Qatar gives millions in relief grants; Education, health, housing all benefit

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By John Pope

Three local universities, Children's Hospital, the March of Dimes and Habitat for Humanity will receive grants totaling $61.1 million from Qatar, a Persian Gulf country slightly smaller than Connecticut, to aid victims of Hurricane Katrina.

The gifts, announced Tuesday, will help Xavier University expand its College of Pharmacy and let other recipients provide homes, scholarships and medical care for people in the region Katrina struck.

"We have done this out of friendship and out of sympathy and feeling for the people who have suffered," said Nasser bin Hamad al-Khalifa, Qatar's ambassador to the United States, in a telephone interview from Washington.

Besides underwriting scholarships at Xavier, Tulane and Louisiana State universities, the money will pay for 293 homes that Habitat for Humanity will build, repair two of Children's Hospital's clinics and let the March of Dimes buy three vans, which will be deployed to the Gulf Coast region to provide medical care for pregnant women and their children.

These programs deal with education, health and housing, the areas for which al-Khalifa and his colleagues wanted to provide help.

The biggest local grant -- $12.5 million -- was awarded to Xavier, which will use it to pay for a 60,000-square-foot addition to the College of Pharmacy so it can admit more students to meet the demand for its graduates.

"This is a tremendous gift, a major commitment to Louisiana and New Orleans in particular," Xavier President Norman Francis said. "It is, like Katrina, unprecedented."

Lengthy process

Like Francis, the other beneficiaries welcomed the grants warmly, but they weren't surprised. The announcement marked the end of a six-month process in which institutions applied for the aid and went through painstaking reviews by al-Khalifa and his staff, because, he said, he wanted to be sure the money would go to the people who needed it most.

The program "will be transparent, and there will be accountability," said al-Khalifa, who has hired a team from PricewaterhouseCoopers, the financial consulting firm, to assist in distributing the money and work with recipients as their projects advance.
"It was a very rigorous process," Tulane President Scott Cowen said. "We had to submit proposals to a blue-ribbon panel of advisers, who evaluated our proposals to make sure they were clear and, most of all, would help people in the areas most affected by the storm."

Tulane is to get $10 million for full scholarships during the next four years for about 300 students hard-hit by the storm.

"I'm absolutely delighted by the incredible generosity of Qatar," Cowen said, "and I'm pleased about why the gift was given."

LSU is to receive $3.3 million, which is expected to provide more than 1,200 full scholarships for students from areas where the storm hit.

"This is a magnificent humanitarian gesture for which LSU is very, very grateful," LSU System President William Jenkins said. "This will go a long way toward helping to relieve the suffering our students and faculty endured and are still enduring as a result of Katrina."

Xavier will be given $5 million for scholarships.

Medical grants

A $5 million grant to Children's Hospital will set up the Qatar Cares Fund to pay for all medical treatment not covered by insurance or other funds for needy children whose families were devastated by Katrina.

Another grant, for $351,651, will let the hospital repair two of its Kids First primary-care clinics -- one near Touro Infirmary and another at Canal Street and North Claiborne Avenue -- that it operates with LSU Health Sciences Center.

Grateful for the grant, hospital spokeswoman Cathleen Randon said the hospital was lucky to learn of the program, which colleagues heard about from a patient's relative who works in Washington and knows people who work at the Qatar embassy.

When Children's was told it had received the money, "we thanked her profusely," Randon said.

Another medical grant, for $3 million, will let the March of Dimes buy and staff three medical vans, each of which can cost as much as $600,000, to send to hurricane-affected areas.

The vans, which should hit the road in six months, will let March of Dimes personnel schedule as many as 20,000 medical visits for women and children during the first three years they are in operation, said Doug Staples, a spokesman for the organization.
The biggest grant overall -- $22 million -- went to Habitat for Humanity, which will use it to build 153 homes in Louisiana, 107 in Mississippi and 33 in Alabama, said Mark Crozet, its senior vice president in resource development.

"We're pretty excited about that," he said in a telephone interview from Americus, Ga.

"I was down there a couple of weeks ago, and it just makes your heart cry to see the devastation," he said. "It's very hard to look at that and know that we don't have all the money we need to make the difference, but people come through like this, and it's one step toward making the community whole again."

City editor David Meeks contributed to this report.