



INTERNATIONAL POLICY REPORT

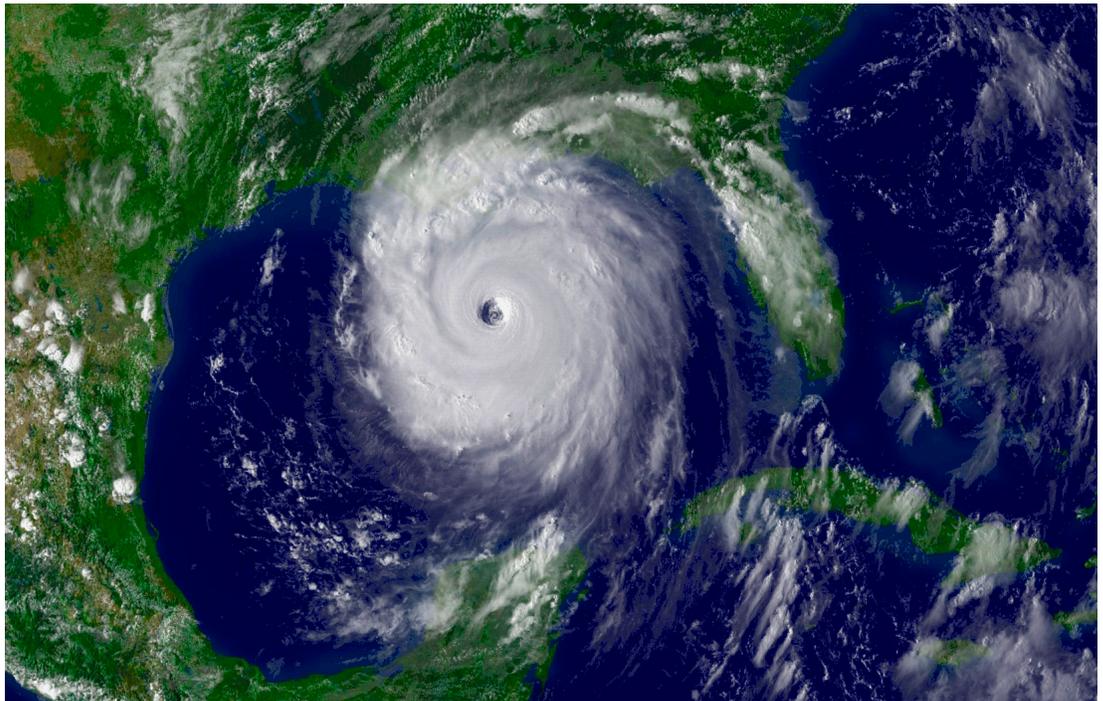
FACING THE STORMS TOGETHER CIP CONVENES FIRST U.S. - CUBA HURRICANE CONFERENCE

By Wayne Smith and Jennifer Schuett

August 2007

From name calling to bomb dropping, Cuba and the United States have bantered and battled for almost 50 years. But there are certain issues of mutual interest on which the two ought to set aside their differences and cooperate. One of the most urgent, and most promising, is hurricanes. Located just 90 miles apart, every year the two countries face hurricane season together yet very separately. With advanced detection and warning, the Cuban Meteorological Service effectively plans for storms, using a developed and trusted emergency system to deal with hurricanes. Only 18 people have died in the past ten years. The U.S. experience with Hurricane Katrina suggests that we could learn much from the Cubans, and benefit from cooperation; however, due to political obstacles, communication and cooperation between Cubans and Americans is difficult.

To promote greater bilateral understanding and dialogue, the Center for International Policy con-



Located just 90 miles apart, Cuba and the United States face hurricane season together every year, yet political obstacles make communications and cooperation between the two countries extremely difficult

vened the first hurricane preparedness conference in Mexico in late May. Organized by Wayne Smith of the Center for International Policy in Washington, D.C., with the assistance of Randy Poindexter of New Orleans and Jay Higginbotham of Mobile, it was hosted by Dr. Víctor López Villafañe of the Tecnológico de Monterrey. The two nations' experts agreed there is much to be learned through open discussions of past successes and failures, and much to be gained from cooperation before, during and after each hurricane.

