

Urban leaders 'storm' Bush domestic policy

by H. Graham Lowry

With the elation over Desert Storm fading fast, George Bush is now under attack for his refusal to lift a finger to deal with America's worsening domestic crisis. In congressional testimony March 12, officials of the National League of Cities proposed a crash program of urban reconstruction, demanding that the scale of resources poured into the sand in the Gulf now be mustered to reverse the destruction of America's cities.

"Now that the liberation of Kuwait has been accomplished," said New York City's Manhattan Borough President Ruth Messinger, "my colleagues and I propose that the federal government immediately undertake the liberation of millions of Americans in our cities trapped by the tyranny of poverty, illiteracy, hunger, unemployment, crime, and hopelessness. We propose, in short, the launching of Operation Urban Storm."

Rep. John Conyers (D-Mich.), whose Committee on Government Operations conducted the hearing on the urban crisis, charged that the central cities are in a "death spiral [of] unemployment, wanton violence, eroding tax bases, crumbling services, and despair." He drew an ironic contrast between the commitment to war far away, and the cold neglect of the nation's cities. "We moved hundreds of ships, thousands of aircraft and tanks, and one-half million men and women halfway around the globe to free Kuwait," Conyers noted. "We may have liberated Kuwait—a country of fewer than 2 million people—but we are in danger of losing many of our cities."

The cost of the Gulf conflict, Conyers emphasized, "is estimated at \$45 billion, or \$213 million each day. The city of Detroit receives a little more in one year (\$292 million in 1990) than we spent in one day. . . . Kuwait has \$100 billion in its bank account to rebuild the country. But our cities are told the federal till is empty. . . . I ask you, isn't the crisis in our cities just as much of an emergency as bailing out the S&Ls and fighting a war in a faraway desert? . . . The U.S. spent \$13 billion in four years on the Marshall Plan to rebuild the devastated cities of Western Europe after World War II," Conyers said. "We should do no less today to meet the crisis in our cities." He cited the figure of \$70 billion as the equivalent amount of aid in 1990.

In her testimony, Messinger declared, "Clearly, any nation capable of so dramatically projecting its power half a world away can also carry out the mission that we propose.

The mission we propose will take longer than 100 days, and will require a greater commitment of resources than those that were deployed in the Persian Gulf." Three-fourths of the nation lives in metropolitan areas of at least 100,000 people.

Messinger also called attention to the fact that the infrastructure of the nation's cities is in ruins. "Our cities are in desperate need of large-scale federal assistance simply to provide transportation, water, and other basic services. New York City is currently very near the limit of what it can borrow in the bond market—and still faces the massive tasks of rebuilding its bridges, streets, highways, sewage systems, and other elements of its infrastructure. . . . Many of our most heavily traveled bridges, for example, are only marginally safe, and need immediate rehabilitation. This is a challenge that Urban Storm also must meet."

Nearly half the urban population in poverty

The National League of Cities released a report at the hearing that documented the dismal standard of living in America's central cities. By 1989, over 43% of the urban population was living below the poverty level. Per capita income had already fallen below \$10,000 by 1987 in the cities of Newark, El Paso, Cleveland, Baltimore, Detroit, Buffalo, St. Louis, Dayton, Birmingham, Miami, New Orleans, Louisville, and San Bernardino—and was just barely above that level in Chicago, Philadelphia, Milwaukee, Memphis, Toledo, Tucson, Fresno, Columbus, Norfolk, and Pittsburgh. Newark's figure was only \$7,622.

Among the cities surveyed, official unemployment rates in 1988 had already topped 12% in Baltimore, Chicago, St. Louis, and San Antonio, while Detroit's was over 17%. Actual unemployment levels were far higher, and have risen even more under Bush. The U.S. Conference of Mayors has also reported that requests for emergency food assistance increased by an average of 22% during 1990, according to a survey of 30 major cities, and 75% of those seeking assistance were members of families.

Messinger drew a grim picture of the situation in New York City, as an example of "conditions facing every metropolitan region of this nation." More than 40% of the city's children currently live below the poverty level. "What does that mean for their lives? It means, for one thing," she said, "that their lives are likely to be brief. In the Borough of Manhattan that I represent, children in Central Harlem are less likely to live through the first year of life than are children in Cuba, Costa Rica, Singapore, and many other so-called 'Third World' countries."

More than one-third of all New York City public school students fail to complete high school. Unemployment in Central Harlem reached 41% a year ago. Tuberculosis cases in New York increased by 68% during the 1980s. The AIDS epidemic is spreading fastest among poor women in their child-bearing years, and is now the leading cause of death among women between the ages of 20 and 39.