

CONFERENCE REPORT

U.S. - Cuba Conference on Hurricane Cooperation

San Luis Resort and Conference Center
Galveston, Texas
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A Report by Elizabeth Newhouse

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SUMMARY

Since 2007, the Center for International Policy (CIP) has sponsored delegations and conferences of officials from the United States Gulf Coast and from Cuba's hurricane, civil defense and medical emergency services to discuss hurricane preparedness and explore ways to work together. This series of meetings culminated in a well-attended conference in New Orleans in November 2009 to review lessons learned. Both U.S. and Cuban participants found the exchanges informative and worthwhile and vowed to stay in touch to continue to share ideas and practices (see the conference report *Putting Preparedness Above Politics: U.S.-Cuba Cooperation Against the Threat of Hurricanes*, CIP, January 2010). In addition, U.S. conferees agreed on a proposal urging President Barack Obama to suspend the embargo in the event of a hurricane so that U.S. companies could quickly step in to help Cuba rebuild.

The success of CIP's 2007-2009 hurricane exchanges led conference organizer and Cuba program director Wayne S. Smith to organize two additional delegations to Havana in 2010 and to hold another conference in December in Galveston, Texas, the site of one of history's deadliest hurricanes and an iconic city for hurricane trackers.

GALVESTON AND CUBA

Galveston's mayor from 2004 to 2010, Lyda Ann Thomas, a CIP delegate to Havana in 2009, welcomed the conferees to Galveston. She highlighted how much she enjoyed the trip and how instructive and useful she found it. She cited the hurricane that destroyed her city in 1900, leaving 8,000 dead. Had a warning from Cuba been received, many of these lives



Lyda Ann Thomas, Galveston's mayor 2004-2010, Elise Hopkins Stevens, Galveston City Council advisor, Gerald Sullivan, Chairman of the board of trustees Port of Galveston, on a panel about Galveston and Cuba's ties.

would have been saved. More than a century later, in 2008, Hurricane Ike followed the same path; this time modern communications and early warnings gave the city time to prepare. Thomas added that in pre-embargo days, ships bound for Cuba entered and left the port of Galveston, the city's lifeline, several times a week. "I hope those days will return," she said.

Cuba's disaster preparation greatly impressed Thomas during her trip. "Planning, planning, planning," is what it's about, she said. Cuba's bottom-up system, with neighborhoods mapped and the most vulnerable people identified, inspired her to set up volunteer committees in Galveston to go door-to-door to assess needs. As in Cuba, "medical personnel and social service agencies must be brought into preparedness planning before a disaster." After Hurricane Katrina, Thomas established a Mayors Preparedness Planning group that held monthly meetings, consisting of all relevant organizations such as the Coast Guard, Red Cross, medical and mental health agencies, and utilities companies. Today, Galveston is a regional model for preparedness and response. "I know we learned from Cuba," Thomas said, "and I hope the relationship can continue well into the future."

COOPERATION AND DIVERGENCE

In his introductory remarks, Wayne S. Smith noted that the virtual destruction of Galveston in 1900 dramatically highlighted the need for cooperation between the United States and Cuba, at least against hurricanes. As vividly described in Erik Larson's book, *Isaac's Storm*, the giant storm struck Galveston on September 8 without warning, wrecking the city and becoming the worst natural disaster in U.S. history. How was there no warning? The Cuban meteorological service, one of the best in the world, had accurately predicted the path and ferocity of the storm. However, Cuba was occupied by the United States at the time, and the U.S. weather service had given instructions that the Cuban service was not to send out international messages. As a result, the Cuban service was muzzled, and the U.S. service's predictions that the storm would turn north proved to be incorrect.

