



# Islamic Relief

*a worldwide leader in alleviating poverty*

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## Islamic Relief Written Statement U.S. Senate Committee on Health, Education, Labor, and Pensions Roundtable Discussion - March 7, 2006

Islamic Relief immediately responded to the needs of the victims of Hurricane Katrina – one of the greatest natural disasters in United States history. Islamic Relief committed \$2 million for Katrina relief projects, which include working in the affected areas of Louisiana, Mississippi, and Houston and Dallas, Texas.

Hurricane Katrina was the first major response to a domestic emergency in Islamic Relief's history. As part of its emergency response, Islamic Relief has carried out many activities to help victims of the hurricane. Islamic Relief has distributed needed food and non-food goods, purchased a building to house a clinic, provided shelter and housing, helped establish a community coordination and relief center, distributed medicines, hygiene kits, and cleaning kits, helped clean out homes and provided funding to rebuild others, bring volunteers to assist victims, and many other activities to help in the Hurricane Katrina relief and recovery efforts.

Islamic Relief worked with many community-based, national, and governmental organizations in coordinating its relief efforts. A perfect example of such collaborative work is the establishment of the Coordination and Relief Center in Biloxi, Mississippi. Realizing the need to coordinate the efforts of the relief groups coming into the area and to better serve the victims in a timely and efficient manner, Islamic Relief worked with the local city councilman and Oxfam America, among many others, to make the center a reality. Other organizations that worked together to establish this center included: Urban League Ministries, Hands on USA, community groups and churches, the Salvation Army, the Red Cross, FEMA, Presbyterian Disaster Assistance, International Relief and Development, and many others.

The center held at least two or more meetings per week to gather all the organizations working in the area, share information on the needs of the community, what services the groups were providing, what resources they needed to continue their work, and the challenges they were encountering. The other major goal of the Coordination Center encouraged community members to register in one central location and fill out surveys that informed us of their situation and their immediate needs. Hurricane victims would also pick up supplies that were available at the center. This effort helped match organizations offering specific services to community members who needed those services. Priority was given to the elderly and those needing the services urgently. Working in such a coordinated fashion not only helped the relief groups to efficiently carry out their work, but more importantly helped serve the victims in a more organized and timely fashion.

A key for improving future response efforts is setting up an organized and coordinated emergency response structure – with an open and consistent communication system - that includes the participation of government agencies, relief organizations, and community based groups. Such a system will better coordinate the efforts of all those involved in responding to emergencies. Without this open communication line and an organized system of aid distribution, relief efforts will be tremendously hindered. Groups participating in such a structure would meet regularly to organize the best system in responding to disasters.

Another effective method of responding to disasters is making sure points of supply distributions and other services are located in the area of, or close to the population that is most affected. Due to closed roads, lack of access to transportation, high gas prices, or other hurdles, victims and aid agencies cannot be expected to travel long distances to obtain supplies or services. In affected areas where distribution warehouses or registration sites for obtaining aid were located nearby, the relief efforts were much better. Having such resources close to the area affected will dramatically cut the aid delivery time and help disaster victims obtain vital resources faster.

An area where government support can improve future efforts is access to statistical information. Any post-disaster data that is collected by agencies or old data that can help aid agencies know the statistical make-up of an affected area can be crucial to relief efforts. For example, when trying to clean hurricane damaged homes, the Coordination Center in Biloxi wanted to send the volunteer groups first to the vulnerable elderly and disabled citizens, but there was no access to such data at hand. To collect this information, surveys had to be conducted in the neighborhood, which consumed time and delayed the delivery of assistance.

In preparation for future disasters, Islamic Relief is planning the creation of an Emergency Response Team that is pre-selected and properly trained to immediately respond to disasters. Learning from our wealth of experience in response to Katrina, our goal is to systemize aspects that worked well and improve in other areas. This team would be trained to respond to disasters and know how to help victims once on the ground. Another area of preparedness includes recruiting the proper number of volunteers, training them with at least the basics, and having a system for them once on the ground. Also, the relationships we have forged with the many other aid agencies will be tapped into to help us respond as a group and better serve the population in need.

Islamic Relief looks forward to continue its emergency relief and development work as we have done in over thirty countries for more than two decades. It is essential for all groups involved in disaster response to work together in serving the needs of disaster victims. Islamic Relief would like to thank the Senate Committee on Health, Education, Labor, and Pensions for inviting us to be a part of this important discussion to better serve those in need when responding to future disasters..