

HSPI Commentary Series

FLOODED WITH HELP—BUT STILL FLAILING

HSPI Commentary 13

June 24, 2010

Daniel Kaniewski and James Carafano

We were not prepared to make the best use of foreign support. Some foreign governments sought to contribute aid that the United States could not accept or did not require. In other cases, needed resources were tied up by bureaucratic red tape. But more broadly, we lacked the capability to prioritize and integrate such a large quantity of foreign assistance into the ongoing response.¹

This quote from the previous Administration's Hurricane Katrina lessons learned report is (unfortunately) equally applicable to the current oil spill disaster.

Prior to Katrina, the U.S. had never accepted aid from foreign countries. As a result of the lessons learned from Katrina, the Federal government revised its response plan and developed an interagency process to coordinate offers of foreign assistance for a domestic response.² Further, the State Department developed procedures specifically addressing the issue of present concern:

Procedures for conveying information on needs to the international community, requesting foreign assistance, and reviewing offers of foreign assistance are described in the International Assistance System Concept of Operations.³

But today it is unclear if any of these mechanisms—developed as a direct result of the Katrina experience—are being utilized.

¹ The White House, *The Federal Response to Hurricane Katrina: Lessons Learned*, February 2002, 62. <http://georgewbush-whitehouse.archives.gov/reports/katrina-lessons-learned.pdf>

² National Response Framework, *International Coordination Support Annex*, January 2008. <http://www.fema.gov/pdf/emergency/nrf/nrf-support-internatl.pdf>.

³ *Ibid*, INT-5.

When asked about the Katrina example earlier this month, the State Department responded that, "This is different... We are and will be drawing on the foreign assistance."⁴ Tell that to the international community.

Twenty-nine countries and international organizations have offered equipment and experts, but only a few such offers have been accepted.⁵ Most countries have been greeted not by open arms, but by silence.



Take Sweden, for example. After offering assistance shortly after the oil rig fire, the Swedes received a request for information about their specialized assets from the State Department on May 7. Swedish officials answered the inquiry the same day, saying that some assets (such as booms) could be sent within days and that it would take a couple of weeks to send ships. There are three brand new Swedish Coast

Guard vessels built for dealing with a major oil spill cleanup. Each has a capacity to collect nearly 50 tons of oil per hour from the surface of the sea and can hold 1,000 tons of spilled oil in their tanks.

But according to the State Department's recently released chart on international offers of assistance, the Swedish equipment and ships are still "under consideration."⁶ So months later, the booms sit unused and brand new Swedish ships still sit idle in port, thousands of miles from the Gulf.

The delay in accepting offers of assistance is unacceptable. The international community possesses specialized equipment and technical expertise that, if the U.S. has at all, is in limited supply. Even now that the Obama Administration is finally waking up to this reality—

⁴ Eilperin, Juliet and Glenn Kessler. "After delays, U.S. begins to tap foreign aid for gulf oil spill," *Washington Post*, June 14, 2010. <http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2010/06/13/AR2010061304232.html>

⁵ U.S. Department of State, *Chart on Deepwater Horizon Oil Spill Response: International Offers of Assistance from Governments and International Bodies*, June 23, 2010 10:30 AM. <http://www.state.gov/documents/organization/143488.pdf>

⁶ *Ibid.*

months into the disaster—by slowly accepting offers of assistance,⁷ there seems to be a failure to coordinate the assistance offered and to communicate the Administration's needs to the international community. Both bear striking resemblance to the failed response to Hurricane Katrina.

As first reported in the *Washington Post*, the Obama Administration, rather than expeditiously accepting the offers, hesitated and then made the decision not to accept the aid:

On May 5, Crowley announced that 13 international offers had been received and that decisions on what to accept would be made "in the next day or two." Two weeks later, the State Department said the government saw no reason to accept any of the offers.⁸

In doing so, the Administration may well have frustrated our allies, who we increasingly call upon for cooperation on shared national security priorities abroad (such as Afghanistan and Iraq).

Equally concerning, the Obama Administration has been characteristically deferential to BP, rather than exercising leadership on the issue:

"We'll let BP decide on what expertise they do need," State Department spokesman Gordon Duguid told reporters on May 19. "We are keeping an eye on what supplies we do need. And as we see that our supplies are running low, it may be at that point in time to accept offers from particular governments."⁹

And just last week, feeling increasing pressure at home and abroad to accept the international aid, a State Department spokesperson gave little more than lip service to the offers. Rather than discussing how the Administration has communicated with the international community, the spokesperson directed reporters to the on-scene command and the chart the Department developed.¹⁰ Such an answer provides little confidence that the international effort is coordinated.

