No shelters of last resort in N. Orleans storm plan
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By Jeffrey Jones

NEW ORLEANS, May 2 (Reuters) - New Orleans' Superdome and convention center, where scenes of despair, anger and death shocked the world after Hurricane Katrina, will not be shelters of last resort in Mayor Ray Nagin's new storm evacuation plan.

Instead, buses and trains will rush the disabled and elderly out of the battered city as officials start to empty it 30 hours before a strong hurricane makes landfall, Nagin said on Tuesday as he announced the long-awaited strategy.

With less than a month before the 2006 hurricane season starts, Nagin said New Orleans will be evacuated whenever anything stronger than a Category 2 storm, or winds above 110 miles per hour (177 km per hour), appears headed its way.

About 95 percent of the population now is believed able to evacuate themselves, and they will be expected to formulate their own plans long before a storm threatens the region.

"I think it incorporates a lot of the lessons learned from Katrina," Nagin, who is running for re-election against Louisiana Lt. Gov. Mitch Landrieu, told reporters.

"As you can see, we don't have a shelter of last resort, and special needs, we're getting them out a lot quicker. We have the airlines hopefully on board to not cancel flights."

Airlines will be asked to add flights from New Orleans' two airports for tourists, according to the plan, developed in conjunction with federal authorities.

Nagin was widely criticized for waiting too long before ordering evacuation ahead of Hurricane Katrina, which made landfall as a Category 3 storm and killed 1,300 people along the Gulf Coast. Poor, disabled and elderly people were left with no means to leave.

STAGING AREA

As levees failed and 80 percent of the city flooded, thousands of residents made their way to the Louisiana Superdome and Ernest N. Morial Convention Center, which had no power or working plumbing and little security.

Television beamed scenes of hunger, thirst, illness and even death to the world, as days passed with no rescue.

Now, the convention center will be used only as a staging area for residents who need help evacuating. Those evacuees, who could number up to 10,000, will be shuttled to state shelters on city buses or, assuming a deal with U.S. Homeland Security chief Michael Chertoff is finalized, by Amtrak train.
Among other parts of the plan, fiber optic and wireless communications will be beefed up to avoid failures that hampered the early response to Katrina.

The Louisiana National Guard will be asked to send more than 3,000 soldiers to help keep the evacuation moving and prevent the crime that marked the Aug. 29 disaster.

Police will enforce a strict curfew for anyone who refuses to leave, police chief Warren Riley said.

By the end of June, 30,000 families whose homes were damaged by Katrina could be living in travel trailers supplied by the Federal Emergency Management Agency and officials said they will be moved to shelters when a storm is in the area.

Another big change from last year is that residents evacuating by bus or train will be allowed to bring pets as long as the animals are in cages.

Nagin could not say if the plan would be in force by the June 1 start of the hurricane season if he loses the May 20 runoff election. But he noted a new mayor "would have to be Einstein" to quickly cobble together a different strategy.