

## PERSPECTIVE

A WEEKLY JOURNAL OF COMMENTARY, ANALYSIS AND OPINION

SUNDAY

JANUARY 22, 2006

HURRICANE KATRINA  
THE STORM AND THE METAPHOR

## Shelter anyone?

In the dark, uncharted waters of crisis, communication is key

By Ed Minyard

FROM THE SIXTH FLOOR of the Hilton Hotel in New Orleans, I could tell I was witnessing something extraordinary. A major U.S. city lay in darkness only hours after a severe hurricane struck its shores. Levees were failing, thousands were left to fend for themselves within a crippled infrastructure, and floodwaters were rising at alarming rates. Communication among emergency responders and the remaining citizens of New Orleans was practically non-existent. It was a scene out of a war zone in a Third World country.

It seems unfathomable that an Ameri-

Ed Minyard is a partner of global outsourcing and infrastructure services for Unisys. He spent several weeks in New Orleans helping local, state and federal agencies restore communications networks.

can city in the 21st Century could be brought to its knees by one storm, but you only have to look as far as New Orleans to realize that this country will never be able to prepare for every crisis, even the ones we can see coming from miles away. For years experts have studied the potential impact a major hurricane could have on the flood-prone city of New Orleans. Even with advance warning of Katrina's arrival, they were incapable of mounting an effective response.

This calamity should serve as a wake-up call to the potential disasters currently threatening the well-being of our largest cities. Consider the consequences of a dirty bomb exploding in midtown Manhattan or an outbreak of avian flu in Chicago.

Now consider one of these disasters and ponder the dire outcome if the entire emergency response mechanism is as it was after Katrina. The end result: deaths by the thousands, perhaps millions, a

We're not prepared for an economic hurricane either

By Alan Tonelson

AS ITS BROKEN LEVEES AND drowned pumping systems made so painfully clear, if the Big One was widely predicted in New Orleans, it was never genuinely feared. After Hurricanes Katrina and Rita, disaster preparedness and prevention are no longer completely academic subjects.

If only such realism could be injected into U.S. policymaking before a widely predicted economic disaster finally strikes.

Hurricane-force winds of overspending are building storm surges of debt that tower over the levees and pumps available to American leaders. These mounting

Alan Tonelson, a research fellow at the U.S. Business and Industry Council Educational Foundation, is the author of "The Race to the Bottom."

imbalances could wash over the economy and leave America and the world submerged in a deep, long-term downturn.

This building economic storm has generated at most pro forma acknowledgments. Even worse, discussing crucial international dimensions of the looming emergency is usually considered taboo, even though numerous, ongoing policy mistakes on this front have heightened America's and the world's vulnerability.

Ironically, these failures were showcased in the most prominent way possible just before Katrina, when key global economic aristocrats gathered for an annual gabfest in Jackson Hole, Wyo.

Beneath the Tetons, bankers, policy experts, finance whizzes and academic gurus alternated fly-fishing outings and nature hikes with sweeping discussions, such as "The Greenspan Era: Lessons for the Future." The subtext of the discussion: Has the U.S. economy become a bubble inflated by investors and consumers

PLEASE SEE ECONOMY, PAGE 4

PLEASE SEE CRISIS, PAGE 4





Tribune photo by Heather Stone

Communication is key to control in disaster response, but communication networks are likely to be destroyed or damaged. For example, cell phone or radio towers may not be there.

## CRISIS: Emergency response must improve

CONTINUED FROM PAGE 1

panic among survivors in and around the affected areas and the crippling of local, domestic and even global economies. Given the magnitude, why are our disaster-response efforts failing?

For one, many of those responsible for providing disaster preparedness and response services do not realize that 80 percent of what is written in business continuity plans is questionable, and 20 percent of it is just plain wrong.

Additionally, many organizations do not have "instant infrastructure" capabilities to help them respond in the immediate aftermath of a crisis, and most are too reliant on communications networks that are likely to be destroyed or damaged in the situation.

Communication is key to control in disaster response. The inability to command equates to a relinquishing of that control. Cell phones and radios depend

on towers that may not be there. Large phone systems depend on power, and most have limited battery backup systems. None of them will function if severely damaged by wind, water, rubble or explosions.

Further, many organizations are relying on people who may not be capable—psychologically or geographically—of assisting in responding to a crisis situation. Their absence won't be a function of their level of commitment; rather it becomes human nature to protect family first. In developing a realistic response mechanism, companies need to plan with the assumption that a large number of those who are usually considered key first responders will not be there.

Finally, the entire emergency response community — from law enforcement to military to infrastructure experts — must turn the spotlight on themselves and conduct a Katrina post-mortem.

Specifically, chief information officers and security chiefs of government agencies responsible for the welfare of their citizens, or a corporation responsible to employees, customers and shareholders need to immediately re-evaluate everything concerning emergency planning and disaster preparedness. These audits will find many organizations are woefully unprepared to deal with this level of

disaster response.

Despite the dire circumstances, the situation is not hopeless. There are steps the public and private sectors can take immediately to make their organizations more disaster resilient. While we can't prevent most crises, we can prepare adequately by making communications the centerpiece of any disaster response mechanism. If you cannot communicate, you cannot command.

Organizations must have a "ready response" initiative in place that will enable them to communicate and respond immediately after a disaster. Ready response could entail pre-staging essential communications equipment, durable mobile communications vehicles, disaster-recovery sites outside the geographic area, mobile command centers and security to protect physical assets. The next critical step is to choose the key people to implement the plan and ensure they understand their roles and responsibilities in advance.

Government organizations and companies alike have an inherent responsibility to create a resilient model by which their people and infrastructure can respond effectively to the needs of their constituents. By doing so, some good can actually come from the Katrina disaster. We can prevent the crippling of another great American city.