteorological Organization.

Moreover, Rubiera detailed his organization’s role during a hurricane emergency. Working in conjunction with other civil defense organs, the Cuban Meteorological Institute will issue warnings and watches, but ultimately, it does not have authority to order evacuations. It provides the National Evacuation Center with updated weather forecasts that are later transmitted via radio and television reports to the Cuban people. Rubiera stated that “we teach people in plain language about the weather, for if they do not understand the threat, they will not evacuate.” While the government oversees the “big things,” everyone “has a role to play” during an emergency and will “act accordingly.” People will self-mobilize to transfer belongings to a safe location or evacuate entirely. The Cuban Meteorological Institute also has to keep providing information during and immediately after the hurricane even with downed communication lines. For example, Rubiera remembers that in 2002, immediately after Hurricane Isidore, the Cuban state had to send trucks with loudspeakers to warn of the impending Hurricane Lili.

Unlike the uniform reports released by the National Forecasting Center, both Reader and Graham worried about the “weather shopping” that occurs throughout the Gulf and the United States in general. Although the men use the same information that Rubiera uses, people will surf the channels for the “best forecast” or become unwilling to follow advice due to the crying wolf syndrome; they “heard this warning before and nothing happened then.” The Americans touched upon the emotional toll that happens after the hurricane since they “can only send the warning, but not stop” the hurricane from hitting the region. Reader asserted, “it’s a battle that a [meteorologist] can’t win.” Both men called for more clarification of weather terminology especially in schools and stressed the importance of close relations among the meteorological centers. As Graham concluded his talk, “it’s not always about the science.”

At the final panel on public health, International Cuba Society member Randy Poindexter affirmed that these conferences on hurricane preparedness “opened spaces for conversation that transcend political troubles.” She proposed the formation of a Cuba Study Group that would actively work to improve U.S.-Cuban relations with more conferences and delegations in the region. She announced that CIP would be planning another delegation to Cuba with General Honoré of the Joint Task Force during Hurricane Katrina. She then introduced Dr. Guillermo Mesa Ridel, the Director of the Center for Disaster Medicine in Havana, a pillar of the civil defense system in times of hurricanes. Dr. Ridel summarized the work of his center whose mission is to mitigate disaster effects and aid the public health ministry at times of crises. The Center is also responsible for translating forecasts and data from meteorologists like Rubiera into concise information for doctors. Dr. Ridel proudly discussed how all Cuban and foreign medical students attending the country’s medical schools take courses in disaster relief and emergency medicine. Dr. Ridel’s center focuses on the “most vulnerable” of the population and will even send psychological first aid to evacuation centers after hurricanes to help civilians. Poindexter mentioned that Cuba rarely experiences suicides after natural disasters while New Orleans witnessed a spike in the days and months following Katrina. In a sign of solidarity, Cuban medical brigades have gone to Chile after the 2010 earthquake and Ecuador after the 2011 volcanic eruption to help locals there.

Dr. Randy Travincek, Director of Public Health for Harrison County, discussed the widespread post-traumatic stress disorder that affected most of the Gulf’s population following Hurricane Katrina. He remembers the horrors of the hurricane, and knows how medical preparation for natural disasters is vital. He even recalled that Harrison County “did not have bottled water for sixty days” after Katrina, and the county is still reconstructing the sewage system today. Dr. Ridel ended the panel by underscoring the “need for human capital” over money and technology and supporting projects that reach everyone. “We want to transmit the information we learned to other countries, including the United States,” he concluded.

Spraggins concluded the event by deeming the conference a “wonderful opportunity to listen to Cuban friends about this process,” and in turn, “we can work some more in the future over this issue.” Currently, the Center for International Policy and the Association of Gulf Coast Emergency Managers are planning future conferences and delegations in the Gulf and abroad to bring more awareness to the Cuban model of hurricane preparation and mitigation in an effort to foster collaboration between the two countries that transcends political differences.

#### LIST OF PARTICIPANTS:

1. Dexter Accardo, director of Emergency Management, St. Tammany Parish, LA
2. Linda Atterberry, former police chief of Biloxi, MS
3. Kenneth Graham, meteorologist-in-charge, National Weather Service New Orleans and Baton Rouge
4. Rupert Lacy, director of Emergency Management, Harrison County, MS
5. Randy Poindexter, International Cuba Society
6. Sabine Prokscha, Pd.D candidate, Freie Universität , Berlin, Germany
7. Mike Reader, chief meteorologist, WLOX-TV, MS
8. Dr. Guillermo Mesa Ridel, director, the Center for Disaster Medicine, Havana, Cuba
9. Connie Rocko, supervisor District 5, Harrison County, MS
10. Dr. Jose Rubiera, chief meteorologist, Cuban Meteorological Institute, Havana, Cuba
11. Wayne S. Smith, senior fellow and Cuba Project director, Center for International Policy
12. Brigadier General Joe Spraggins, former director of Emergency Management, Harrison County
13. Dr. Randy Travincek, director of Public Health for Harrison County

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