

Testimony of Marty J. Bahamonde
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before the
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Good Morning. I appreciate the opportunity to appear before you today.

I am Marty Bahamonde. I work for the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) as a Public Affairs Officer for FEMA's Boston office and worked in FEMA's Headquarters in Washington, D.C. I worked in New Orleans prior to and immediately following Hurricane Katrina and have spent that past 6 weeks working at the Joint Field Office in Baton Rouge. I was the only FEMA employee deployed to New Orleans prior to the storm. I am here today to tell you what I experienced during the five days before and after Hurricane Katrina in New Orleans and specifically at the Superdome.

Let me briefly explain why I was there.

Since 2003, I have often been tasked by the Undersecretary of FEMA Mike Brown and his staff to do advance work for the Undersecretary in preparation for or responses to large disasters. My assignments included Hurricane Isabel in 2003, Hurricane Charley in 2004, Hurricane Dennis this past June and others. My responsibilities varied, but always included providing accurate and important information to FEMA's front office and Under Secretary Mike Brown. On Friday, August 26th, I was tasked by FEMA's front office to work advance wherever Hurricane Katrina was going to hit, which by Saturday appeared to be New Orleans.

I arrived in New Orleans Saturday night, August 27. Through the generosity of the New Orleans Emergency Operation Center (EOC), I was able to work in their office, and they provided me with shelter during the hurricane. The city EOC is located in City Hall, almost directly across from the Superdome.

On Sunday, August 28, I met the city staff at the EOC, got to know people and their roles at the EOC, and developed my own plans for my advance work, which included coordinating with the Coast Guard to arrange a flyover after the Hurricane passed. On Sunday, Katrina intensified to a Category 5 storm. I sensed a great deal of worry among everyone. I was worried too. My contact at FEMA Headquarters told me to leave New Orleans because it would be too dangerous. But like the thousands of other people left in New Orleans, the traffic jams leaving the city that morning prevented me from leaving.

The Superdome had been opened as a special needs shelter, but on Sunday, as thousands of residents were unable to evacuate, the Superdome became a shelter of last resort for anyone left in the city. By noon, thousands began arriving and by midday, lines wrapped around the building. It was also at that time that I realized that the size of the crowd was a big concern at the EOC. Terry Ebbert, the city's Homeland Security Director, made an announcement in the EOC that struck me. He asked the maintenance staff to gather up all of the toilet paper in city

hall and any other commodities they could find and immediately take them over to the Superdome. I specifically note this because it told me that supplies at the dome might be a serious issue.

I was between the Superdome and the EOC throughout the day on Sunday. I took pictures of the crowds and sent them back to FEMA Headquarters. On Sunday evening, I was at the Superdome to do media interviews and afterwards I met with the National Guard inside the Superdome to discuss a range of things including the expected arrival of a FEMA Disaster Medical Assistance Team (DMAT) from Houston. The National Guard also told me that they expected 360,000 “meals ready to eat” “MRE’s” and 15 trucks of water to arrive that night. As the storm intensified outside, a series of critical events began to unfold. Instead of 360,000 MRE’s, only 40,000 arrived. Instead of 15 trucks of water, only 5 arrived, and the medical team did not arrive either.

Later that night after most of the 12,000 evacuees entered the Superdome, I returned to the EOC around midnight to ride out the storm. By early Monday morning, with the storm upon us, reports from throughout the city were moderately optimistic; some low level flooding, no levee breaks and limited wind damage. But by 8 a.m., the nearest point of eye passage, the situation worsened, I could clearly see and reported back to FEMA Headquarters that the Hyatt hotel and other tall buildings in downtown had suffered incredible window damage, and I could see the roof peeling off the Superdome. I received several calls from FEMA Headquarters seeking confirmation of the situation on the ground.

At approximately 11 a.m., the worst possible news came into the EOC. I stood there and listened to the first report of the levee break at the 17th Street Canal. I do not know who made the report but they were very specific about the location of the break and the size. And then they added it was “very bad”. I continued to provide regular updates to FEMA Headquarters throughout the day as the situation unfolded.

