

No Promise on Stronger Levees

(AP) — The White House's top hurricane-relief adviser said Tuesday he has not decided whether the federal government should pay to make New Orleans' levees stronger than they were before Katrina.

Donald Powell declined to say how long it would take before a decision is made.

Katrina, a Category 3 storm, surged through the city's levees at

numerous points when it struck three months ago, killing more than 1,000 people.

Powell said he is gathering information from local and state officials and will eventually recommend to the Bush administration whether the levees should be strengthened to protect against more powerful Category 4 or Category 5 storms.

Gov. Kathleen Blanco and other Louisiana officials, as well as businesses and homeowners, have said the levees must be improved to protect against Category 5 storms if the New Orleans metropolitan area hopes to persuade people to return.

Such improvements would require federal funding and would take up to 30 years to complete.



Teacher Sabina Puri (left) greets former student Michael Bankston, 6, and his mother Hazel Bankston, as students return to Benjamin Franklin Elementary school in New Orleans Monday, the first regular public school to reopen since Hurricane Katrina hit three months ago. (AP photo)

Public School Opens in New Orleans

Hopeful sign, but difficulties ahead

(AP) — After two years of trying, Ronald Coleman was at last delivering his children Monday to one of New Orleans' best public schools - thanks in large part to a catastrophe.

"It took Hurricane Katrina to get my children in a good public school in Orleans Parish," Coleman said as he and his wife escorted their son and daughter into Benjamin Franklin Elementary.

On Monday, Franklin Elementary became the first regular public school in New Orleans to reopen since Katrina devastated the city on Aug. 29.

Before the storm, Franklin was a magnet school with selective enrollment for children with an aptitude for math and science. But now, Franklin is open to anyone in the city who wants to attend.

Welcome signs hung over the door and in the hallways as students began trickling into the three-story brick building in the Uptown section that was largely spared by the storm. The building has a capacity of 550, but only 210 students were registered and only about 120 showed up.

For the students, the day opened with a breakfast of granola bars, canned peaches and fruit juice in the cafeteria, where Sabina Puri, a teacher in the school's gifted program, had a tearful reunion with first-grader Michael Bankston. She had taught him in kindergarten last year and she had not heard from since his family evacuated.

"He started crying and I started crying," Puri said, wiping away a tear as she sat next to Michael.

Some private schools in New Orleans began reopening in October, but no public schools had opened, with the exception of two charter schools that are outside the local board's control.

Franklin's opening was both a hopeful sign for the city's recovery and a sign of the difficult road ahead in re-populating the city.

At least 10 public schools are expected to open in the coming weeks. Only about 4,000 to 5,000 students are expected to come back during the current school year, out of a pre-Katrina public school enrollment of close to 60,000.

One hurdle is the housing shortage. Puri and second-grade teacher Ava Price both were left homeless after Katrina. Puri is staying with friends, while her husband and children remain in Texas. Price is staying with an aunt.

Congressman Took Bribes

(AP) — U.S. Rep. Randy "Duke" Cunningham resigned Monday after admitting he took \$2.4 million as part of guilty pleas in a case that grew from an investigation into the sale of his California home to a wide-ranging conspiracy involving payments in cash, vacations and antiques.

The Republican congressman wiped away tears as he announced his resignation outside federal court in San Diego.

Authorities said Cunningham steered defense contracts worth tens of millions of dollars to the people who bribed him.

Cunningham, 63, entered pleas in U.S. District Court to charges of conspiracy to commit bribery, mail fraud and wire fraud, and tax evasion for underreporting his



U.S. Rep. 'Duke' Cunningham

income in 2004.

He will be released on his own recognizance until a Feb. 27 sen-

tencing hearing. He could receive a maximum sentence of 10 years in prison.

Virginia Man's Life Spared

(AP) — Virginia's governor on Tuesday spared the life of a convicted killer, an African American inmate who would have been the 1,000th person executed in the United States since the Supreme Court allowed capital punishment to resume in 1976.

Robin Lovitt's death sentence was commuted to life in prison without parole a little more than 24 hours before he

was to be executed by injection Wednesday night for stabbing a man to death with a pair of scissors during a 1998 pool-hall robbery.

In granting clemency, Gov. Mark R. Warner noted that evidence had been improperly destroyed after Lovitt's trial.

"The commonwealth must ensure that every time this ultimate sanction is carried out, it is done

fairly," Warner said in a statement.

Warner, a Democrat, had never before granted clemency to a death row inmate during his four years in office. During that time, 11 men have been executed.

The 1,000th execution is now scheduled for Friday in North Carolina, where Kenneth Lee Boyd is slated to die for killing his estranged wife and her father.

Town Scraps Plans for King Statue

Money goes to heating assistance

After two years of wrangling about what a statue of civil rights leader Martin Luther King Jr. should look like, a North Carolina town has decided to scrap the project.

The Rocky Mount City Council voted 4-2 Monday, to end negotiations with a sculptor. The \$45,000 funds that had been previously al-


located to the statue will be spent on winter heating assistance and other local needs instead.

"Whatever we do is going to continue to be vilified," said Councilman Lamont Wiggins. "Other than trying to build a consensus that won't be realized, I suggest we spend our money on more pressing issues facing the city."

The city block-sized memorial park with a sculpture of King was proposed several years ago.

The city, about an hour east of Raleigh in North Carolina, prides

itself on its association with Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. On Nov. 27, 1962, he addressed people in a high school gym, using for the first time words he would rephrase the following August in his famous speech at the Lincoln Memorial in Washington. "And so, my friends of Rocky Mount, I have a dream tonight," he said. "That one day, right here in Rocky Mount, North Carolina, the sons of former slaves and the sons of former slave-owners will meet at the table of brotherhood."



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