HURRICANE CONFERENCE IN MONTERREY, MEXICO
MAY 24-25, 2007

U.S. PARTICIPANTS

Non-Gulf Coast Participants

WAYNE S. SMITH, Center for International Policy, conference organizer

PHIL COGAN, formerly with FEMA, now working in Washington, D.C.

MORRIE GOODMAN, formerly with FEMA, now in Washington, D.C.

From New Orleans

RANDY POINDEXTER, conference organizer

IVOR VAN HEERDEN, founder and co-director of the LSU Hurricane Center and author of "The Storm: What Went Wrong and Why During Hurricane Katrina the Inside Story From One Louisiana Scientist."

JED HORNE, *New Orleans Times-Picayune* and author of "Breach of Faith: Hurricane Katrina and the near death of a great American city."

MARK SCHLEIFSTEIN, *New Orleans Times-Picayune* and co-author of "Path of Destruction: Hurricane Katrina and the Coming Age of Super Storms."

From other Gulf Coast Points

JAY HIGGINBOTHAM, Mobile, conference organizer

JOHN S. DOSH, director of emergency management, Pensacola, FL

JOE SPRAGGINS, director of emergency management, Harrison County, MS

WALT DICKERSON, director of emergency management, Mobile County, AL

CUBAN PARTICIPANTS

DAGOBERTO RODRIGUEZ BARRERA, ambassador, chief of the Cuban Interests Section in the United States.

NORYS DE LA MERCEDES MADERAS, official of the Center for Cooperation of the Ministry of Foreign Relations of Cuba.

JOSE RUBIERA, head of the Department of Forecasting at the Cuban Institute of Meteorology

DR. JOSE BORGES RODRIGUEZ, surgeon, member of the Henry Reeve Medical Brigade, experience in Indonesia and Pakistan.

DR. DANIEL JAIME LORIET ANDREU, orthopedist, member of the Henry Reeve Medical Brigade, experience in Indonesia and Pakistan.

MERCEDES VICENTE SOTOLONGO, official from the Cuban embassy in Mexico.

Background

As the prognosis is for even more intense hurricanes in the years ahead, better communications and cooperation among the nations in their paths is increasingly important. There has been a modicum of cooperation between the U.S. Hurricane Center in Miami and the Cuban Meteorological Service in tracking storms. U.S. weather planes, for example, are able to track them through Cuban air space. But conditions for broader U.S.-Cuban cooperation do not exist. The U.S.-Cuban Hurricane Conference had to be held in a third country, given that the United States would not give visas to the Cuban conference participants and would not give licenses for many of the American delegates to travel to Cuba. The day before the conference was to begin, the State Department ordered Lixion Avila, a federal employee at the Hurricane Center in Miami, not to attend.

Even more striking evidence of this uncooperative attitude was seen a year earlier when, immediately after Hurricane Katrina, the Cuban government offered to send up some 1,600 doctors and 36 tons of medical supplies to assist victims on the Gulf Coast. The Bush administration was silent. A spokesman later commented to the press that such aid was “unnecessary.” Conference participants, however, could attest that this was not true. The doctors **were** needed and might have saved many lives.

The conference was called to address this uncooperative attitude and to call for greater communications and cooperation between the U.S. and Cuba. The conference had several additional objectives. First, to focus on how Hurricane Katrina and the disaster it brought to New Orleans and the Mississippi coast could have happened; second, to understand why the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) failed to respond effectively in the aftermath of Katrina, though in past years it had been rec-

ognized as one of the most efficient federal agencies; third, to hear about Cuba’s ability to offer emergency assistance to third countries in the face of natural disasters (especially in the area of medicine); and fourth, to better understand how Cuba has successfully defended against hurricanes and reduced their toll in recent years.

Introductory Session

Referring to Cuba’s offer to send doctors and medical supplies to the Gulf Coast after Katrina, Ambassador Rodríguez said he personally had delivered the offer to the State Department, emphasizing that the intent was purely humanitarian. “We simply wanted to help the victims,” he said. Cuba received no acknowledgement. It is difficult to see how such aid would be considered “unnecessary,” Rodríguez noted.

