

Canadians respond to Katrina's devastation

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As the US government declared a national public health emergency following Hurricane Katrina's body blow to the Gulf Coast states, Canada took its first steps toward providing assistance in the form of medical supplies and personnel.

The hurricane struck Aug. 29, devastating huge swaths of Louisiana, Alabama and Mississippi, as well as areas in Florida, and forcing a complete evacuation of New Orleans as levees protecting the below-sea-level city broke and submerged it under rushing water.

"During this difficult time, we are offering our support to our friends and neighbours," Deputy Prime Minister Anne McLellan said in a statement. McLellan, who said she had contacted Homeland Security Secretary Michael Chertoff, was closely monitoring the unfolding disaster, which US officials have said has likely resulted in thousands of deaths. But there was no official death toll, as police officers and emergency workers were told to ignore bodies floating in the streets and turn their attention instead to the living.

The US Health Human Services Department contacted the Canadian Public Health Agency yesterday, asking for an inventory of medical supplies and personnel the embattled states could draw on.

Ottawa has also offered to supply the US with troops, military engineers and water purification expertise, though the government has yet to receive a formal request for assistance.

As armed looters fired on military helicopters and medical personnel attempting to evacuate hospitals and the Superdome

in New Orleans, the US government tried to set up 40 emergency medical centres, with 10 000 beds. In Baton Rouge, La., 250 emergency medical beds and 38 public health service officers had arrived.

Health and Human Services Secretary Mike Leavitt sent medical experts and mental health personnel from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention in Atlanta and called for doctors and nurses from across the country to respond to the crisis. But rescue efforts were hampered by the looting and desperation of the stranded residents. The Pentagon ordered an additional 10 000 National Guard members into the region, bringing the number of troops on their way to 21 000 in the Gulf Coast states.

The floodwaters have been described as "diluted sewage," and there is widespread fear of outbreaks of hepatitis A, cholera and Norwalk virus, as well as mosquito-borne diseases such as West Nile virus and dengue fever. Health officials also fear carbon monoxide poisoning as stranded residents try to use gas-powered generators or barbecues in poorly ventilated areas.

Meanwhile, the walking wounded crowded hospitals and clinics, where physicians, nurses and technicians tried to treat them without electrical power or water.

The Canadian Red Cross was mobilizing at least 100 trained volunteers who will begin heading to the region for 3-week missions as early as today.

The Canadians will join some 1900 American Red Cross volunteers over the next few days to work at 230 emergency shelters, which are already hous-

ing an estimated 45 000 people. It is American Red Cross' largest mobilization to date.

"We are sending some of our most highly trained disaster response volunteers," said Suzanne Charest, manager of media relations for the Canadian Red Cross. Volunteers will likely keep going to the region for several months. "There has been no call for health workers yet," she added.

The need for psychological support is likely to grow in the coming weeks, Charest said. The American Red Cross is "very experienced" in this area. It sent experts to Canada during the 1998 Swiss Air disaster. But officials here fear the US relief organizations may soon be overwhelmed.

The Canadian agency sent more than 100 volunteers to the US last summer during 4 other hurricanes, as well as 150 people after the 9/11 terrorist attacks.

As of yesterday, there were no reports of Canadians injured or killed in the hurricane, said Dan McTeague, the parliamentary secretary to Foreign Affairs Minister Pierre Pettigrew. But the Canadian government was asking any stranded Canadians "to obey the local authorities," whose prime concern was safety, said McTeague. "Our hearts go out to the American people," he added.

The Canadian Red Cross is not seeking volunteers but is accepting donations for Katrina relief efforts at www.redcross.ca or 800 418-1111. Other organizations accepting donations include the Mennonite Central Committee, at www.mcc.org and 888 622-6337.

— *Barbara Sibbald and Laura Eggertson, CMAJ*