⁷ Eilperin, Juliet and Glenn Kessler. "After delays, U.S. begins to tap foreign aid for gulf oil spill," *Washington Post*, June 14, 2010. <http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2010/06/13/AR2010061304232.html>

⁸ *Ibid.*

⁹ *Ibid.*

¹⁰ Toner, Mark C., Acting Deputy Department Spokesman, *U.S. Department of State Daily Press Briefing*, June 18, 2010. <http://www.state.gov/r/pa/prs/dpb/2010/06/143358.htm>

The State Department's chart¹¹ raises more questions than it answers. Most of the offers—many of which are months old—are simply listed as “under consideration.” This provides no real indication of the status of the request to the American public or the foreign governments who have stepped up to help us meet this challenge.

The chart also highlights that most of the offers require reimbursement. Noting this fact, the *Associated Press* highlighted the aid that the U.S. has historically provided to some of the nations offering assistance for the oil spill.¹² But this article misses the point. During Hurricane Katrina, thirty-six foreign nations and international organizations donated \$126 million¹³ and forty-three provided in-kind donations to the U.S.¹⁴ Other countries have similar examples. Sweden, for instance, has provided disaster relief to countries in Africa at no cost to the recipient. But when Sweden was itself hit by heavy windstorms a couple of years ago, the Swedes paid Germany and the Czech Republic for the emergency power units they provided. This distinction between humanitarian aid and technical assistance is an important one.

More fundamentally, the cost factor should be irrelevant, given that this is an unprecedented environmental disaster with grave economic consequences to the Gulf region, and that the costs for foreign assistance would be borne by BP. With \$20 billion now set aside for the response and recovery effort, we certainly hope that cost is not a consideration, despite it being a factor listed on the State Department's chart.

Sooner rather than later, the Obama Administration needs to acknowledge the parallels to Hurricane Katrina, rather than continue its practice of denial. If they don't, the independent commission established by the President¹⁵ surely will. And most urgently, as oil continues to spew from the ocean floor, the Administration needs to learn how to say “yes” to the countries that can help bail us out from this disaster.

¹¹ U.S. Department of State, *Chart on Deepwater Horizon Oil Spill Response: International Offers of Assistance from Governments and International Bodies*, June 23, 2010 10:30 AM. <http://www.state.gov/documents/organization/143488.pdf>

¹² Lee, Matthew and Eileen Sullivan, “Cleanup aid from overseas comes with a price tag,” *Associated Press*, June 18, 2010.

http://hosted.ap.org/dynamic/stories/U/US_GULF_OIL_SPILL_FOREIGN_GENEROSITY?SITE=AP&SECTION=HOME&TEMPLATE=DEFAULT

¹³ Government Accountability Office, *Hurricane Katrina: Comprehensive Policies and Procedures Are Needed to Ensure Appropriate Use of and Accountability for International Assistance*, April 2006, 3. <http://www.gao.gov/new.items/d06460.pdf>

¹⁴ *Ibid*, 18.

¹⁵ The White House, *Weekly Address: President Obama Establishes Bipartisan National Commission on the BP Deepwater Horizon Oil Spill and Offshore Drilling*, May 22, 2010. <http://www.whitehouse.gov/the-press-office/weekly-address-president-obama-establishes-bipartisan-national-commission-bp-deepwa>

Daniel Kaniewski is Deputy Director of the Homeland Security Policy Institute (HSPI). Previously he was Special Assistant to the President for Homeland Security and Senior Director for Response Policy in the Bush Administration where he served as an author of the “Federal Response to Hurricane Katrina: Lessons Learned.” James Carafano is Deputy Director, The Kathryn and Shelby Cullom Davis Institute for International Studies and Director, Douglas and Sarah Allison Center for Foreign Policy Studies at the Heritage Foundation. Carafano is also an HSPI Senior Fellow.

HSPI Commentaries are intended to promote better policy by fostering constructive debate among leading policymakers, academics, and observers. Designed to be timely and relevant, HSPI Commentaries seek to illuminate the issues of the day by raising important questions and challenging underpinning assumptions. Opinions expressed in Commentaries are those of the author(s) alone. Comments should be directed to hspi@gwu.edu.

Founded in 2003, The George Washington University Homeland Security Policy Institute (HSPI) is a nonpartisan think and do tank whose mission is to build bridges between theory and practice to advance homeland security through an interdisciplinary approach. By convening domestic and international policymakers and practitioners at all levels of government, the private and non-profit sectors, and academia, HSPI creates innovative strategies and solutions to current and future threats to the nation.