

## Commentary: Task as Americans is to be ready for disasters

### Story Highlights

- \* Honoré: Catastrophes that were once exceptional events are happening more often
- \* Disaster readiness is the responsibility of every part of our society, he says
- \* He urges governments to work with private industries to make them part of the plan
- \* He says good first step is "ready box" filled with food, clothes and disaster materials

By Retired Lt. Gen. Russel L. Honoré, Special to CNN  
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**As the Atlantic hurricane season begins, Honoré, who was commanding general First Army and leader of Joint Task Force Katrina before retiring, offers his views on why the United States needs to develop a culture of preparedness for natural disasters.**

(CNN) -- The recent series of disasters in the United States and around the world have resulted in the forced evacuation of hundreds of thousands of people from their homes and have again demonstrated with startling clarity that we are living in a new normal.

In this new normal, international interdependencies and instantaneous communications combine to constantly remind us of disaster and terrorism, and disasters that once were considered exceptional now occur more frequently. The recent earthquakes in China and the Myanmar cyclone are but two reminders of such disasters.

The reminders are beamed into our homes and workplaces as if to demonstrate that tragedy that can result if we fail to prepare. What people once viewed as the exception they now see on a routine basis, yet we still don't take the steps to be prepared for this new normal.

We have to be better prepared, and the first steps start at home and at work.

In today's densely populated and technologically dependent communities, disasters have a far greater impact than ever before. It's time for America to wake up to this reality.

In a world where natural and man-made disasters can and will happen with little or no warning, we need to be prepared. We face a host of potential disasters: from earthquakes, hurricanes and pandemics to industrial accidents, electrical blackouts, terrorism and the effects of possible attacks with weapons of mass destruction. Our task as Americans is to be ready.

At home, events after 9/11, Katrina, wildfires in California and Florida, numerous destructive tornadoes and other storms, and the threat of earthquakes accentuate the need to create a culture of preparedness in America.

A preparedness that is ingrained and intertwined in every part of our daily life, but is mostly common sense, is based in the American spirit. While it is the duty of local, state and federal governments to



*Russel L. Honoré says Americans must embrace a culture of preparedness for a host of disasters.*

prepare for and respond to disaster, true preparedness begins in our homes and our neighborhoods.

To create this culture of preparedness, we need to focus "left of the disaster," which means we focus on preparations and responses before the disaster. How, or if, each of us survives a disaster is directly related to where we were before it hit.

To create this culture of preparedness, we must change the way that academia, private industry, community groups and individual households think about preparedness in their daily lives. Disaster readiness is the responsibility of every part of our society and every individual.

In our free-market society, the private sector has far more response capability than our government. Governments need to work with private industries and make them part of the plan so we can quickly tap into all of our nation's best resources when we need them most.

Our schools, from kindergarten to post-graduate institutions, need to develop a curriculum that will teach us how to prepare for and better respond to crises as communities and as individuals. Neighborhoods and community groups need to know about and keep track of those among us who are unable to self-evacuate or unable to care for themselves, particularly when the power fails or when they run out of medicine.

And each of us has a personal responsibility to be ready. We need to prepare our families and our homes. In many cases, family and personal preparations can be fairly simple. All it takes is a shift in our thinking. For example, when Granny's birthday comes around, we have a tendency to get her one of those little silver picture frames with a photo of the kids. We need to stop giving Granny those picture frames and give her a weather radio. And on Father's Day, instead of giving Grandpa those funky colored ties, give him a weather radio, too.

In times of disaster, information is power. Those radios will let them know if it's time to act because we can never predict when we'll be told to evacuate. An inexpensive plastic tote -- a "ready box" filled with food, water, clothes, a battery-operated radio, copies of important papers, cash and other family necessities, kept in the closet by the front door -- is a big step toward personal preparedness.

In this new normal, we have only two options: We can exist in a culture of fear and dependency, or we can do the responsible thing: Live comfortably in a culture of preparedness and readiness; a culture where individuals can save themselves and empower their local, regional and national governments to better respond to any disaster. It's time for America to adopt this culture of preparedness.