This would not happen today. Despite continuing strain in U.S.-Cuban relations, relations between the Cuban meteorological service and the U.S. Hurricane Center in Miami could not be better, as the conference's first panel made clear. Lixion Avila of the Miami center, born in Cuba, and Jose Rubiera, chief of the early warning system at the Cuban Meteorological Institute, described their long friendship and frequent exchanges. Miami's National Hurricane Center is the regional forecasting center for the Atlantic basin and greatly depends on input from Cuba. "Everyone at the Hurricane Center, from the director on down, talks to Rubiera and his staff," said Avila. On Sept. 15, 1875, Cuba issued the world's first hurricane warning and the quality of its forecasting remains strong today. "They have excellent data and radar and staff preparation," noted Avila. He and Rubiera, together with their Caribbean counterparts, have created a regional hurricane plan under the auspices of the United Nations' meteorological organization.



Robert Muse, Nick Kralj, Rep. Craig Eiland, Elizabeth Newhouse, Wayne Smith and Randy Poindexter during the conference on U.S. - Cuba hurricane cooperation.

Modern-day cooperation between the United States and Cuba on hurricane tracking began in 1963 after Hurricane Flora, and has continued ever since. However, due in part to the differing political systems, the United States and Cuba dramatically diverge on their approaches toward planning, educating and communicating with the public. In Cuba, the preparedness system is highly streamlined and integrated, with strong coordination between the meteorological center, civil defense and state-run media. In the United States, the system lacks smooth integration and coordination between local, state and federal officials. In Cuba, Dr. Rubiera is well-known as the spokesman on hurricanes. As a storm approaches, he appears frequently on TV and clearly explains conditions. The public must understand that a category 3 storm can be more deadly than a category 5 due to flooding, he said; they must also be aware that any prediction of where landfall will happen has a variation of up to 150 km. “If people have confidence in the message, they’re more likely to do what’s needed,” Rubiera remarked. In the United States the public often hears conflicting messages from multiple sources.

Responding to a question, Dr. Rubiera described the warning stages as information, alert and alarm. At the information stage a hurricane may be days away, and civil defense officials prepare all emergency systems; at the alert phase, 36 hours before a strike, civil defense examines vulnerable areas and hard to reach places where early evacuations might be needed, such as isolated mountain communities and offshore resorts. At the 24-hour alarm phase, general evacuation begins with time built in to ensure that it occurs in daylight.

MEDICAL RESPONSE

In the panel on medical response, Michael Mastrangelo, program director for preparedness at the University of Texas Galveston medical branch, described the process at the hospital for managing a disaster—from hazard analysis and mitigation projects, to transportation and communication plans, to evacuation drills, the identification of alternate sites, and the deployment of portable hospitals, to recovery and rebuilding. He stressed that the success of this process depends heavily on collaboration with federal, city and state officials, as well as with the utility companies and University of Texas system, which can often be problematic.

Former Mayor Thomas noted that there was an inordinate period in 2008, following Hurricane Ike, when Galveston had no functioning hospital because essential federal funds did not arrive to restore services. Lack of funds also delayed repair work on the hospital until January 2010. She asked whether federal funds could go directly to the city, bypassing state bureaucracy. Mastrangelo agreed that anything that could speed up funding would be a great help to the recovery process.



Wayne Smith (CIP) and Dr. Mesa Ridel (Cuba’s director of disaster medicine) discuss the merits of Cuba’s integrated approach to disaster response.

Cuba’s director of disaster medicine, Dr. Guillermo Mesa Ridel, further emphasized the integrated Cuban approach. A single entity—civil defense—oversees and coordinates every aspect, from risk analysis and planning to educating and communicating with the public to evacuations and recovery. It’s both a top-down and bottom-up process, with officials at every level responsible for everyone beneath them, beginning with Cuba’s president. The Ministry of Public Health, under which Dr. Mesa works, issues

instructions and guidelines to every Cuban medical facility covering all types of disasters, from hurricanes and other natural catastrophes to epidemics to technological mishaps. Every health institution must create a detailed disaster reduction plan and spend three percent of its budget to implement it. Courses and workshops in disaster medicine are mandatory for all doctors and first responders. While disaster response is taught to all students at Havana's Latin American Medical School, foreigners often come to Cuba to study the systems in place.



