

White House, Chertoff faulted over Katrina

WASHINGTON (AP)—The White House and Homeland Security chief Michael Chertoff failed to provide decisive action when Hurricane Katrina struck, congressional investigators said Wednesday in a stinging assessment of slow federal relief efforts.

The White House had no clear chain of command in place, investigators with the Government Accountability Office said, laying much of the blame on President Bush for not designating a single official to coordinate federal decision-making for the Aug. 29 storm. Bush has accepted responsibility for the government's halting response, but for the most part then-FEMA Director Michael Brown, who quit

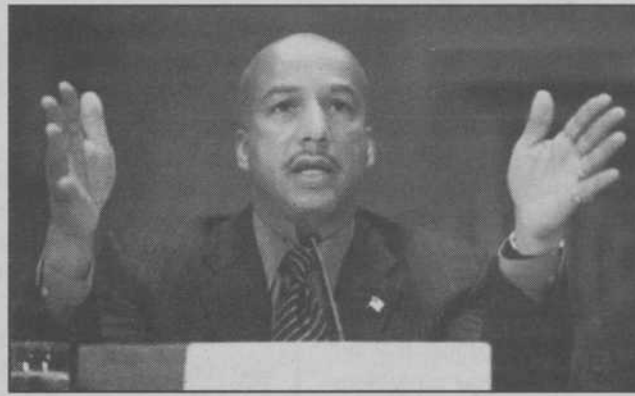
days after the hurricane hit, has been the public face of the failures.

"That's up to the president of the United States," GAO Comptroller General David M. Walker told reporters after being asked whether Chertoff should have been the lead official during the emergency.

"It could have been Secretary Chertoff" or someone on the White House staff, Walker added. "That's up to the president."

The report, which the congressional agency said was preliminary, also singled out Chertoff for several shortcomings.

Chertoff has largely escaped direct criticism for the government's poor preparations and slow rescue efforts.



Controversial New Orleans Mayor Ray Nagin testifies at the Senate committee on Homeland Security and Government Affairs on Wednesday in Washington D.C.

The Homeland Security Department angrily responded to the GAO report, calling the preliminary findings a publicity stunt riddled with errors. Homeland Security oversees the Federal Emergency Management Agency and issued a national plan last year for coordinating federal disaster response with state and local agencies.

In their nine-page report, investigators noted that they had urged the Clinton White House to appoint a single disaster coordinator more than a decade ago after the destruction wrought by Hurricane Andrew. Still, they said, the Bush administration continued the failure with the lack of a clear chain of command and that led to internal confusion when Katrina struck.

"In the absence of timely and decisive action and clear leadership responsibility and accountability, there were multiple chains of com-

mand," the report found.

The assessment — the first of several reports about the response to Katrina — noted that Chertoff authorized additional federal assistance to overwhelmed state and local resources on Aug. 30, a day after the storm hit. But Chertoff did not specifically classify the storm as a catastrophic disaster, which would have triggered a faster response.

"As a result, the federal response generally was to wait for the affected states to request assistance," the report found.

In another stab at Chertoff, the report called for Homeland Security to provide stronger advance training and planning for future disasters — including taking better advantage of the military's ability to rescue and evacuate victims, provide supplies and assess damage.

Homeland Security

spokesman Russ Knocke called the report misleading because federal officials and supplies were already at the Gulf Coast before Katrina hit. He said Chertoff did not activate a government plan for dealing with catastrophes because it is used only to respond to unexpected disasters.

The report "displays a significant misunderstanding of core aspects of the Katrina response that could have easily been corrected in the most basic conversations with" Homeland Security leaders, Knocke said.

Rep. Tom Davis, R-Va., who is leading a special House investigation of the Katrina response, said the GAO findings will be included in his own panel's conclusions, which are due Feb. 15.

"I'm very hopeful that our final report will answer a lot of questions the American people have," Davis said. "The most obvious being: How could our government fail so badly?"

New Orleans Mayor Ray Nagin, in Washington to testify before a separate Senate-led Katrina inquiry, said he was not surprised at the report's conclusions.

"One of the big challenges in this event was the chain of command issue," Nagin told The Associated Press. "And for something that was a multistate event, something that pretty much over-

whelmed local government, we need to figure out how to do this better in the future."

However, a transcript of an Aug. 28 briefing as Katrina bore down on the region indicates Gulf Coast state officials were satisfied with the federal assistance they had so far received.

"I want to say thank you very much for all that you're doing," Louisiana emergency preparedness deputy director Col. Jeff Smith told Homeland Security and FEMA officials during the call, in which President Bush also participated, according to the transcript obtained by The Associated Press. "I think that at this point in time our coordination is as good as it can be."

Asked by FEMA's Brown if Louisiana had any unmet needs at that point, or if there were anything else the federal government could provide, Smith said: "Mike, no."

Until he was relieved of his onsite duties on Sept. 9, Brown was the top federal officer in the Gulf Coast. But GAO concluded that his authority was unclear, leading to an "incomplete understanding of roles and responsibilities" for other federal agencies.

The report praised the Coast Guard, the Pentagon, the U.S. Postal Service and the National Finance Center for taking a "lean forward" approach to preparing for and responding to Katrina.

DNA freedom: Man jailed for 25 years

By K. Chandler
Special to Sentinel-Voice

FORT LAUDERDALE, Fla. (NNPA) — It's happened once again.

Alan Crotzer, 45, who spent nearly a quarter century behind bars was recently cleared by DNA evidence of any involvement in the July 8, 1981, armed robbery and rape for which he received a prison sentence of 130 years.

Three years after he sought help from the New York-based Innocence Project — a non-profit legal clinic handling cases where post-conviction DNA testing can yield proof of innocence — Crotzer walked out of prison a free man after being incarcerated for more than half his life.

After being identified in a lineup by the 38-year-old rape victim, Crotzer, along with his two brothers Corlenzo James and Douglas James, were found guilty in 1982 by an all-White jury of robbing a Pensacola family in town for an opticians' convention.

In addition, Douglas James and Crotzer were convicted of the double abduction and rape of the 38-year-old Pensacola mother and her 12-year-old daughter.

Douglas James, now 52, and serving a sentence in excess of 100 years has vehemently denied Crotzer's involvement, saying he never was at the scene of the crime, and that he and Corlenzo, along with a childhood friend, were the real perpetrators.

Crotzer, whose mother died while he was in prison, will be staying with his sister Wanda Sanders in St. Petersburg as he tries to put his life back together. Responding to her brother's long-awaited release, Sanders became overwhelmed with emotion, crying, "Oh Lord, I thank you Jesus!"

As of a week ago, there were 173 people who have been exonerated through post-conviction DNA testing.

Incredibly, Florida, which bears the dubious distinction of wrongfully convicting more innocent people than any other state in the entire country, is still considering whether to impose a fixed deadline for future DNA appeals.

The questions arise: How many more are out there serving lengthy sentences for capital offenses they did not commit? And what about all the others — men and women in prison convicted of lesser crimes but equally as innocent? What accountability measures can be applied to put pressure on prosecutors so they will cease rushing to convict based on spurious and often questionable evidence?

Despite being convicted of multiple offenses including sexual assault and armed robbery many people in Crotzer's old St. Petersburg neighborhood never wavered in their belief that he was innocent. Unfortunately, it took the law 24 years to catch up to them.

K. Chandler writes for the Westside Gazette.

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