

Mr. WEXLER. Mr. Speaker, like all Americans, my heart goes out to the millions of people displaced and suffering from one of our largest national catastrophes in our history. I hope the victims of Hurricane Katrina know that our prayers are with them in this most difficult hour, and I strongly support today's initial package to help the victims of Hurricane Katrina.

However, the administration's response to this catastrophe is nothing short of a national disgrace itself. How is it possible, how is it possible that the administration did not realize earlier what a catastrophe this is? There is a 90,000 square-mile footprint of disaster, and yet last night FEMA's director, Michael Brown, admitted that the administration had no idea exactly how bad the situation was. Even worse, he had previously characterized the security situation in New Orleans as "pretty darn good," and stopped just short of blaming the residents of New Orleans themselves for not evacuating.

The Bush administration failed the American people in advance of this hurricane by cutting critical funding in spite of the pleas by the Army Corps of Engineers, money that would have been used to reinforce the very levees that broke and flooded New Orleans.

We had plenty of money to pay for tax cuts for the wealthiest Americans, but none apparently to save the poorest Americans with an ounce of prevention.

In terms of the response to the disaster itself, what we have seen is unquestionably too little too late. While the President today said relief efforts so far were "not acceptable," how can he possibly be surprised by this deplorable response? How can he say that flooding was not anticipated? Quite to the contrary, it was expected. It was predicted. What is not acceptable is the President's response.

Mr. Speaker, 1 year ago we had an opportunity to learn from the disasters in my home State of Florida. Floridians experienced the consequences of FEMA's failure to deliver aid to communities who needed it the most. We saw the most vulnerable in our society, the elderly and the poor, being left out and overlooked. Last year we had the opportunity to prevent this from happening again. At the time I called for the resignation of the head of FEMA, Michael Brown, because of his grievous mismanagement in Florida. The President did not heed that call, nor did he see fit to make any substantial changes in FEMA.

Last year when the President's election was in question, his response to the hurricanes in the swing State of Florida was tremendously fast, even passing out ice in the immediate aftermath. Where was he in the immediate aftermath in New Orleans? Where were the trucks of food, where were the water buffalo? Where were the tents of aid that are just now being established and delivered?

When the issue was the medical condition of Terry Schiavo, the President

and the Congress flew back to Washington on Palm Sunday to intervene.

Why did the President delay so long for an entire American city in crisis? These have desperate people who need food, water, shelter and safety, not a photo opportunity, which even itself comes 5 days too late.

Every asset of the great American military in this hemisphere should have been devoted to America's humanitarian crisis starting on Monday at 5 in the afternoon.

I was in Aceh in Indonesia last month. I saw firsthand the greatness of the American aid efforts. Our response in the aftermath of the tsunami was one of America's finest hours. I was extremely proud as an American to see all the work that Americans and our country have done to stave off famine and disease for tens of thousands of desperate people.

Our aircraft carrier was off the Aceh coast within 2 days. If we can do that 12,000 miles away in Indonesia, why not in New Orleans? If we had even met that same standard, help would have been in New Orleans on Wednesday. We would not be seeing the horrific scenes we saw yesterday and today. It should have been self-evident on Monday that now is the time to use our enormous strength for the benefit of our own people.

Mr. Speaker, now is a wake-up call for America. This should never happen again. It should not have happened this time.

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HURRICANE KATRINA

The SPEAKER pro tempore. Under a previous order of the House, the gentleman from Connecticut (Mr. SHAYS) is recognized for 5 minutes.

Mr. SHAYS. Mr. Speaker, a disaster of this magnitude can be hard to comprehend. Convinced of our mastery of the physical world, we too often underestimate Nature's horrible, irresistible power.

A storm like Hurricane Katrina should puncture that hubris and occasion in its wake a humble assessment of our plans and preparations to meet the catastrophes Mother Nature sends our way.

As our fellow citizens in affected States struggle to cope, now is not the time to compound their fears with criticisms and second guessing about rescue and recovery efforts. But gaps and flaws in the joint local, State and Federal response are clearly showing. Today the President concluded those efforts so far were "not acceptable." They are not acceptable.

In the weeks and months ahead, those of us charged with oversight of homeland security issues will be asking hard questions about the effectiveness of the Department of Homeland Security and the Federal Emergency Management Agency, commonly referred to as FEMA, for their response, planning and execution.

Streams of refugees and reports of lawless gangs terrorizing the streets of New Orleans convey images more commonly associated with the Third World than with a major commercial port in the New World.

When a catastrophe, natural or man-made, rips through the social fabric, the first obligation of governments at all levels is to maintain order and deal with the short-term needs of the populace. The capability to reestablish public safety and protect the lives and property of law-abiding citizens must be brought to bear visibly and promptly.

Katrina's destruction took just hours, but reconstruction will take months and years. Together, we must work overtime until homes are built and people are back to work. We must continue to provide all the government support, money and manpower they need. We must continue to encourage private donations of food, blood, funding and services.

Although the burden of this storm has been borne by those who live in the region, this is truly a national challenge. I have heard from so many of my constituents, and all want to express their love and concern and convey their desire to be of help by lending their skills, opening their homes, providing financial assistance, and doing whatever else they can.

Two wonderful organizations in our district, Save the Children and AmeriCares, are working around the clock to provide relief. On our Web site, we have provided information on ways to donate money, food and water to the efforts.

Since Katrina washed away homes, businesses, families and lives, America has grieved deeply. We all mourn those who lost their lives, and we grieve with those who have lost their loved ones and friends.

While we cannot reverse Katrina's damage, we can begin to repair the region, which sustains millions of Americans and is vital to our Nation. Today's legislation will help us begin that process of rebuilding the area, providing support to law enforcement and getting Gulf Coast residents back to the business of their lives. In the days and weeks to come, there will be much more that follows.

HURRICANE KATRINA SUPPLEMENTAL RELIEF

The SPEAKER pro tempore. Under a previous order of the House, the gentleman from California (Ms. ZOE LOFGREN) is recognized for 5 minutes.

Ms. ZOE LOFGREN of California. Mr. Speaker, on behalf of the people of San Jose, California, I extend our deepest condolences to the thousands who have lost family and friends, and to those who are still searching for loved ones. As the chairperson of the California Democratic Congressional Delegation, I want to let the people suffering today know that we care and that we Californians stand with them.