

# For disaster aid, don't ask FEMA

by Marcia Merry

On Oct. 3, less than two weeks after Hurricane Hugo struck mainland United States, a congressional call was made for an investigation of why the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) grossly bungled providing assistance to South Carolina, as well as Puerto Rico and other hard-hit islands in the Caribbean.

Sen. Ernest F. Hollings (D-S.C.) officially requested that the Government Accounting Office conduct an investigation of FEMA. He accused the agency of strangling aid attempts in red tape, and called FEMA's hierarchy a "bunch of bureaucratic jackasses" who would do best to "get the hell out of the way."

The senator from South Carolina was, if anything, too polite. The pathetic behavior of the FEMA apparatus in the case of Hurricane Hugo is just the latest episode in the dismal track record shown by this agency, which in recent years has oriented away from readiness for emergencies—its original mandate—and toward mechanisms for police-state social control.

On Sept. 22, the day after Hugo struck, South Carolina Gov. Carroll Campbell requested federal disaster aid. President Bush signed the disaster declaration the same day, but the first FEMA office didn't open until a week later. Applicants for relief are being given forms and instructions to come back Oct. 12, to fill out paperwork.

Joseph P. Riley, Jr., the mayor of Charleston, S.C., blasted the agency for slowness. "The system is not designed to cope immediately and urgently with a major disaster," he said. "They didn't bring in enough people and enough resources."

FEMA spokesman Bill McAda lamely defended the agency, saying their routine is to wait at least four days before they open aid offices to give victims time to contact their insurance agents. When they finally opened, the FEMA offices were great distances away from the areas most in need. Two weeks after Hugo hit, thousands of stricken still have no idea there is a location to which they can resort for help.

The mayor of the town of St. Stephen spoke for many when he said, "I really had more faith in our government. We're in serious trouble if FEMA is going to be the organization in the event of a nuclear war."

The main shortage in South Carolina is "a shortage of common sense in FEMA," said an angry Senator Hollings on a Sept. 28 ABC "Good Morning America" broadcast.

Hollings blamed the continuing crisis on FEMA officials: "They are as sorry a bunch of bureaucratic jackasses as I've worked with in my life. . . . I tell them people need generators, and they tell me, 'We don't have any generators—fill out a form.'"

Hollings charged that FEMA had made no provisions for renting house-trailers, even though the hurricane destroyed 40,000 homes. He also attacked FEMA for originally having only one emergency relief office for 13 counties. Now there are five offices, but "they only set up two offices in Charleston County, both in the suburbs. They expect the poor people in the city of Charleston to walk out to the suburbs."

Hollings contrasted FEMA's incompetence and indifference, to the instant responses from the Marines and Army, and from the volunteers for groups like the Red Cross and Salvation Army, all of whom rushed in aid.

## 'Crisis counseling' instead of relief

Part of FEMA's activity has been to bring in mental health staff to conduct "crisis intervention counseling." This reflects the objective of FEMA to conduct population profiling, under the pretext of providing victims "the ability to ventilate, and to cope with stress, distress, and loss," in the words of a state mental health official. "We hope to help calm people down and help to keep order."

The current advisory board of FEMA is dominated by elements associated with the Trilateral Commission, including Prof. Samuel Huntington of Harvard University, Brent Scowcroft of Kissinger Associates (until he went to the National Security Council), and Center for Strategic and International Studies counterterrorism specialist Robert Kupperman. Huntington, in his book *Crisis in Democracy*, makes clear that in his view, the proper function of emergency organizations such as FEMA is not to provide relief, but to accustom Americans to a drastic curtailment of their constitutional rights under a draconian economic austerity regime. "A government which lacks authority," he writes, "will have little ability, short of cataclysmic crisis to impose on its people the sacrifice which may be necessary."

Originally founded to deal with food and vital services in case of dire emergencies, FEMA was transformed into a self-styled shadow government. Among those with FEMA assignments in recent years have been Oliver North, the FBI's Oliver "Buck" Revell, and Buster Horton at the U.S. Department of Agriculture—the same Buster Horton who was foreman of the federal jury that railroad Lyndon LaRouche in December 1988.

Using a series of secret National Security Decision Directives by President Reagan, North and others used FEMA as part of their actions to create a "parallel" or "secret government," later exposed by the Iran-Contra scandal. FEMA came to have virtual cabinet-level status, and plans were laid for ways to suspend the Constitution in event of national security emergency.