At approximately 5 p.m., I rushed over to the Superdome because I had been notified that a Coast Guard helicopter was able to take me for a short flyover so that I could assess the situation in the city and plan for Under Secretary Brown’s visit the next day. My initial flyover lasted about 10 minutes and even in that short time I was able to see that approximately 80 percent of the city was under water, and I confirmed the 17th Street Canal levee break. I was struck by how accurate the 11 a.m. call was about the levee.

About 15 minutes later, I went back up on a second Coast Guard helicopter for approximately 45 minutes, and during this flight, I was able to get a real understanding of the impact of Katrina on New Orleans and the surrounding area.

Upon landing, I immediately made three telephone calls. The first was to Under Secretary Mike Brown at approximately 7 p.m. The second was to FEMA’s front office, and the third was to FEMA Public Affairs. That third call was to set up a conference call with FEMA Operations in Headquarters, the Emergency Response Team-National (ERT-N) team in Baton Rouge, the Regional Response Coordination Center (RRCC) in Denton, Texas, and with FEMA’s front

office, so I could make as many people aware of the situation that faced FEMA and the City of New Orleans.

In each report and on the conference call, I explained what I saw and then provided my analysis of what I believed to be the most critical issues we were facing:

- Ground transportation into the city was virtually non-existent because of the massive flooding. Any ground transportation must come from west of the city because the I-10 bridge to Slidell on the east side of the city was completely destroyed and there was no access from the north because of flooded roads. I also stated that the situation would only worsen in the next day or so because of the massive amounts of water being deposited into the city via the levee break. I described the levee break as being really bad.
- Search and rescue missions were critical as thousands of people stood on roofs or balconies in flooded neighborhoods.
- Supplying commodities would be a challenge as more and more people were headed to the Superdome to escape the flood waters and food and water supplies were already very short at the Superdome. I told them that the Superdome population was at almost 20,000 people.
- Medical care at the Superdome was critical because the staff there had run out of oxygen for special needs patients and more and more people needed medical attention.
- Housing an entire city worth of people would be a major issue as approximately 80 percent of the city was underwater to varying degrees and many areas were completely destroyed.
- Environmental issues would be major as I reported that an oil tanker had run aground and was leaking fuel.

I believed at the time and still do today, that I was confirming the worst case scenario that everyone had always talked about regarding New Orleans.

I then had a meeting with New Orleans Mayor Nagin and his staff of approximately 25 people, and I told them of the situation so that they would know what they faced in the hours and days ahead. It was a very emotional meeting for everyone. Following that meeting, Terry Ebbert pulled me aside and said, "You have done this before, what do we need to do now?" I told him that he needed to make a list of the city's priorities, actions and commodities, so that they could move forward with an organized plan. I also told him that they needed to let the State know so that FEMA could be tasked to help. He said, "Consider it done."

On Tuesday, August 30, I woke early to discover that water was rising around the Superdome and that by 6 a.m., 2-3 feet of water was in the streets around City Hall and the Superdome, and it was continuing to rise. I called Bill Lokey, the Federal Coordinating Officer in Baton Rouge immediately and told him of the rising waters and once again tried to express the seriousness of the situation. He told me he would have an operational team deployed to the Superdome later that day to relieve me.

About an hour later I was informed that Under Secretary Brown, Governor Blanco, Senators Landrieu and Vitter and others were planning on flying to the Superdome later that morning. At approximately 8 a.m., I went to find Mayor Nagin, who was at the Hyatt hotel, to inform him of

the visit and asked him to meet with the group. So I put on tennis shoes and shorts and walked through what was now waist deep water over to the Hyatt, and told the Mayor of the visit. I then walked through the water again to get to the Superdome.