He went on to emphasize that the example of hurricanes pointed to the difficulties imposed on all communications between the American and Cuban academic and scientific communities. For its part, Cuba wished not only to expand these communications but to have a dialogue across the board. Nations may have disagreements, but how to resolve them without talking? Cuba, therefore, stands ready to begin a constructive dialogue with the United



Nearly 80 percent of New Orleans flooded after Hurricane Katrina and some 1,500 people lost their lives.

4 States, and not simply on how best to handle hurricanes, but on a wide variety of issues, such as immigration, drug interdiction, protection of the environment, and the struggle against terrorism.

Wayne Smith agreed. “We are neighbors,” he said, “and it is therefore imperative that we discuss common problems. Unfortunately, the Bush administration’s objective seems to be to reduce communications between the two countries to as close to zero as possible. That is short-sighted and unwise.”

The Tragedy in New Orleans

Jed Horne characterized the disaster at New Orleans as “the near death of a great American city,” and indeed it was. Some 80 percent of the city was flooded; property losses were cataclysmic; some 1,500 people lost their lives and tens of thousands were displaced – many possibly never to see their homes again.

All panelists agreed that the tragedy did not owe to Katrina’s strength. As the storm came ashore, its winds had dropped to Category 3 strength, though it was accompanied by an unusually high storm surge. Still, its worst winds missed New Orleans, instead hitting the Mississippi coast and causing extensive damage there. The failures leading to New Orleans’ near destruction were largely man-made.

First, there was the loss of wetlands to the south of the city. In years past, these acted as an impediment. But, as has been extensively reported, the wetlands are disappearing, in part due to historical decisions to build flood protection and navigation measures along the Mississippi River without

understanding the consequences. High levees kept spring floodwaters from nourishing interior wetlands and jetties at the river’s mouth directed sediment into deep Gulf of Mexico waters, away from wetlands. This prevents a rebuilding process. During the 20th century, more than 10,000 miles of navigation channels and exploration canals were constructed to serve the oil fields to the south of the city, exacerbating the natural sinking of wetlands and their erosion.

As a consequence, the wetlands are fast disappearing. This has long been known as a danger to the city. But efforts to restore the wetlands are barely underway. The state is proposing a \$25 billion restoration effort, but it remains to be seen whether Congress will pay for it.

Second, man-made levees and floodwalls in and around the city failed or were washed away. The storm surge was exceptionally high and resulted in the overtopping of levees in some areas. But damage would

have been significantly less if the walls and levees had held fast after the storm passed. Why did they break?

The 1965 Flood Control Act mandates that the levees be built to resist “the most severe meteorological conditions.” Had they been, they would have held. But, inexplicably, the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers did not revise their designs when new information indicated the existing designs were based on outdated information about the strength of hurricanes and determination of levee heights.

Katrina was a powerful storm, but the levees



Photo by Infrogmaton

and walls surrounding New Orleans were supposed to be designed to withstand its forces and limit the extent of flooding in the city. All panelists agree that the Corps of Engineers, and thus the U.S. government, bears most of the responsibility. They should therefore be responsible for building new levees and for taking measures to replace the wetlands. All the measures needed to make New Orleans safe would cost less than what we are spending in Iraq every three months.

Finally, the evacuation of New Orleans was a disaster. Many citizens with transportation got out quickly and safely. Those without, or who were in hospitals and nursing homes, were in serious difficulty leaving the city.

All panelists agreed that there was plenty of blame to go around among the city and state governments as well as FEMA. The awful scenes from the Astrodome, or of those hundreds of buses that might have been used to evacuate citizens, but instead remained parked and were inundated by the flood, will not soon be forgotten. In the final analysis, however, evacuation was FEMA's basic responsibility. FEMA was supposed to have led, to have had a plan. Rather than that, FEMA seemed clueless for days – until the worst had passed.

