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Katrina report slams failure to act

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WASHINGTON: The Bush administration's lack of initiative left the Gulf Coast vulnerable to Hurricane Katrina and contributed to the widespread death and suffering the storm inflicted, a congressional inquiry has concluded.

Finding fault with the White House down to local officials, the 520-page report determines that authorities failed to move quickly to protect people - even when faced with warnings before the storm struck last August 29.

"Passivity did the most damage," concludes the report by a Republican-dominated house committee.

"The failure of initiative cost lives, prolonged suffering, and left all Americans justifiably concerned that our Government is no better prepared to protect its people than it was before 9/11, even if we are."

The report, titled A Failure of Initiative, concludes that President George W. Bush could have sped the response by becoming involved earlier. It says he was not receiving guidance from a disaster specialist. "Earlier presidential involvement might have resulted in a more effective response," the inquiry concludes.

The White House declined to comment on the findings.

The inquiry looked at everything from the evacuation failure to the military's role to planning for emergency supplies, and found much to criticise in each category.

Typical of the report's unsparing tone, it warns: "The preparation for and response to Hurricane Katrina should disturb all Americans."

The study is the first to be completed in a series of Katrina inquiries by Congress and the Bush administration.

The storm left more than 1300 people dead in Louisiana, Mississippi and Alabama,

hundreds of thousands homeless and tens of billions of dollars worth of damage in its wake.

Despite Mr Bush accepting responsibility for the federal Government's shortfalls, the storm response continues to generate blame. The panel was to unveil the final version of the study overnight, after parts of it were released on Sunday.

In a 59-page response released on Sunday, Democrats Charlie Melancon and William Jefferson said that while they largely agreed with the report's conclusions, it did not hold "anyone accountable for these failures".

In Senate testimony last week, former Federal Emergency Management Agency director Michael Brown singled out the Homeland Security Department and its chief, Michael Chertoff, as a muddled bureaucracy that slowed relief. The White House and Homeland Security described Mr Brown as a renegade who failed to follow the chain of command.

The house report finds fault with Mr Chertoff for failing to activate a national plan to trigger fast relief, and with Homeland Security for overseeing a skeleton staff and inexperienced emergency response.

The report also finds Louisiana governor Kathleen Blanco and New Orleans mayor Ray Nagin waited too long to order mandatory evacuations.

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