

“Katrina and the Asian American Community”

Testimony of Reverend Thich Hang Dat

Congressional Briefing

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Introduction

Good afternoon. I appreciate the opportunity to speak with you regarding Hurricane Katrina’s impact on the Vietnamese-American people in the Biloxi, Mississippi area. In addition to the obvious physical impact, this disaster has also exposed what appears to be a general lack of responsiveness from official disaster response organizations, such as FEMA, USCC, and The United Way. The causes may be due to language or cultural difficulties of the generally Vietnamese-speaking people in the area, but the problem still needs to be addressed.

My purpose for talking with you today is to describe what I personally have done and witnessed. I hope this testimony will assist you in your decision-making efforts regarding the support of Vietnamese-Americans.

My name is Thich Hang Dat, and I am the President at the Ten Thousand Buddhas Summit Monastery in Corydon, Indiana. Two days after Hurricane Katrina hit, Wednesday, August 31 of 2005, I rushed to Biloxi to assist in the relief effort. I focused most of my attention on the Vietnamese-American community. While staying there, I organized relief efforts, provided to the spiritual needs for the evacuees, oversaw the distribution of food and supplies, and dispensed cash to them. Presently, at my Temple in Corydon, Indiana, I am caring for a young boy who lost his immediate family, his Mother, to Katrina.

Katrina’s Exposure of Culture Problems

Due to the language and cultural obstacles, ethnic people appear to have little voice to FEMA, Red Cross, USCC, or The United Way to receive financial assistance.

Lack of responsiveness from official disaster response organizations

In spite of recognizing the severe impact of the Hurricane within the first week after the disaster, no official agency such as FEMA representative was available for the Vietnamese or other ethnic people to contact, and no non-government agency such as Red Cross, USCC, or United Way representatives came to the Vietnamese community, i.e. Buddhist temple.

The Buddhist community relief effort

Care for the Vietnamese-American's came mainly from the local Buddhist Temple. In deed, the day after Hurricane Katrina hit, Tuesday, August 30, 2005, in order to relieve the victims' immense sufferings the Buddhist temple promptly served as a distribution center for food and supplies, provided financial and spiritual assistance as well as a temporary shelter for many families. The Temple served as a location for news organizations, such as Reuters, Chicago Tribune, St. Louis Post, Washington Post, etc., which came and inquired about the affect of the hurricane's aftermath to our community. The Temple was the first place that established a temporary medical clinic, and provided a place where the Vietnamese people could find English translators to help them claim their loss of homes, cars, etc. And it was at the Buddhist temple where it became apparent through the news media's investigation, i.e. the Chicago Tribune, that there was a problem with the Vietnamese-American community being ignored by some government agencies such as FEMA.

Conclusion

The hurricane aftermath's problems are enormous. Along with other people in the Gulf Coast areas, the Vietnamese American suffers physically, mentally, and spiritually. They live their life as the "cavemen". The resources of our Buddhist community and other faith-base organizations around the U.S are limited. Therefore, we need your help and support to lessen the problems and sufferings and assist the Vietnamese American getting back to their normal life.

Thank you for allowing me to speak here today, and I would be happy to answer any questions you may have.

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