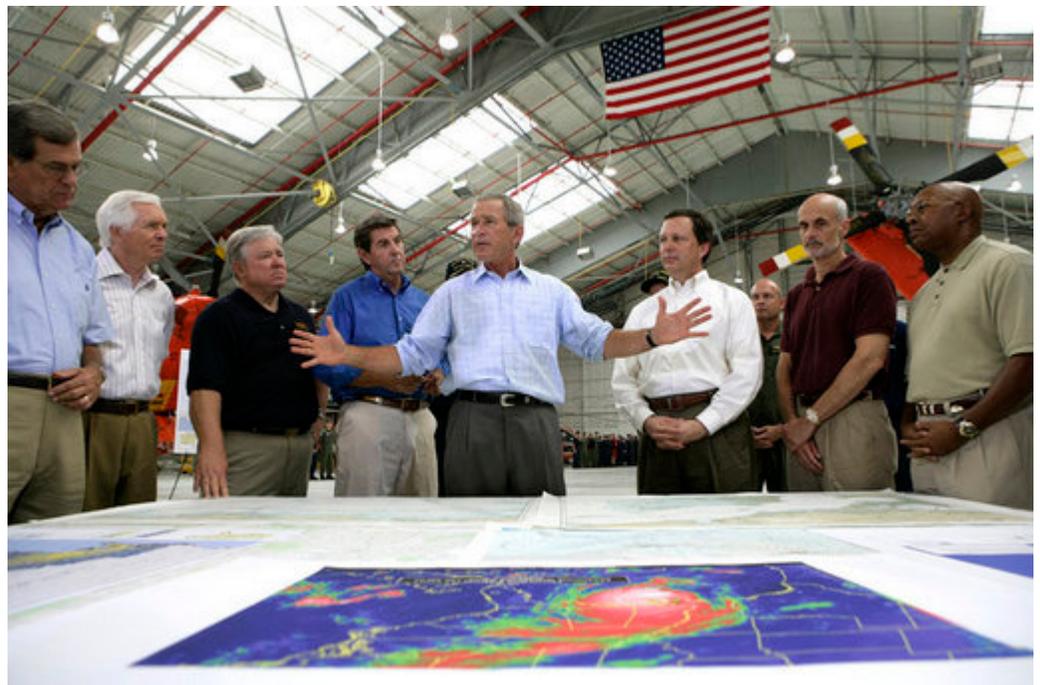
storm of 1900 virtually wiped out Galveston, 5 Texas. Cuban meteorologists at the time had warned that Galveston would be hit, but their fore-warnings were ignored by American counterparts. This is symbolic of what is continuing to this day: a lack of cooperation between the U.S. and Cuba.

Joe Spraggins reported that Katrina's wind gusts struck the Mississippi coast at speeds of up to 150 miles per hour with a storm surge of up to 38 feet. Katrina left 97 dead on the Mississippi coast and destroyed over 35,000 homes. Emergency crews continued to rescue people two weeks after the storm, and many evacuees spent three months or more in shelters. Harrison County, where Spraggins was the director of Emergency Management, had a fifteen-year old emergency evacuation plan and no mandatory evacuations. As the result of Katrina, the plan is being reformulated and a study has been launched on the need for sounder residential structures. "You can't face a hurricane in a clapboard shack," he said, "and expect to come out unscathed."

As the panelists from New Orleans had also noted, FEMA was overwhelmed and not able to respond to requests for help. Spraggins expressed appreciation to Florida for its assistance during the

...And to the East of New Orleans

Jay Higginbotham noted that hurricanes have always existed and some of the more intense ones have actually shaped history. In 1717, for example, a storm so devastated the port of Mobile that Louis XIV had to move the capital of La Louisiane to Biloxi Bay and later to New Orleans. He also noted that lack of bilateral cooperation had tragic consequences in the last century. The great



President Bush and FEMA Director Michael Brown after Hurricane Katrina

6 intense rescue and recovery effort.

John Dosh, of Pensacola, said that counterparts in Florida were happy to help. Pensacola had expected to be in the eye of the storm, but it had passed to the west. Biloxi and Gulfport had taken the brunt that Pensacola escaped.

Walt Dickerson noted that Mobile had also survived Katrina relatively unscathed. The storm passed to the west leaving no dead or wounded, and less severe property damage. Nonetheless, evacuation plans were ready. Some areas, notably Dolphin Island, were evacuated as a precaution. Still, much preparation and planning is needed to meet the hurricanes of the future.