State Rep. Craig Eiland, State Rep. Tommy Merritt and State Senator Mario Gallegos discuss lessons they learned from observing the Cuban system.

To Dr. Mesa, the key to success in disaster medicine lies in educating and communicating with the public. Preventing a disaster is much cheaper and more effective than responding to one. "To teach people, you have first to work on their risk perception," he said.

LESSONS LEARNED

The final panel featured Texas state legislators discussing the lessons they brought back from observing the Cuban system. State Representative Craig Eiland of Galveston, the panel chair, pointed out that "the Cubans are in hurricane alley, and practice makes perfect," noting that enormous progress had been made in Texas hurricane preparedness between Hurricanes Rita (2005) and Ike (2008). He praised the coordination in the Cuban system. Unlike the free-for-all that ensues in the United States when an evacuation is called for, Cuba's detailed neighborhood mapping allows for a priority based evacuation. Furthermore, the system is extremely organized down to block captains who oversee evacuations.

Noting that in Cuba 80 percent of evacuees go to the homes of family and friends, State Representative Tommy Merritt recommended that efforts be made, perhaps via interfaith groups, to establish relationships between residents of vulnerable Gulf Coast cities such as Galveston and communities in the interior of the state. If home refuges were viable alternatives to large evacuation centers, residents might be more inclined to leave when an evacuation was called for. He deplored recent state budget cuts, noting that the hurricane director job had yet to be filled. "The Department of Public Safety is not the place to make cuts," he insisted.

State Senator Mario Gallegos of Houston, who chairs the Senate Subcommittee on Flooding and Evacuations, lamented the absence of clear lines of authority in a disaster and urged that two command centers with beds and medical personnel be set up along the Texas coast. These would manage the entire process and thus avoid the confusion that invariably results from the lack of a clear authority. "It's amazing that with all the technology we have, we don't do a better job," he said.

On the question of evacuations, however, former Mayor Thomas noted that in the United States, unlike in Cuba, "We cannot make you go. We can only educate and communicate the danger so that people understand what they are up against. Then it is up to them whether or not to evacuate." During Hurricane Ike, she said, many Galveston residents refused to leave because they remembered the traffic gridlock

sparked by the exodus during Hurricane Rita.

Another conference participant, Gerald Sullivan, vice-chairman of the Port of Galveston, asserted that, without question, Cuba's hurricane preparedness works better than that of the United States, but it is impossible to emulate because of the difference in political systems. The United States cannot mandate evacuations. He described how in 1900, when there was no FEMA, Galvestonians took responsibility for themselves. After Hurricane Ike many people ended up in tents, waiting for FEMA assistance. None came. Citizens are better off organizing locally and taking responsibility for their own welfare, he said.

MOVING THE GOAL POSTS

Attorney Robert L. Muse of Muse and Associates in Washington, D.C., an expert on legal issues between the United States and Cuba, closed the conference by citing the ongoing difficulty in getting the Obama administration to engage with Cuba. He noted the proposal put forward last year at CIP's New Orleans conference to suspend the embargo during a hurricane to allow U.S. companies to help Cuba in rebuilding. An executive order can accomplish this. Muse sent the proposal to the White House but has received no response.

Many people had hoped President Obama would take steps to rethink the policy, Muse noted. In the election campaign, Obama said he would do so if Cuba released political prisoners. Not only have the Cubans done that, but they have also begun a major economic transformation, the most significant since 1959. The United States continues to shift the goal posts, Muse said. "We announce we will do something in exchange for an action by the Cubans, but then we never do it." Originally, the purpose of the embargo was to coerce Cuba to compensate for nationalized properties, and then to discourage the export of revolution. But that is now all in the past. The only purpose now is to change the regime, which is unrealistic and more than anything, concluded Muse, "stems from the mythic proportion Florida seems to have assumed in the administration's electoral calculations."

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