At the Superdome, I spoke with the National Guard to get the latest conditions and it was obvious that the Superdome conditions were in rapid decline and that there was a critical need for food and water. I communicated this to Under Secretary Brown when he arrived later that morning. I told him that the Superdome conditions were deplorable, and that we desperately needed food and water.

During the subsequent meeting with the Mayor and the incoming group, Mayor Nagin pulled out his list of priorities and proceeded to tell everyone what he needed for his city and the residents.

By early Tuesday morning a FEMA Medical Team arrived at the Superdome and by early afternoon a four-member Emergency Response Team- Advance (ERT-A) arrived. For the next three days I worked and lived at the Superdome with the ERT-A team and with the FEMA Medical Team. Each day it was a battle to find enough food and water and get it to the Superdome. It was a struggle, meal-to-meal, because as one was served, it was clear to everyone that there was not enough food or water for the next meal. But because of some truly heroic efforts from FEMA staff, the Coast Guard, and the National Guard, enough food was always found and brought to the Superdome so that at least two meals were served each day.

While we battled food and water issues, rescue missions continued, more and more people arrived at the Superdome, and the medical conditions of many at the Superdome were in rapid decline, many people were near death. Working in absolutely deplorable conditions, the FEMA New Mexico DMAT Team saved lives. They worked with helicopter Medivacs to evacuate the most critically ill.

I would like to say that what has been lost in all of the discussions and criticisms of what did or did not happen in New Orleans, is that real heroes existed there and the FEMA New Mexico medical team did truly amazing things to save lives and make a difference. They worked 24 hours a day to treat patients and it can be said that without their work, more people certainly would have died. I am honored that I can call them co-workers because they are the best of what FEMA has to offer.

It is well known what happened over the next several days, most of it real, some of it hyped and exaggerated by the media, but all of it tragic. I am most haunted by what the Superdome became. It was a shelter of last resort that cascaded into a cesspool of human waste and filth. Imagine no toilet facilities for 25,000 people for five days. People were forced to live outside in 95-degree heat because of the horrid smell and conditions inside. Hallways and corridors were used as toilets, trash was everywhere, and amongst it all children, thousands of them. It was sad, it was inhumane, and it was so wrong.

By Thursday, plans to evacuate the Superdome were underway, but there were critical missions to still carryout at the Dome. But early Thursday, the National Guard approached the FEMA staff and told us that there was intelligence that a riot was being planned for noon and that they

did not want to be responsible for our safety so they recommended that we leave. Phil Parr, who was the senior FEMA official on the ground, made the decision to evacuate all FEMA assets from the Dome including the medical team. I strongly voiced my concerns about abandoning the mission and the critical need to continue with medical care and the coordination of food and water into the Dome. I pointed out that overnight, approximately 150 heavily armed forces arrived at the Superdome by helicopter raising the security level. I called Mike Brown to tell him that we were leaving. I contacted FEMA's front office to let them know that we were leaving. Within an hour, all FEMA personnel were ordered onto trucks and driven out of the Dome. Our leaving meant that FEMA lost visibility of the situation and operational control at the Superdome. I do not believe that it was the right decision for us to leave.

I have worked for FEMA for 12 years and have been a full-time employee since 2002. I have spent most of that time in the field, not behind a desk. I have responded to numerous hurricanes, earthquakes, floods, tornadoes and fires. At the personal request of Under Secretary Brown, I deployed to Bam, Iran in 2003 in support of the medical team that worked miracles in a city that was totally destroyed and resulted in more than 30,000 deaths. I have seen the worst mother nature can hand out, and I saw it in New Orleans and at the Superdome.

My purpose before you today is to help you understand what happened in New Orleans and when it happened, as I know it from my own perspective. I hope that what you learn from me and the many others that will come later, is a better understanding of emergency management and response. From this I hope that we are able to effect change, so that no other child, no other senior citizen, no other special needs patient, no other parent, and no other community in this country will have to experience the horrors and tragedy that happened in New Orleans and the entire Gulf Coast.

I will now answer any questions that you may have.