What Happened to FEMA?

Panelists stressed that FEMA had indeed fallen from one of the most effective agencies in the federal government to, at least for a time, one of the least effective. Why was this so?

The first reason was leadership. The director under President Clinton, James Lee Witt, was an experienced and impressive leader. The director at the time of Katrina was not; he was a former Judge

and Stewards Commissioner of the International Arabian Horse Association with no experience in natural disasters.

Second, FEMA itself had been downgraded. The PATRIOT Act made FEMA a part of the Department of Homeland Security. During the Clinton administration, FEMA was an independent agency with its director at cabinet level, having direct access to the president. However, President Bush had taken away its independence and made it a part of Homeland Security. The FEMA director no longer had direct access to the president, and the agency was now subsumed in an organization whose whole attention was fixated on terrorism, not hurricanes or other natural disasters. These organizational changes to FEMA undermined its ability to react properly to Hurricane Katrina.

Cuban Medical Assistance Around the World

Cuba has a long history of extending medical assistance to other countries, including emergency medical brigades which it has deployed to 18 countries. At the moment, more than 42,000 Cuban medical personnel are providing services to people in 69 countries, many of which – Guatemala and Pakistan, for example—did not initially have friendly ties with Cuba. In Haiti, Cuba maintains the only major clinic to provide assistance to the thousands of poor Haitians lacking basic care. These services are fully funded by the Cuban government.

The Henry Reeve Medical Brigade was formed on September 4, 2005, and would have been deployed to the U.S. Gulf Coast to assist victims of Hurricane Katrina. Since Cuba had received no response from the United States, the brigade was sent to Pakistan following a devastating October 2005 earthquake.

Some 2,573 Cuban medical per-



Cuban emergency medical bridages have been deployed to 18 countries, one of which would have been the United States after Hurricane Katrina, had we accepted their offer.

sonnel were deployed to Pakistan, including 1,481 doctors and 915 paramedics. The cost involved 7 was enormous, with over 40 flights required just to get the brigade there. They were then deployed to the devastated areas, where they set up some 32 field hospitals under difficult conditions. The brigade members present showed a film illustrating that conditions were very difficult and the need immense. Over the months they were there, the brigade attended some 1.7 million patients and saved countless lives. President Pervez Musharraf, though an ally of the United States, has been unstinting in his praise of Cuban efforts to assist his countrymen and expressed sincere gratitude to the Cuban doctors.

Since its deployment to Pakistan, the brigade has provided emergency assistance in Indonesia, Bolivia and Guatemala. It stands ready now to assist wherever needed, perhaps in the coming hurricane season.

Cuba's Hurricane Preparedness

Rubiera began by expressing regret that Lixion Avila, of the Hurricane Center in Miami, was not present. He has had a very constructive, professional relationship with Avila over the years and believes Avila could have contributed valuable insights. Rubiera sympathized with the Gulf Coast participants. He recounted similar experiences in Cuba. In 1932, Santa Cruz del Sur was practically wiped out by a hurricane, causing 3,000 casualties. In 1963, Hurricane Flora claimed 1,200 casualties and over \$300 million in property damage. It was Flora that sparked the meteorological service modernization and the organization of a system for defense against natural disasters.

The president of each Cuban province's assembly of *Poder Popular* is the chief of civil defense. Strict provincial evacuation plans are distributed to each household, and practice evacuations ensure that evacuations go smoothly.

Rubiera stressed the importance of an informed public. Cuba's civil defense system is activated 72-96 hours in advance of any storm, and people are informed of the approaching danger. Alerts with evacuation orders begin 48 hours before the storm, with a final alarm 24 hours in advance, at which point all protective measures are rushed to completion. After the storm has passed, people return to their homes and begin damage assessment and repair.

Rubiera showed a film on the Cuban system— with its advance planning and practice sessions. Over the past ten years, Cuba has suffered a number of severe hurricanes with only 18 deaths resulting.

Next Steps

All participants agreed that the exchange of views and experiences had been invaluable, and that the dialogue must be continued in the interest of the Cuban and American people affected. Organizers said they would plan a follow-up conference to include a wider circle of emergency management directors.



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