

# FEMA chief prepares agency for Dean

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WASHINGTON --

The government has contracts it can quickly take "off the shelf" for buses, ambulances and relocation camps and has improved communications should Hurricane Dean strike Texas, the head of the Federal Emergency Management Agency said Sunday.

As he urged Texas residents to prepare for a possible evacuation, FEMA head R. David Paulison told reporters that there would be no repeat of the problems that occurred after Hurricane Katrina in 2005. "From my perspective, it's not going to happen," he said.

"Katrina was a wake-up call for all of us in emergency management and also for the federal government. We know we have to play together as a team, we know we have to respond as the federal government, not as individual agencies," said Paulison, who took over the agency in 2006 after his predecessor, Michael Brown, was sharply rebuked for the government's slow response to Katrina.

"I do not see this country allowing another Katrina-type event to happen."

The storm is on course for northern Mexico, but could shift and hit the region around Brownsville, Texas, Paulison said.

Of particular concern, he said, is the state's southeastern coast and its colonias, or immigrant shantytowns, that are prevalent a few miles from the Mexican border.

"There's probably about 400,000 people living in some very substandard housing. Texas is saying that they may have evacuate, if this storm does come up further north, over 100,000 out of that area. They primarily do not have any transportation," Paulison said.

Colonias, which is Spanish for neighborhoods, started appearing in Texas in the 1950s, usually outside city limits where there were no building codes. Already in place to help with a possible evacuation are 1,300 buses in San Antonio as well as more than 130 fixed-wing commercial aircraft and several hundred helicopters, Paulison said.

The FEMA chief advised people in south Texas to prepare for possible evacuations as Hurricane Dean heads into the Gulf of Mexico.

"The storms are unpredictable. If I was a Texas resident, particularly along that southeast coast, I would make sure that my home was ready. I would make sure that I had my three-day supply of food and water," Paulison said.

"If I was in an evacuation zone, I would have my plan in place, of where I'm going to go, and how I'm going to get there, what I'm going to take with me," he said. "This is not a time to be complacent."

To that end, Texas Gov. Rick Perry mobilized the National Guard and search and rescue teams and shipped 60,000 to 80,000 barrels of gasoline to stations in the Rio Grande Valley.

"You can't wait too long," Paulison said. "If you have to evacuate 100,000 people, particularly by bus and by air, you can't do that overnight. It takes a couple days to do that."

Texas had 2,500 National Guard members ready Sunday, with plans to increase that to 10,000 by Wednesday afternoon if necessary, Paulison said. At Perry's request on Saturday, President Bush signed a pre-landfall emergency disaster declaration for Texas, allowing federal equipment and supplies to be moved in preemptively.

"We have responded very forcefully and very quickly to this event," Paulison said. "We are ready."

Louisiana Gov. Kathleen Blanco declared a state of emergency Friday, and requested a federal declaration to allow aid to flow to the state should Dean strike any part of the Louisiana coast. But Paulison said she withdrew that request once the storm seemed to veer away from her state.

Government agencies have 10 million liters of emergency water and 4 million MRE (Meals Ready to Eat) food packs available in Texas, Paulison said, while the American Red Cross has 7 million liters of water ready and its own supply of MREs.

The National Hurricane Center in Miami said the first hurricane of the Atlantic season was projected to reach the most dangerous hurricane classification, Category 5, with winds of 160 mph, before crashing into the Mexican coastline near Cancun by Monday night or Tuesday. The Mexican mainland or Texas could be hit later.

"We are going to continue to operate as if this storm is moving into the United States. I think that is a prudent thing to do," Paulison said after a video conference with the various federal agencies preparing to respond if necessary.

He said U.S. officials already have spoken with the Mexican government about expedited processing by U.S. customs and border agencies should Mexican residents temporarily need to cross the border.

"This could be very much a border issue," the FEMA chief said. "We're going to protect people regardless of which country they are in."