

U.S. Clergy Push Washington to End Katrina Aid Delays

Around 150 clergy members in the U.S. are urging Washington to speed up the delivery of billions of dollars earmarked for post Hurricane Katrina-aid.

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Some 150 U.S. religious leaders are up in arms over delays in billions of dollars of Hurricane Katrina aid following a tour of the New Orleans area that remains in need of urgent reconstruction.

150 clergy from 80 cities toured neighbourhoods and churches left devastated by the hurricane in an attempt to throw into the public limelight the lack of action by Congress to rebuild the region, known for its historic churches.

The clergy members urged Congress to quickly pass US\$42 million in supplemental housing funding requested by the state of Louisiana that would enable the thousands of evacuees forced to relocate across the country to finally return home.

The pastors were gathered for a major summit to launch a national campaign to make Congress act, reports Reuters.

Their visit to the Gulf Coast city also took in areas around New Orleans that remain devastated by Katrina 7 months on, including the Ninth Ward, Gentilly Woods and New Orleans East.

The post Katrina population of New Orleans remains under 200,000, less than half of the pre-storm figure, with an estimated 150,000 homes still in need of reconstruction or renovation

"I'm just overwhelmed with the magnitude of the neglect," Rev. Heyward Wiggins of the Camden Bible Tabernacle in Camden, New Jersey, told Reuters after the tour. "It's as if it's become a forgotten city."

Fresh funding for Gulf Coast reconstruction totalling US\$19 billion was passed by the House of Representatives on Thursday but the US\$4.2 billion requested by Louisiana for housing programmes has yet to be cleared.

The religious leaders were in New Orleans under the umbrella of the People Improving Communities through Organising, or PICO, a network of faith-based organisations. They continue to oppose proposals from some lawmakers to share the earmarked funds among all the Gulf Coast states, urging that it should go solely to Louisiana.

The gathered leaders also called on Congress to support a bipartisan initiative for Louisiana to obtain rebuilding money from offshore oil and gas royalties and lease sales.

The Rev. Rayfield Burns of the Metropolitan Missionary Baptist Church in Kansas City, Missouri, said he and his colleagues were calling on their congregations and communities to press lawmakers into speeding up action on post-Katrina reconstruction so those "in exile" in other parts of the United States can be "freed."

They said that included pressing the Federal Emergency Management Agency into quicker action on the provision of trailers and other temporary housing to those who need it.

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