
September 6, 2005

Last Updated Thursday, 07 August 2008

Ambassador's Corner

WEEKLY MESSAGE FROM AMBASSADOR JOHN BRUTON

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The destructive power of

Hurricane Katrina continues to horrify almost a week after it struck the US Gulf Coast. With official estimates of deaths in the thousands, and media reports reminding us of the human suffering of the survivors, little is left to the imagination about how great a challenge it will be to rebuild lives, reconnect families and revitalize neighborhoods and livelihoods in towns now underwater. It really was upsetting to see on television a family return to their hometown in Southern Mississippi to find not only their own home destroyed, but almost every landmark in their little town, everything that made them feel at home, obliterated as well. Their neighbors are scattered, perhaps never to come together again, and the family despairingly picked through ruins of their home to find little mementos – cracked crockery and sodden photographs – that might remind them of a past that was never to return.

If there is any silver lining in the huge clouds of Katrina, it is the realization, at all levels, of the importance of good friends in times of crisis. This is true for the individuals and families displaced by Katrina, but it is also true internationally as countries and people around the world come forward to help the United States deal with this catastrophe.

I am extremely proud of the rapid and generous

response from Europe, which has been ready and willing to help ever since this disaster struck. This past weekend, just hours after a request from the United

States, the EU and its Member States mobilized all available resources. Twenty-one of our Member States, joined by Romania (EU

Candidate Country) and Norway (member,

European Economic Area), have already offered assistance, and new offers continue to pour in. Under the coordination of the United Kingdom's

EU Presidency and the EU Commission, aid is being matched to needs on the ground. It includes everything from medical teams to high-speed water pumps, water purification units, meals, first-aid kits, beds, blankets, tents, mobile telecommunications units, generators and even cruise ships to accommodate the displaced. Several cargo aircraft carrying food and supplies have already arrived in the US, and teams of experts in various fields of disaster management are on their way.

No country is immune from natural disasters. Returning from Europe, which has seen both extreme flooding and forest fires this summer, I have never been more aware of the need for preparedness and coordination at the international level. Fortunately, the EU has recently set up a mechanism to coordinate the relief efforts of all our Member States if any nation, inside or outside the European Union, needs assistance. Established in 2002, not long after the terrorist attacks of 9/11, this "Civil Protection Mechanism," as it is known, has proved its worth in bringing relief to victims disaster around the world.

The challenge facing the US and its citizens at this moment is enormous. But true to the American way, lives will be rebuilt and lessons will be learned.

Perhaps one of those lessons will be that rugged individualism is not always enough in such a crisis, particularly if an individual does not have the material and psychological means to escape the fury of a hurricane in time. These crises are a salutary reminder of the fragility of our societies and the need to protect the most vulnerable as we continue to work for democracy around the world.

Please send me your comments

about this or any of my weekly messages, or other EU matters. I look forward to hearing from you!

John Bruton

Flooding caused by Hurricane Katrina in the New Orleans area is visible from US President Bush's plane, Air Force One, Wednesday, August 31, 2005. White House photo by Paul Morse.