

# Public self-preparedness

**Lt Gen Russel L Honoré** says that communities can no longer rely on the government to protect them fully during times of disaster

## THE LAST WINDS OF HURRICANE

Katrina had barely blown out before Americans started blaming the Government for mismanaging operations in New Orleans. I don't believe things were handled perfectly; but I don't believe that people should rely on the government to pick up the pieces after a disaster, either. The way we live in the 21st Century is a lot different than we lived in the 20th Century, but disasters aren't. Yet we have a 21st Century assumption that government will fix everything in a crisis. The fact is: it can't. No matter how well run, funded, staffed, or intentioned, government agencies cannot equip people to deal with a disaster as well as simple preparedness can.

## CHALLENGING ASSUMPTIONS

Yet, rather than becoming more prepared, Americans seem to be dismantling their own sandbags. For instance, 20 years ago there were 269 million people in America; today there are around 309 million and the size of government has grown commensurately, but taxpayers haven't insisted that government response agencies grow in tandem.

Meanwhile, we have contracted out our emergency response capability and reduced the number of trauma rooms across the country to reduce our tax burden. Twelve per cent of us live in the regions threatened most by Atlantic hurricanes, an increase of 25.1 million people since 1950. The Department of Homeland Security's budget of approximately \$50 billion (£32.3bn; €36.6bn) is meant to deal with bad people doing bad things, whereas the most common disasters are floods, hurricanes, and tornadoes. Most Americans don't have a weather radio in their homes, much less a three-day supply of food and water. A recent *New York Times* survey found that most of the people on the Gulf Coast have done no preparation for hurricane season.

The truth is, there aren't enough first responders on earth to keep the world safe in the event of a disaster, man-made or natural, yet we expect the government to be the solution. I think the solution is educating people to be prepared for crisis. To do that, to meet the crises of the 21st Century, we need to return to the assumptions of the



*Lieutenant General Russel L Honoré was the commanding general of Joint Task Force Katrina. A native of Lakeland, Louisiana, Honoré swept into New Orleans, surveyed the destruction and took charge, bringing the city back under control and started the long process of putting it back together. Since his command of Joint Task Force Katrina, Honoré has brought the lessons of Katrina to organisations around the US. An expert on preparedness and responding to catastrophe, he offers insights into protecting people and organisations, outlining the principles necessary to lead through unexpected and uncontrollable crises*

19th Century: disaster can come at any time, happen to anyone; our chances of surviving it depend on our preparedness for it. Our forefathers spent much of their summers preparing for winter. We have to somehow rebuild that into our culture, particularly among those least able to take care of themselves.

This will require a massive cultural shift, which won't be easy or cheap. But it is necessary, and it can be done. Every child graduating from high school ought to know first aid. We need federal emergency safety policies, even draconian ones, such as requiring all rental properties to have weather radios. States and Counties must pre-position water and food for those who will not, or cannot, evacuate in the face of a hurricane or tornado. Businesses that house survival essentials, such as food and medicine, ought to have electrical generators. We need to have a

## FROM THE UNKNOWN

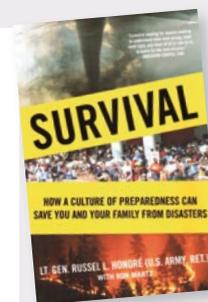
*Voices from the unknown will be devoted to the exploration of the challenging issues characterised by 21st Century crises. It is spearheaded by CRJ's Editorial Advisory Board Member Dr Patrick Lagadec, and will go beyond our usual mindsets, helping to clarify pitfalls that must be avoided, redesigning the new landscapes that must be considered and showcasing creative moves that will help to feed positive dynamics. The goal is not to find ready-made solutions, but to stimulate and to feed new ideas, new approaches, new methods of thinking...*

national standard for communication equipment, integration, and redundancy on a municipality, county and state level, because after disaster lack of communication is common and lethal. Civil authority headquarters must be better protected – many are located in buildings that are over 50 per cent glass, with no subsurface area to operate in during a catastrophe.

That's what government can do. What individuals need to do is: Get a weather radio; a three-day supply of food and water stored in a safe location; back-up medications; a supply of cash in case financial institutions lose power; fire and water-proof storage of important documents; an evacuation plan and kit including food; clothing; and copies of identification papers. We also need to know our communities so that we can help our neighbours.

And then we need to make hard, expensive decisions: Cut down trees that threaten power lines or pay to have the lines buried. Consider how far inland you have to live to be safe from hurricanes and floods. Dig and equip a tornado shelter just like people did 110 years ago.

And that's the point. In the 21st Century, we've outsourced just about all of our preparedness and protection to others. But a disaster puts people back into a 19th Century environment, when self-reliance meant self-survival. If we want to secure our own safety, we must do three things: accept that bad things will happen, sacrifice time and money to prepare for them, and blend modern technology with old-fashioned common sense to see us safely through.



*Survival by Lt Gen Russel L Honoré, is a teaching tool for developing a culture of preparedness, available from Atria Books. CRJ will be publishing a full review in our next issue*