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Much Left To Do Post Katrina Congressman Moran reports on his trip to the region.

By **Jim Moran**
Friday, March 17, 2006

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Hurricane Katrina was the single largest natural disaster in American history. It flooded 90,000 square miles and displaced 400,000 people.

Imagine, if you can, every home in Northern Virginia's 8th District either washed off its foundation or packed with three-to-four feet of toxic mud and sewage. For 400,000 residents of the Gulf Coast, this was not something to imagine; it was reality. Today, six months after Hurricane Katrina struck, the toxic mud has hardened and, in most neighborhoods, homes, if standing at all, continue to sit completely uninhabitable.

These were the images that struck me upon my arrival in New Orleans last week, on a tour of the damage with representatives from FEMA.

In New Orleans' lower 9th Ward, where home ownership in the predominantly black middle class neighborhood had stood at 90 percent, cars lie upside down on roofs and homes stand naked with their walls ripped off revealing the physical contents of family life (from clothes and toys to furniture and television sets) strewn about the properties. More than a thousand residents were killed here, when an eight-foot wall of water came gushing down these streets. A thousand more are still missing, many of them children.

Most, if not all, of this tragedy could have been avoided if the Army Corps of Engineers had properly constructed the levees that were supposed to protect New Orleans in the first place.

When the Corps originally prepared to build the levees, it took boring samples to determine the soil's composition. The samples told the Corps that thick, impermeable clay lay below a bed of loose, black sediment. The Corps understood that steel sheets had to be driven deep enough to sit securely in the clay and that the levees themselves had to be built with clay rather than the loose sediment.

But these important actions were not taken. And nearly 20 years later, that's the main reason why 22 New Orleans' levees gave out.

During my visit, the Chief Corps Engineer during the Reagan Administration, General Thomas Sands, explained to me that a Corps engineer made some fatal errors when recording the results of soil samples that showed the depth of the clay. As a result, the plans called for steel sheets to be driven 14 feet into the ground in some areas where they should have been driven 34 feet. The Corps' failure to drive the steel sheets deep enough and construct the levees using clay two decades ago turned a dangerous natural disaster into a man-made catastrophe.

But history cannot be changed and now we must determine what the future should hold for New Orleans and the rest of the Gulf Coast.

As I have stated in the past, the Department of Homeland Security's initial response to Hurricane Katrina bordered on the criminally negligent.

Since that time, however, the federal government has been working to provide vital assistance to the region. FEMA has provided and paid for 63,000 temporary homes and trailers, repaired 81,000 roofs, written out 270,000 checks for more than \$1 billion, completed over a million housing inspections, made 8,000 small business loans, given \$164 million to 108,000 unemployed victims, paid out over \$12 billion in flood insurance and carted off 35 million cubic yards of debris.

I applaud the work of FEMA's civil servants. However, an enormous amount of work still needs to be done. Congress has appropriated \$18 billion for the cleanup and rebuilding effort. Another \$4.2 billion is needed to fulfill the federal government's initial commitment. The appropriation of these funds must be accompanied by strict requirements for oversight and transparency over how they are spent.

There isn't enough space in this article to detail the stories of graft and corruption that were described during my visit. But it is very clear to me that, before we make this substantial investment in the region, Congress must ensure

that the authority to expend these funds is given to parties who will exercise the authority properly and wisely, with solid monitoring and oversight taking place at both the state and federal level. Otherwise, the American taxpayer will be lining the pockets of contractors rather than rebuilding the city.

Upon leaving New Orleans, I reflected on the many challenges facing the Gulf Coast. Mardi Gras brought a much-needed boost in tourism and press coverage. But with Iraq and other foreign affairs taking the public's attention, I am concerned that the Gulf Coast's tremendous needs will not receive the attention needed.

New Orleans refines and transports approximately one-third of our energy supply. It is absolutely essential to the economy of the Midwest and South and is also part of the fabric of our life and culture. We owe it to ourselves and our children's children to lend a helping hand and a generous heart to the people of this great American city.



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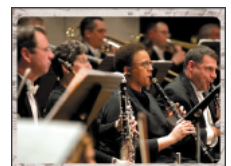
U.S. Rep. Jim Moran surveys the damage remaining in New Orleans earlier this month. Here, a boat continues to reside inside houses in a destroyed neighborhood.



Rows of houses remain with their roofs cobbled about and flooded.

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