

IN BRIEF

Brown defends himself on late FEMA response

WASHINGTON, D.C. — Embattled former Federal Emergency Management Agency director Michael Brown says he was initially unaware of desperate conditions at the New Orleans Convention Center because it was not a planned Hurricane Katrina evacuation site, according to a congressional memo.

After learning from television about the thousands of evacuees who gathered at the center, Brown ordered food and water be delivered there. But Brown, who on Tuesday faces a House inquiry into the government's slow response to the Aug. 29 disaster, told congressional aides that "there is no reason FEMA would have known about it beforehand."

In Katrina's aftermath, thousands of people gathered at the convention center, where adequate food, water and other supplies were lacking and where violence was common.

The memo, obtained by The Associated Press, was written by a Republican congressional aide who attended a 90-minute briefing Monday with Brown, who resigned as director of FEMA on Sept. 12.

Brown announced his resignation three days after Homeland Security Secretary Michael Chertoff removed him from overseeing the onsite disaster response, and Brown was highly criticized for being a Bush administration political appointee without deep emergency management experience. He denied accusations that he padded his resume.

Brown, who ran FEMA for more than two years, has a two-week "transition" remaining at the agency, during which he will advise the department on "some of his views on his experience with Katrina," Homeland Security spokesman Russ Knocke said. He is receiving full pay.

The congressional memo details Brown's self-defense — and attacks on other officials — in managing the response to the catastrophic storm and flooding that killed more than 1,000 people in Louisiana, Mississippi and Alabama.

Brown "acknowledged that he made mistakes," said a second Republican staff member who attended the briefing.

New Orleans residents return at mayor's invitation

NEW ORLEANS — The on-again, off-again official reopening of New Orleans was back on track as the mayor welcomed residents back to the Algiers neighborhood, where they found a curfew, limited services and no critical care hospital services.

A steady line of cars waited 20 to 25 minutes Monday to get through police checkpoints, said police spokesman Capt. Marlon Defillo. Defillo had no estimate of how many people had returned. Only scattered handfuls of people even bothered to return to neighboring St. Bernard Parish. They came to salvage what they could from homes where the waters from Hurricane Katrina topped the attics, where mold is blooming on the walls like ab-

stract art and toxic sludge covers the floors. Many said they wouldn't be back, not after the double blow of Katrina and Rita, which reflooded parts of the parish.

At a Texaco station in Algiers, owner Mohammed Mehmood found damage both from the storm and from looting. His gas pumps were vandalized, his computers did not work and his ceiling was about to collapse.

"I have immediate problems," he said. "I have no money. They broke and stole everything."

The neighborhood of 57,000 people lies across the Mississippi River from the main part of New Orleans and largely escaped flooding from Hurricane Katrina and Rita. Unlike most of the rest of the city, Algiers has electricity and clean water.

Mayor Ray Nagin also invited business owners in the central business district, the French Quarter and the Uptown section to inspect their property and clean up. But he gave no timetable for reopening those parts of the city to residents.

Governor's challenger urges gambling ban

Gubernatorial candidate Pete Sorenson is calling on his rival, Gov. Ted Kulongoski, to prevent hurricane victims from gambling away their federal relief money in Oregon.

In a letter to the governor, Sorenson asked Kulongoski to "direct all Oregon lottery and video poker outlets to immediately institute procedures to refuse to cash federal disaster relief checks or allow the use of federally issued debit cards issued as part of relief efforts."

He added that Kulongoski should ask Oregon tribal casinos to follow the same restrictions.

The Lane County commissioner is one of three Democrats planning to run against Kulongoski in the May primary. In an interview, he said his concern was "constituent driven," and he wasn't aware of any evacuees gambling away their relief checks.

Chuck Baumann, a spokesman for the Oregon Lottery, said he met with agency field managers on Monday. He said there was no talk of storm victims trying to use relief money for gambling.

Groups working with the evacuees said Sorenson's concerns are misplaced.

"The majority of people I've met are just looking to get back on their feet," said Ellen Cedergreen, a founder of Eugene Cares, which is helping look after an estimated 100 evacuees in Lane County. "They're not spending their money on anything other than trying to survive."

Holly Armstrong, a spokeswoman for Kulongoski, said Sorenson's actions were an attempt to get political mileage out of the tragedy.

"I think you're getting into dangerous territory when you're telling people who have been through a horrendous experience how they should and shouldn't spend their money, and assuming that they don't have the judgment to spend it appropriately," she said.

—The Associated Press

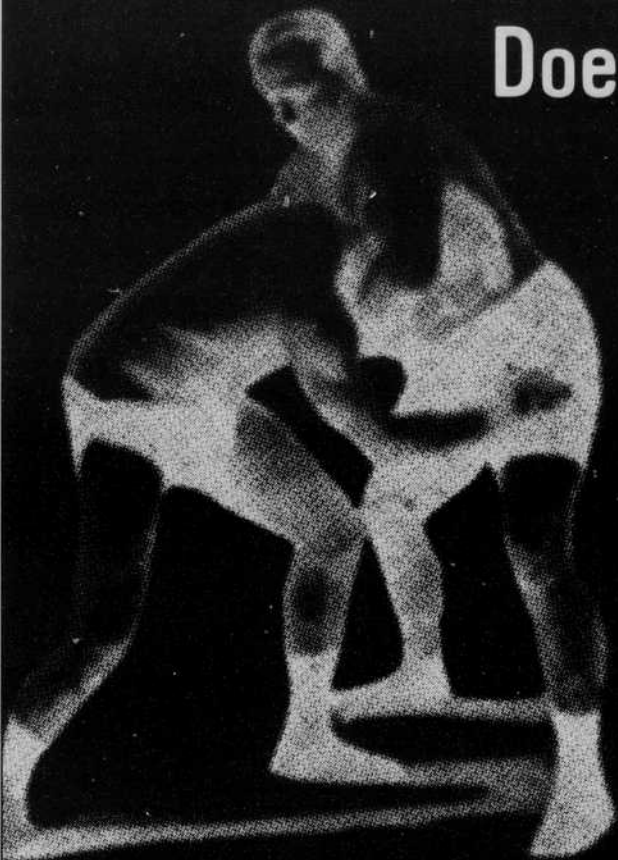
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