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Ministers criticize 'deplorable' fed response to Katrina recovery

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Louisiana religious leaders criticized Congress and the Bush administration Wednesday for failing to develop a coordinated plan to allow New Orleans residents to return home and reclaim their city.

Nearly two months after Hurricane Katrina flooded the city and forced the evacuation of hundreds of thousands of its residents, the ministers said the federal government still has not provided a commitment to enhance the city's hurricane defenses to a level that residents would feel safe returning.

"The response of government has been deplorable," said the Rev. Michael Jacques, pastor of St. Peter Claver Church in New Orleans. "Shame on you for sitting in your beautiful homes and in your offices while your citizens in the United States are treated like refugees."

Congress moved quickly after Katrina to provide \$62 billion in emergency relief to the Gulf Coast states. But subsequent proposals to hurricane proof Louisiana's coast and rebuild and revitalize the city have stalled while lawmakers battle over budget cuts to pay for the recovery.

Sen. Mary Landrieu, D-La., said the unprecedented nature of the destruction caused by Katrina has made it difficult for lawmakers and administration officials to understand how much the state really needs to recover.

The ministers from New Orleans and Baton Rouge, where tens of thousands of displaced New Orleans residents are still taking shelter, said they planned to press lawmakers and administration officials for assurances that displaced families and Louisiana residents will be given first priority for jobs funded by federal recovery funds.

They said they also are seeking housing and community development funds, particularly for families who lost their homes in the flood and did not have insurance because federal officials had told them the levees in New Orleans would protect them.

"Families and churches cannot move forward until Washington decides how New Orleans will be protected and what federal resources will be available to rebuild the great city of New Orleans," said Steven Beckham, pastor of the First Little Rock Baptist Church in Baton Rouge.

"We're very concerned because it's been more than two months and still there's not been any precise direction given," he said.

